Louise

W. Somerset Maugham

I COULD NEVER UNDERSTAND why Louise bothered with me. She disliked me and I knew that behind my back, in that gentle way of hers, she seldom lost the opportunity of saying a disagreeable thing about me. She had too much delicacy ever to make a direct statement, but with a hint and a sigh and a little flutter of her beautiful hands she was able to make her meaning plain. She was a mistress of cold praise. It was true that we had known one another almost intimately, for five-and-twenty years, but it was impossible for me to believe that she could be affected by the claims of old association. She thought me a coarse, brutal, cynical, and vulgar fellow. I was puzzled at her not taking the obvious course and dropping me. She did nothing of the kind; indeed, she would not leave me alone; she was constantly asking me to lunch and dine with her and once or twice a year invited me to spend a week-end at her house in the country. At last I thought that I had discovered her motive. She had an uneasy suspicion that I did not believe in her; and if that was why she did not like me, it was also why she sought my acquaintance: it galled her that I alone should look upon her as a comic figure and she could not rest till I acknowledged myself mistaken and defeated. Perhaps she had an inkling that I saw the face behind the mask and because I alone held out was determined that sooner or later I too should take the mask for the face. I was never quite certain that she was a complete humbug. I wondered whether she fooled herself as thoroughly as she fooled the world or whether there was some spark of humour at the bottom of her heart. If there was it might be that she was attracted to me, as a pair of crooks might be attracted to one another, by the knowledge that we shared a secret that was hidden from everybody else.

I knew Louise before she married. She was then a frail, delicate girl with large and melancholy eyes. Her father and mother worshipped her with an anxious adoration, for some illness, scarlet fever I think, had left her with a weak heart and she had to take the greatest care of herself. When Tom Maitland proposed to her they were dismayed, for they were convinced that she was much too delicate for the strenuous state of marriage. But they were not too well off and Tom Maitland was rich. He promised to do everything in the world for Louise and finally they entrusted her to him as a sacred charge. Tom Maitland was a big, husky fellow, very good-looking and a fine athlete. He doted on Louise. With her weak heart he could not hope to keep her with him long and he made up his mind to do everything he could to make her few years on earth happy. He gave up the games he excelled in, not because she wished him to, she was glad that he should play golf and hunt, but because by a coincidence she had a heart attack whenever he proposed to leave her for a day. If they had a difference of opinion she gave in to him at once, for she was the most submissive wife a man could have, but her heart failed her and she would be laid up, sweet and uncomplaining, for a week. He would not be such a brute as to cross her. Then they would have quite a little tussle about which should yield and it was only with difficulty that at last he persuaded her to have her own way. On one occasion seeing her walk eight miles on an expedition that she particularly wanted to make, I suggested to Tom Maitland that she was stronger than one would have thought. He shook his head and sighed.

“No, no, she’s dreadfully delicate. She’s been to all the best heart specialists in the world and they all say that her life hangs on a thread. But she has an unconquerable spirit.”

He told her that I had remarked on her endurance.

“I shall pay for it tomorrow,” she said to me in her plaintive way. “I shall be at death’s door.”

“I sometimes think that you’re quite strong enough to do the things you want to,” I murmured.

I had noticed that if a party was amusing she could dance till five in the morning, but if it was dull she felt very poorly and Tom had to take her home early. I am afraid she did not like my reply, for though she gave me a pathetic little smile I saw no amusement in her large blue eyes.

“You can’t very well expect me to fall down dead just to please you,” she answered.

Louise outlived her husband. He caught his death of cold one day when they were sailing and Louise needed all the rugs there were to keep her warm. He left her a comfortable fortune and a daughter. Louise was inconsolable. It was wonderful that she managed to survive the shock. Her friends expected her speedily to follow poor Tom Maitland to the grave. Indeed they already felt dreadfully sorry for Iris, her daughter, who would be left an orphan. They redoubled their attentions towards Louise. They would not let her stir a finger; they insisted on doing everything in the world to save her trouble. They had to, because if she was called upon to do anything tiresome or inconvenient her heart went back on her and there she was at death’s door. She was entirely lost without a man to take care of her, she said, and she did not know how, with her delicate health, she was going to bring up her dear Iris. Her friends asked why she did not marry again. Oh, with her heart it was out of the question, though of course she knew that dear Tom would have wished her to, and perhaps it would be the best thing for Iris if she did; but who would want to be bothered with a wretched invalid like herself? Oddly enough more than one young man showed himself quite ready to undertake the charge and a year after Tom’s death she allowed George Hobhouse to lead her to the altar. He was a fine, upstanding fellow and he was not at all badly off. I never saw anyone so grateful as he for the privilege of being allowed to take care of this frail little thing.

“I shan’t live to trouble you long,” she said.

He was a soldier and an ambitious one, but he resigned his commission. Louise’s health forced her to spend the winter at Monte Carlo and the summer at Deauville. He hesitated a little at throwing up his career, and Louise at first would not hear of it; but at last she yielded as she always yielded, and he prepared to make his wife’s last few years as happy as might be.

“It can’t be very long now,” she said. “I’ll try not to be troublesome.”

For the next two or three years Louise managed, notwithstanding her weak heart, to go beautifully dressed to all the most lively parties, to gamble very heavily, to dance and even to flirt with tall slim young men. But George Hobhouse had not the stamina of Louise’s first husband and he had to brace himself now and then with a stiff drink for his day’s work as Louise’s second husband. It is possible that the habit would have grown on him, which Louise would not have liked at all, but very fortunately (for her) the war broke out. He rejoined his regiment and three months later was killed. It was a great shock to Louise. She felt, however, that in such a crisis she must not give way to a private grief; and if she had a heart attack nobody heard of it. In order to distract her mind she turned her villa at Monte Carlo into a hospital for convalescent officers. Her friends told her that she would never survive the strain.

“Of course it will kill me,” she said, “I know that. But what does it matter? I must do my bit.”

It didn’t kill her. She had the time of her life. There was no convalescent home in France that was more popular. I met her by chance in Paris. She was lunching at the Ritz with a tall and very handsome young Frenchman. She explained that she was there on business connected with the hospital. She told me that the officers were too charming to her. They knew how delicate she was and they wouldn’t let her do a single thing. They took care of her, well-as though they were all her husbands. She sighed.

“Poor George, who would ever have thought that I with my heart should survive him?”

“And poor Tom!” I said.

I don’t know why she didn’t like my saying that. She gave me her plaintive smile and her beautiful eyes filled with tears.

“You always speak as though you grudged me the few years that I can expect to live.”

“By the way, your heart’s much better, isn’t it?”

“It’ll never be better. I saw a specialist this morning and he said I must be prepared for the worst.”

“Oh, well, you’ve been prepared for that for nearly twenty years now, haven’t you?”

When the war came to an end Louise settled in London. She was now a woman of over forty, thin and frail still, with large eyes and pale cheeks, but she did not look a day more than twenty-five. Iris, who had been at school and was now grown up, came to live with her.

“She’ll take care of me,” said Louise. “Of course, it’ll be hard on her to live with such a great invalid as I am, but it can only be for such a little while, I’m sure she won’t mind.”

Iris was a nice girl. She had been brought up with the knowledge that her mother’s health was precarious. As a child she had never been allowed to make a noise. She had always realized that her mother must on no account be upset. And though Louise told her now that she would not hear of her sacrificing herself for a tiresome old woman the girl simply would not listen. It wasn’t a question of sacrificing herself, it was a happiness to do what she could for her poor dear mother. With a sigh her mother let her do a great deal.

“It pleases the child to think she’s making herself useful,” she said.

“Don’t you think she ought to go out and about more?” I asked.

“That’s what I’m always telling her. I can’t get her to enjoy herself. Heaven knows, I never want anyone to put themselves out on my account.”

And Iris, when I remonstrated with her, said: “Poor dear mother, she wants me to go and stay with friends and go to parties, but the moment I start off anywhere she has one of her heart attacks, so I much prefer to stay at home.”

But presently she fell in love. A young friend of mine, a very good lad, asked her to marry him and she consented. I liked the child and was glad that she was to be given at last the chance to lead a life of her own. She had never seemed to suspect that such a thing was possible. But one day the young man came to me in great distress and told me that his marriage was indefinitely postponed. Iris felt that she could not desert her mother. Of course it was really no business of mine, but I made the opportunity to go and see Louise. She was always glad to receive her friends at tea-time and now that she was older she cultivated the society of painters and writers.

“Well, I hear that Iris isn’t going to be married,” I said after a little.

“I don’t know about that. She’s not going to be married quite as soon as I could have wished. I’ve begged her on my bended knees not to consider me, but she absolutely refuses to leave me.”

“Don’t you think it’s rather hard on her?”

“Dreadfully. Of course it can only be for a few months, but I hate the thought of anyone sacrificing themselves for me.”

“My dear Louise, you’ve buried two husbands, I can’t see the least reason why you shouldn’t bury at least two more.”

“Do you think that’s funny?” she asked me in a tone that she made as offensive as she could.

“I suppose it’s never struck you as strange that you’re always strong enough to do anything you want to and that your weak heart only prevents you from doing things that bore you?”

“Oh, I know, I know what you’ve always thought of me. You’ve never believed that I had anything the matter with me, have you?”

I looked at her full and square.

“Never. I think you’ve carried out for twenty-five years a stupendous bluff. I think you’re the most selfish and monstrous woman I have ever known. You ruined the lives of those two wretched men you married and now you’re going to ruin the life of your daughter.”

I should not have been surprised if Louise had had a heart attack then. I fully expected her to fly into a passion. She merely gave me a gentle smile.

“My poor friend, one of these days you’ll be so dreadfully sorry you said this to me.”

“Have you quite determined that Iris shall not marry this boy?”

“I’ve begged her to marry him. I know it’ll kill me, but I don’t mind. Nobody cares for me. I’m just a burden to everybody.”

“Did you tell her it would kill you?”

“She made me.”

“As if anyone ever made you do anything that you were not yourself quite determined to do.”

“She can marry her young man tomorrow if she likes. If it kills me, it kills me.”

“Well, let’s risk it, shall we?”

“Haven’t you got any compassion for me?”

“One can’t pity anyone who amuses one as much as you amuse me,” I answered.

A faint spot of colour appeared on Louise’s pale cheeks and though she smiled still her eyes were hard and angry.

“Iris shall marry in a month’s time,” she said, “and if anything happens to me I

hope you and she will be able to forgive yourselves.”

Louise was as good as her word. A date was fixed, a trousseau of great

magnificence was ordered, and invitations were issued. Iris and the very good lad were radiant. On the wedding-day, at ten o’clock in the morning, Louise, that devilish woman, had one of her heart attacks-and died. She died gently forgiving Iris for having killed her.