

The Intended (Notre Futur)

by Georges Feydeau

A smart salon in Paris at the end of the nineteenth century.

Henrietta (*offstage*) So. You understand? I want candles everywhere, and masses of lamps. I want everything to be perfect!
(*she enters*) Oh yes, masses of lamps. I do love them so. It's astonishing how well they set off my complexion.
(*as an admirer*) "Upon my word, madame, you are quite simply exquisite! And that dress suits you perfectly."
"Unless I am much mistaken, you are on the brink of yet another conquest."
All the ladies will be furious – ah, jealousy, how naturally it comes to a woman! And as for these men... well, I generally know what men are thinking!
8.15. An hour to go – a whole tedious hour! How long time seems when one is waiting. It's not like me to be nervous or agitated. But then, the prospect of getting married is always bound to shake one up a little – especially when the intended is a young man, and one is the widow of an old general. I have to say that, when it came to matters of love, my poor husband was not the most vigorous... God forgive me! I mustn't malign the dear man. After all, it wasn't his fault. But, whatever the reason, he was a bit too... how can I put it... too economical. Now with Monsieur de Neyriss, there's no risk of that! He is young... and he's from the north! And, God knows, men from the north are... well let's just say that it won't be the same problem! But what if he doesn't turn up? I haven't heard from him for a while... Nonsense! I've invited him, so of course he'll be here. Anyway, he's in love with me. I'm certain he intends to marry me, and that he's going to use the occasion of tonight's party. Only the other day, in the room next door, I was sitting on my lovely Cuban settee, when he knelt down and I'm sure he was on the verge of popping the question. He would definitely have done so if we hadn't been interrupted.
(*a bell rings*)
Good heavens! Who can that be? It's far too early.

Valentina (*offstage*) You may go now! Thank you.

Henrietta Valentina!

Valentina (*entering*) The very same, cousin! Good evening.

Henrietta You are prompt!

Valentina Is that a complaint?

Henrietta Don't be silly!

Valentina The thing is, I wanted to get here a bit before the party started, because I need to talk to you.

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Henrietta Ooh!

Valentina Yes it's very important. As you know, there are some things I wouldn't dare tell mother...

Henrietta but you can tell me!

Valentina Exactly. I need your advice. But first let me say how beautiful you're looking this evening!

Henrietta "This evening" rather spoils the compliment.

Valentina Don't tease me! I just meant that you'd made a very good job of everything.

Henrietta Really?

Valentina I feel like Cinderella in comparison, in this plain white dress.

Henrietta Oh but you look so pretty!

Valentina And your jewellery! So many diamonds! How I'd love to have diamonds!

Henrietta You know perfectly well that girls don't wear diamonds.

Valentina Yes. But a widow like you...! Goodness but it must be wonderful to be widowed!

Henrietta That's not a nice thing to say for your future husband!

Valentina Oh my! How ridiculous of me! It's a nuisance: I'm always saying things like that – or else I end up saying nothing. And then I end up looking really stupid because I'm trying not to look stupid!

Henrietta Oh come along now!

Valentina Anyway, as I mentioned, I need you to give me some advice.... But first, when a young man speaks to me, what should I say? I'm always confused. At your last party, Monsieur de Mercourt came up to me and said: "Madame, you look quite charming." Well, can you guess how I replied?

Henrietta No.

Valentina "You too", I said. You see the problem? He thought I was mocking him and left.

Henrietta My poor child. You're so innocent.

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Valentina Yes. Innocence is a virtue I really admire... in others! If only I was as experienced as you. My goodness!

Henrietta Valentina!

Valentina You see, another stupid mistake! I can't help myself! So, you absolutely have to advise me....

Henrietta Sorry to interrupt, but first you need to tell me what it's about.

Valentina It's very difficult to explain. It's erm... it's about... a....

Henrietta ...a young man?

Valentina How did you know?

Henrietta Your blush gave you away! And I was a young girl once. I have also been known to blush – once or twice. Come on, my dear, I'm right aren't I?

Valentina Yes you are. It is about a young man.

Henrietta I knew it. And what is his name?

Valentina Can I tell you that later?

Henrietta Ah some mystery! Perfect. Is he at least of a good family?

Valentina Oh yes, very good!

Henrietta Excellent. Are you going to introduce him to me?

Valentina You'll see him this evening! And you must tell me if I have good taste.

Henrietta You are funny! Does he love you?

Valentina Oh yes, he loves me! He even told me the other day that he would be very happy if I agreed to marry him!

Henrietta That doesn't mean anything.

Valentina No he's absolutely serious! Listen, at your last party, I danced with him, and quite without my noticing he waltzed me into the room next door. You know your little salon with the Cuban settee?

Henrietta Of course. It seems to be the preferred spot.

Valentina There was no one there. So he sat me down on the settee....

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Henrietta On my Cuban settee?

Valentina Yes, why?

Henrietta Oh nothing. These men. They're all the same.

Valentina And when I was seated, this Monsieur de...

Henrietta Monsieur de....?

Valentina This gentleman took my hands and knelt down in front of me – like this....! Oh it's such a pleasure to see a man on his knees!

Henrietta I'm not sure all husbands would agree with you – but do go on.

Valentina Well, he knelt down in front of me, and in a soft voice he said things – oh such things! I didn't understand everything, but I did enjoy it all. Not that it matters. I can tell you that I was very confused. So, to avoid appearing stupid, I just said yes to everything he said.

Henrietta You said yes? Oh my poor child!

Valentina Was that a mistake?

Henrietta With men, saying yes is very dangerous.

Valentina But I didn't know what to say. If only you'd heard him: "Mademoiselle, you are beautiful and I love you!" Yes! "Ah Valentina..." (yes he called me Valentina)... "Ah Valentina, make my dream come true! My heart is on fire, and only you can extinguish the flames that your beautiful eyes have set ablaze..." (I didn't quite understand that bit) "...You are my queen, my angel, Valentina; will you be my wife?"

Henrietta And you replied....?

Valentina Yes! I was quite overwhelmed. I didn't know what to say.

Henrietta Men can be so forward!

Valentina Oh yes!

Henrietta "Oh yes"? How would you know?

Valentina But cousin.....

Henrietta Don't "but cousin...." me! I can tell that you're hiding something. I'm not letting you get away without telling me the whole story.

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Valentina Of course. That's what I wanted to do. I would never dare tell mother, but I feel much braver with you. Oh my dear Henrietta, if you knew what he did!

Henrietta Oh dear – this sounds serious!

Valentina It was! In fact, now we have to get married!

Henrietta Oh no! My poor, poor child!

Valentina Yes... he actually....kissed me!

Henrietta Oh. I was really worried for a moment.

Valentina What? Don't you think that's serious?

Henrietta Well, if I was your priest in the confessional, yes I might say it was serious. But, child, I don't have the heart to blame you. I know what men are like.

Valentina Really?

Henrietta If people had to get married for something so trivial, there wouldn't be any single women left.

Valentina So you're not cross with me?

Henrietta Me? Of course not, my dear! My late husband was always saying "Love is the best excuse". And I agree with him.

Valentina And tonight, if he wants to take me to the Cuban settee again, should I...?

Henrietta No. Men are always more forward the second time!

Valentina So what should I do? If he asks me for a dance, I can hardly turn him down – given that he's promised to marry me.

Henrietta Tell me. Do you love him?

Valentina Good heavens, I've no idea!

Henrietta Right. Understood. That's quite clear. And what about him? Does he love you?

Valentina He adores me.

Henrietta Well that's fine. In that case, I'll speak to your mother, and if she agrees you can marry him.

Valentina I can marry him? Oh my dear Henrietta!

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Henrietta You're so adorable sometimes! Why so happy at the prospect of getting married?

Valentina But that's what I dream of! To be called "Madame"! To wear diamonds! To go to the theatre!

Henrietta Well that's one version of what it is to be a wife! If only!

Valentina But cousin, what else is there?

Henrietta Never mind! The important bit is that you're in love with each other. And as he's promised to marry you, I'll speak to your mother. But for that I really do need to know his name.....

Valentina Ah yes. Well I've no reason to hide it any longer. It's Monsieur de Neyriss.

Henrietta (*stupefied*) Monsieur de Neyriss?

Valentina Yes. Why the surprise?

Henrietta But that's not possible.

Valentina Why? I promise you it's the truth.

Henrietta Well, er, he doesn't love you. I'm sure of it.

Valentina But he said he does!

Henrietta You surely don't believe that!

Valentina Well why wouldn't he love me?

Henrietta Because he doesn't.

Valentina But if he's going to marry me?

Henrietta Well... he's going to marry me!

Valentina He's going to marry you?

Henrietta Yes.

Valentina He's asked you?

Henrietta Yes - more or less. He's going to ask me tonight.

Valentina But he's already asked me.

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Henrietta What does that prove? For men, marriage is just a pseudonym for love.

Valentina But...

Henrietta And anyway, he's totally unsuitable for you. You're much too young for him.

Valentina What? He's a young man.

Henrietta A young man! He's at least 30! He's not right for you at all.

Valentina Anyway, I'm happy with him. And you promised you'd speak to mother.

Henrietta Speak to your mother? About him? Certainly not. I don't want you complaining in ten years' time that I ruined your life.

Valentina Ruined my life?

Henrietta Oh come on! You can tell that he isn't really in love with you.

Valentina How?

Henrietta Because he's also courting me!

Valentina But...

Henrietta And what's to say that he's not doing the same with lots of women!

Valentina Oh!

Henrietta Do you think this man would be a faithful husband? Hardly!

Valentina So why do you want to marry him?

Henrietta Why do I want to marry him? Er....

Valentina The same applies, doesn't it? I'm guessing you're not keen on a faithless husband?

Henrietta First of all, this isn't about me.... And then it's not the same thing at all.... A widow has much more experience of this sort of thing than a young girl.

Valentina But...

Henrietta Besides, you don't love him either. You only want to marry him because you want to go to the theatre.

Valentina But...

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Henrietta It's typical. A little girl's crush. A storm in a teacup. My dear child, I know how it is at your age: you see a young man and you lose all sense. He pays you a little compliment, and suddenly you're convinced he wants to marry you. And it's a surprise that he doesn't do what handsome young men do in novels and ask you to elope with him. I know what girls of your age are like! Teenage crushes! But true love... ah no, no, a thousand times no!

Valentina You've changed your tune a bit!

Henrietta I've been thinking.

Valentina Then you've been thinking very quickly! It's only since I mentioned his name that...

Henrietta What do you mean?

Valentina I mean that I know perfectly well where you're coming from. The best defence lawyers are those who are defending themselves

Henrietta I should have expected that! Bitterness. All because I've shown you the truth about Monsieur de Neyriss. What do you want me to say? Marry him? Then you can show off your charming husband – especially charming with other women!

Valentina Go on - laugh at me! That's unkind of you.

Henrietta Come now, Valentina...

Valentina Leave me alone!

Henrietta All right, if you want to have a sulk. Just let me know when you've finished.
(*silence. Henrietta picks up a newspaper*)
Ah! Oh my goodness! What's this? Monsieur de Neyriss....

Valentina What about him?

Henrietta The devious, underhand, treacherous, unfaithful.....! He's getting married!

Valentina Married?

Henrietta Look! "The marriage is announced of Monsieur Raoul de Neyriss and Maemoiselle de Stainfeld. This charming young woman....." (Charming! She's got a squint!) "this charming young woman brings with her a handsome dowry of 200,000 pounds a year. Monsieur de Neyriss is a true gentleman..." With a dowry like that, it's easy to be a true gentleman. The swine!

Valentina Who could have guessed?

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Henrietta Men! Typical!

Valentina And he told me that he loved me.

Henrietta They're not worth the rope to hang them with! And this is the man you wanted to marry? I wasn't going to let you make that mistake! Oh no.

Valentina Oh cousin!

Henrietta Now it's tears and "Oh cousin", but a few minutes ago, when I was trying to put you off, when I was pointing out what a mistake you were making, when I was protecting you against yourself, you got cross with me. Now, I trust, you'll agree that I was right. And if I'd listened to you, I'd have gone and spoken to your mother, and I would have been responsible for your future unhappiness. You don't deserve to be pitied.

Valentina I'm so sorry, Henrietta.

Henrietta Next time, you'll listen to me.

Valentina But how could I have known?

Henrietta It's true. We were both taken in by the lying wretch. I'm better off without him.

Valentina And so am I! But still, it is a shame...

Henrietta Are you crying?

Valentina (*through her tears*) Certainly not!

Henrietta Don't try to hide your tears. The shame is his not yours.

Valentina Quite right, cousin. He doesn't deserve my tears.

Henrietta My poor dear, your first love hasn't been a happy experience. But console yourself with knowing that you'd have been much more unhappy if you'd married him.

Valentina You're right. I shall never think of him again. I promise.

Henrietta Very sensible.

Valentina I shall hate him!

Henrietta Oh no don't do that! You'd end up adoring him.

Valentina What?

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Henrietta It's always the way. If you hate him, you'll keep thinking about him, and then you'll end up finding some excuse for him. Just forget him. And once you've forgotten him, you can ignore him.

Valentina My dear Henrietta, you're just trying to cheer me up.

Henrietta I am trying to cheer you up! We can't have you crying when the guests arrive. I want you to be happy and smiling; I want you to dance and to have fun! Come here and give me a hug! And as for Mademoiselle de Stainfeld...

Bothshe's welcome to our intended!