

FICTION

Paul Verlaine

Madame Aubin

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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FICTION

MADAME AUBIN

a play in one act and in prose

by Verlaine, 1895

Translated and adapted by Frank J. Morlock

Characters:

A Servant

Aubin

Madame Marie Aubin

Peltier

An Officer

The action takes place in the room of a hotel.

PELTIER (to a servant who is leaving)

That's fine. We'll ring when we need you.

(to Marie)

A day and a night of rest, my darling, right? After which we'll leave, crossing Switzerland for Brindisi without any stop and reach the Orient as it was agreed.

MARIE

It was agreed?

PELTIER

Eh! Yes.

MARIE

It's true. Indeed, as you like.

PELTIER What do you mean? Since you approve, I'm going to peruse the train schedule. You'll allow me.

MARIE

My God, yes.

(A short pause during which Marie looks at her ring and munches on a cake she has taken from a gold comfit box.)

PELTIER (after having written some notes in pencil) There. At noon tomorrow we'll take the Express and we'll stop wherever you like. Look. (offering Marie his notes)

MARIE My friend, you are perfect. I'm going to think it over. Would you listen to me for a moment to discuss something else?

PELTIER

Speak my darling.

MARIE

I want to call a halt to our adventure here.

PELTIER

I don't understand.

MARIE Don't interrupt me. What we are doing is crazy. It's not ridiculous, it's crazy. We will be far less happy than we

were there. And it truly required all the influence of your charming character and the persuasion of your frankness (offering him her hand which he holds and keeps) to make me take this enormous step. It's no longer time, I know or rather I suspect, to go back on such an impulse, but after all, what do you want? And I am in despair after all this bravura which decided me, sustained me, swept me off my feet during this long journey from Paris to this chancy place. Ah, I'm afraid.

PELTIER (overwhelmed by surprise rather than skeptical and resolved as he had appeared up until now.) A afraid of whom and what? (he lets Marie's hand fall and crosses his arms waiting to hear more)

MARIE Of the past, first of all. Fear! Remorse because of the past. And certainly my husband doesn't deserve all this outrage. He's a man with faults, surely, even vices, perhaps. But he's honorable and even righteous. And now I think of it these quarrels between him and me must rather proceed from me, spoiled child and over-free young girl that I was before my marriage with this honest, with this gallant man.

PELTIER Let's leave Aubin out of this. In the end what do you mean and what do you want me to do? Return to Paris and your abandoned household?

MARIE I don't know yet. But don't interrupt me every minute and you will be of my opinion. No. My husband ought not to have to endure these things on his honor and his name. And it's true I am afraid of the past. I'm afraid of the future, too. Or rather, no. It's the present which frightens me, sir! For the future, I'll answer for it. And it will conform to the vows of my finally reawakened conscience.

PELTIER (who has a mounting rage within him and feels himself provoked to the last degree)
Explain yourself? Are you joking or not? I want to understand you.

MARIE
Sir, you have no right to speak to me like this!

(Peltier advances like a man who has the right his interlocutor is speaking of or believes he's going to have it.)

MARIE
And I will never give it to you.

PELTIER
Madame.

MARIE
Do you hear, sir?

(The two stiffen and look each other in the face. A silence.)

PELTIER Then why did you come with me of your own free will, or even on your own initiative?

MARIE (who's settled down)
What do you want? I've changed my mind.

PELTIER (very cold and speaking through his teeth) Fine. You've tricked me! At this point I'm not a young man. No one makes a fool of me! For, my darling, I don't think that a caprice of yours, such a sudden turnabout, such a flash of virtue--

MARIE Don't use that word virtue any more. It is terrible to my ears. I was telling you just now that I've something like fear of the present. Yes, fear to remain here this way. But I was in the process of adding that the present doesn't terrify me. It was then that you shrieked out at the moment I was going to explain to you how I intended to confide myself to your honor to allow me to decide in peace. And you got so carried away that you irritated me, too. And you just said things to me! A caprice? me, at my age; twenty-eight years old! A flash of conscience. Yes, that's it. Believe it.

PELTIER But what role is it you wish me to play in all this? You, you are at the same time reasonable, then illogical and me? as for me?

MARIE Your role? All sketched out. Let me do it all. That would be chivalrous and fine.

PELTIER

But I love you, why--

MARIE And me, too, I love you and I say to you: Can't we love each other without all this? (scornful gesture) without all this? (disdainful gesture)

PELTIER Ah! We are there. A virgin arises in you when through you a satyr is rising in me. (grabbing her by the waist) And towards you--

MARIE (who soon gets free)

Look, let's be serious.

(Peltier, who importunes a long explanation sits with bowed head; one hand on the back of a chair, the other playing with his watch chain.)

MARIE What is it you risk? You, a man, a bachelor by this pleasant voyage? Nothing. A duel perhaps on return! In this illogical world we live in your reputation will be far from damaged; a world which dislikes adultery in a woman and is passionately fond of all the gallant sins of a fashionable man. Whereas I?! And yet it's only quite natural and especially on the brink of a final resolution, I hesitate and jump back. Must you be angry about it? Look, are you angry? can you be? ought you to be?

PELTIER (as if unexpectedly released and decided, peremptory, brief, confident) Questions! Questions! In my turn I will say to you: Let's be serious. Admit it: You encouraged me to do this thing. And exactly as you say it was quite natural for me to undertake it, and still is; I concur in your reasoning, and will pursue it like a fashionable man or otherwise!

(Marie recoils abruptly. Peltier takes a step forward.)

PELTIER

And I am going to prove it to you!

MARIE (rigid and henceforth not giving an inch)

Fie!

PELTIER

You are going to see.

(Aubin abruptly opens the door and appears.)

AUBIN (addressing himself exclusively to Peltier) Yes, it's I, the one you didn't expect. No need to tell you how I caught wind of your plot and was able to overtake you so soon. The essential thing is that four officers from the garrison are indeed willing to serve as seconds and are awaiting us in a nearby woods with swords and pistols as you please even though I have indeed the right to choose the weapons.

PELTIER

I'll come with you.

AUBIN (to his wife, aloud, taking her hand which he kisses) You, Marie, await me here--dead or alive. Do you understand me, my pretty?

(Aubin and Peltier leave)

MARIE What an affair! Am I really dreaming in the end. (throwing herself on a sofa which might soon have become dangerous) A little order in my thoughts. (pressing her fingers to her forehead) There. There.--Yes, what I was telling Mr. Peltier is still true. I was a spoiled child when Aubin took me. He spoiled me, too. I became accustomed to prolonging my childhood and my youth in the married state. I was willful, demanding, capricious. At the beginning my husband found this charming, then he tired of it. Quarrels, harshness on his part, on mine sulks. Seven years later Peltier appeared. A charming man, surely. But less so than Aubin, now that I see things clearly. And at bottom, this stupid departure is still more my fault than his. A moment of feminine scorn which with our mores a man is praised for profiting from. I couldn't hold it against him just now for wanting what was implied by our innocent prank and a little fortitude helped me confine it to its character of folly and nothing more. But what? While I tell myself these things, two likable men who both love me, and of which I decidedly prefer one, my husband, are fighting over me. O Mercy! Just as if I were a young girl. And indeed! O punishment! Me! Me! What anguish and what a situation! And the future! During

these sweet words with Aubin just now. I've the great misery of waiting for him or the other one. All the same, I've resisted. And there was a moment when I had some merit. But this trip! And this waiting! My God, you in whom one must believe despite all the opinions of folks these days, My God--have pity on me in my misery! (long silence during which she remains prostrated.)

AUBIN (enters, wounded in the shoulder, supported by an Officer)
It's over. Madame Aubin, I present you one of my seconds.

(To the officer)
Sir?

OFFICER (bowing before Marie)
Count de Givors.

AUBIN
Count de Givors, I present you my wife.

MARIE (who, since her husband's entrance has had eyes only for him, mechanically)
Sir. (leaping after a fashion on his neck) Ah, my friend. Why, why, you are wounded.

AUBIN It's nothing. A bullet that they'll quickly extract from me. And then, right? as soon as my wound is dressed on our way to Paris? By the way, you know, Peltier has nothing.

MARIE (literally superb)
Who cares?

(Silence)

AUBIN (immensely joyful)
Huh?

OFFICER (to both)
Excuse me. (he withdraws after having bowed, escorted out by both)

AUBIN (to his wife)
Explain yourself, Marie.

(Peltier enters)

MARIE (to Peltier)
Sir. Say if you have ever had the right to call yourself my lover?

PELTIER On my oath as an honest and gallant man which my return to this room confirms: Aubin, I swear No. This departure was a delirium from which Madame awakened first, pure and invincible. Invincible because I wanted to have the last word and she had it; and that was a no not to be misunderstood.

AUBIN* Indeed, each has fulfilled his duty here. I, after your folly rushed to get back my wife and to forgive her after a duel. You, Marie, having remained a good spouse. And I will answer to you that the misunderstandings which serve to excuse you, are dead forever. How happy we are going to be. And you, Peltier, what need is there for an explanation? Given our civilization's disapproval of your attempt to do me out of my wife, as for me, I'd bear you a grudge, too, if this bullet weren't in my shoulder. Now this is it: we'll return after my scratch is dressed. Naturally we will be some while without seeing you again, Peltier. Aren't you on a trip?

(to Peltier) And your hand.

(curtain)

* Translator's note. This final speech reads a little strangely and not just in translation because the idea behind it is a

little strange. Aubin's idea is something like this: "The world condemns you, Peltier, for tampering with my wife, and I would too, but for the fact you've put a bullet in my shoulder which proves you're a man of honor, etc." I don't feel justified in incorporating the explanatory material into the text so the best I can do is offer this footnote.