

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

## An Uncomfortable Bed

By Guy de Maupassant  
1909

*Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893) was a popular French writer during the 19th century. He is considered one of the fathers of the modern short story, and he delighted in clever plot twists. In his short story "An Uncomfortable Bed," the speaker is a wealthy yet suspicious man invited by his friends, who often play tricks on him, to stay at their lavish mansion. As you read, pay attention to how de Maupassant's use of point of view affects the story.*

[1] One autumn I went to spend the hunting season with some friends in a chateau<sup>1</sup> in Picardy.

My friends were fond of practical jokes. I do not care to know people who are not.

When I arrived, they gave me a princely reception, which at once awakened suspicion in my mind. They fired off rifles, embraced me, made much of me, as if they expected to have great fun at my expense.

I said to myself: "Look out, old ferret! They have something in store for you."



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[5] During the dinner the mirth<sup>2</sup> was excessive, exaggerated, in fact. I thought: "Here are people who have more than their share of amusement, and apparently without reason. They must have planned some good joke. Assuredly I am to be the victim of the joke. Attention!"

During the entire evening every one laughed in an exaggerated fashion. I scented a practical joke in the air, as a dog scents game.<sup>3</sup> But what was it? I was watchful, restless. I did not let a word, or a meaning, or a gesture escape me. Every one seemed to me an object of suspicion, and I even looked distrustfully at the faces of the servants.

The hour struck for retiring; and the whole household came to escort me to my room. Why? They called to me: "Good-night." I entered the apartment, shut the door, and remained standing, without moving a single step, holding the wax candle in my hand.

I heard laughter and whispering in the corridor. Without doubt they were spying on me. I cast a glance round the walls, the furniture, the ceiling, the hangings, the floor. I saw nothing to justify suspicion. I heard persons moving about outside my door. I had no doubt they were looking through the keyhole.

An idea came into my head: "My candle may suddenly go out and leave me in darkness."

1. a large country house
2. **Mirth** (*noun*): happiness accompanied by laughter
3. Game (also known as prey or quarry) refers to any animal hunted for sport or for food.

[10] Then I went across to the mantelpiece and lighted all the wax candles that were on it. After that I cast another glance around me without discovering anything. I advanced with short steps, carefully examining the apartment. Nothing. I inspected every article, one after the other. Still nothing. I went over to the window. The shutters, large wooden shutters, were open. I shut them with great care, and then drew the curtains, enormous velvet curtains, and placed a chair in front of them, so as to have nothing to fear from outside.

Then I cautiously sat down. The armchair was solid. I did not venture to get into the bed. However, the night was advancing; and I ended by coming to the conclusion that I was foolish. If they were spying on me, as I supposed, they must, while waiting for the success of the joke they had been preparing for me, have been laughing immoderately<sup>4</sup> at my terror. So I made up my mind to go to bed. But the bed was particularly suspicious-looking. I pulled at the curtains. They seemed to be secure.

All the same, there was danger. I was going perhaps to receive a cold shower both from overhead, or perhaps, the moment I stretched myself out, to find myself sinking to the floor with my mattress. I searched in my memory for all the practical jokes of which I ever had experience. And I did not want to be caught. Ah! certainly not! certainly not! Then I suddenly bethought myself of a precaution<sup>5</sup> which I considered insured safety. I caught hold of the side of the mattress gingerly, and very slowly drew it toward me. It came away, followed by the sheet and the rest of the bedclothes. I dragged all these objects into the very middle of the room, facing the entrance door. I made my bed over again as best I could at some distance from the suspected bedstead and the corner which had filled me with such anxiety. Then I extinguished all the candles, and, groping my way, I slipped under the bed clothes.

For at least another hour I remained awake, starting at the slightest sound. Everything seemed quiet in the chateau. I fell asleep.

I must have been in a deep sleep for a long time, but all of a sudden I was awakened with a start by the fall of a heavy body tumbling right on top of my own, and, at the same time, I received on my face, on my neck, and on my chest a burning liquid which made me utter a howl of pain. And a dreadful noise, as if a sideboard<sup>6</sup> laden with plates and dishes had fallen down, almost deafened me.

[15] I was smothering beneath the weight that was crushing me and preventing me from moving. I stretched out my hand to find out what was the nature of this object. I felt a face, a nose, and whiskers. Then, with all my strength, I launched out a blow at this face. But I immediately received a hail of cuffings<sup>7</sup> which made me jump straight out of the soaked sheets, and rush in my nightshirt into the corridor, the door of which I found open.

Oh, heavens! it was broad daylight. The noise brought my friends hurrying into my apartment, and we found, sprawling over my improvised<sup>8</sup> bed, the dismayed valet, who, while bringing me my morning cup of tea, had tripped over this obstacle in the middle of the floor and fallen on his stomach, spilling my breakfast over my face in spite of himself.

The precautions I had taken in closing the shutters and going to sleep in the middle of the room had only brought about the practical joke I had been trying to avoid.

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4. **Immoderate (adjective):** going beyond a reasonable limit or amount
  5. **Precaution (noun):** an action taken to prevent or avoid injury or harm
  6. a type of dining-room furniture with shelves
  7. blows with a fist or an open hand
  8. **Improvise (verb):** to make, invent, or arrange on the spur of the moment

Oh, how they all laughed that day!

*An Uncomfortable Bed by Guy de Maupassant is in the public domain.*

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following statements best describes a theme of the text?
  - A. Practical jokes have a price, often a friendship.
  - B. Paranoia can make fools out of people.
  - C. True friends are never cruel.
  - D. Better to be paranoid and wrong than oblivious.
  
2. PART B: Which of the following passages best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. Paragraph 1
  - B. Paragraph 6
  - C. Paragraph 12
  - D. Paragraph 17
  
3. In the passage, what causes the conflict between the narrator and his friends?
  - A. The narrator secretly despises his friends for their mean-spirited pranks, and he visits only to get the better of them.
  - B. The friends' laughter causes the narrator to be anxious, for he interprets it as a joke on his behalf.
  - C. The friends' exaggerated merriment and predilection to prank the narrator make him paranoid when he visits.
  - D. The narrator dislikes the lodgings given to him by his friends.
  
4. Reread the following quote from paragraph 6: "I smelled a practical joke in the air, as a dog scents game." How does this figurative language impact the tone of the story?
  - A. The comparison of an animal smelling game to the narrator sniffing out a practical joke is inappropriate, adding to the mocking tone of the piece.
  - B. The comparison of an animal smelling game to the narrator sniffing out a practical joke is silly and deluded (since, as a victim of pranks, he is normally the prey), adding to the comedic tone of the piece.
  - C. The word "game" implies that the narrator is the true predator when it comes to pranks, adding to the ironic and cruel tone of the story.
  - D. The comparison of an animal smelling game to the narrator sniffing out a practical joke creates a frightened mood, adding to the dark and anxious tone of the story.

5. Explain how the structural timeline of the piece helps to build tension, thus heightening the story's comedic ending.

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## Discussion Questions

**Directions:** *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. Identify a few of the humorous elements of the story. How do they contribute to the story as a comedy? Explain your answer.
2. Comedy is often used to make light of man's follies. How does de Maupassant use comedy to reveal his theme about weakness in human nature?
3. What can we learn from comedy? Use evidence from this text, your own experience, and other art or literature in your answer.