

The Armoire

by

Kathryn Shaver

Making her way down the foot-worn stone steps, Madame de Berthier clutched the braided-silk rope that ornamented the curving stairwell in the turret. She lived in a fifteenth-century manoir, which she and her husband, dead some twenty years, had restored as a country home, a vacation respite from the bustling city of Toulouse, where he had prospered in the insurance business.

She muttered about the state of the flowerbeds that graced the front access to the house. It had been hot that summer in Southern France. And there had been not a drop of rain for weeks. The graveled walks were powdery, the squarely-clipped hedges grey from dust. Beds of catmint and dahlias, cosmos and old roses, contained by intricate patterns of boxwood, had withered. Only the Russian sage flourished, reaching upright, as if delighting in the sun.

“Michel,” she called in a quiet voice to her son. “Michel, where are you?”

There was no answer. Madame sighed, supposing she didn't really need help watering the gardens. She would do it herself. After all, she wanted no more distressing outbursts. The thought went out of her head as quickly as it had occurred to her. She walked more erectly across the smooth stone floor of the salon into a tiny kitchen, where she began to prepare her breakfast. Unwrapping the remainder of yesterday's bread from a dishtowel, she tried to remember what day it was. Tuesday. Yes, it was Tuesday, the day Mademoiselle comes to clean. She was sure of it, because yesterday was Monday, when the police had come.

Madame set the tray containing her breakfast onto an immense table that bore generations of pocks and polish. She adjusted her chair to gain the most exposure to the invading chunks of sunlight and poured warmed milk into a large handle-less cup containing steaming black coffee. Lifting the bowl with both hands, she inhaled its fragrance, then sipped it without a sound. From a jar of preserves that her daughter had sent from Paris and that she kept hidden behind the lettuce in the small refrigerator, Madame spooned red globs onto the bread. Her hands shook only a little.

Madame was of the age to have lost her will. Her volition was intact, and it sparkled occasionally, but she was generally unable to act on it. And so, much to the displeasure of her two elder children, Madame had acquiesced to Michel's intentions to impose himself upon his mother's declining years.

"He's a madman, maman," her daughter Cedrique had protested. "He'll destroy your peaceful life in the countryside." But neither she nor her brother Jean-Claude had offered an alternative.

Michel had slept only one night in his childhood bedroom. The next day, he had complained bitterly that the room was unpleasant in every respect, though he did not elaborate what the unacceptable qualities might have been. He moved his books and his few possessions into the turret that had served as a library, located on the ground floor. A small wooden door, not as high as he was tall, remained shut, barred securely when he was inside, and locked with a key, which he kept in his pocket when he was outside of the room.

Mademoiselle arrived—she could be heard clattering about in the closet next to the kitchen—while Madame was basking in the solitude of her morning coffee. Emerging with a broom and a mop, a bucket and some rags, the maid nodded a terse "bonjour Madame" and made quickly for the kitchen. She was dressed in street clothes, a fact that disturbed Madame, who was from an era of uniformed household help. Moreover, her slacks were tight and her blouse, tied at the waist and unbuttoned one too many,

accentuated a once-attractive figure, though her lean-muscled slouch bore evidence of what already had been an unfortunate life.

Michel appeared, as if from nowhere. Without acknowledging his mother, he busied himself at the sideboard with a press coffeepot, assembling mesh filters onto the metal rod and spooning finely-ground coffee into the clear vessel. “Café, Luisette?” The maid poked her head out of the kitchen and nodded, proffering a teapot of already boiling water.

It was a ritual that Madame abhorred. Each Tuesday and Friday when Mademoiselle came to clean, Michel, normally preoccupied with his books behind a locked door, made himself quite visible. He would offer the girl coffees and sometimes cookies from a tin, engaging her with his prattle about the socialist state that had destroyed everything in France, including his own opportunities for success. He would lean his tall, smiling self against the door of the kitchen, balancing the demitasse on the small saucer, his fingers, long like his father’s, posed against the cup. The maid would listen politely, sipping the coffee uncomfortably in Madame’s presence, and nod in agreement with the son of her employer.

As soon as the coffee was finished, Michel would announce that Luisette could clean his room now and he would accompany her to be sure she didn’t disturb any of his possessions. Taunting his mother—Madame was certain he took pleasure in her aggravation—he would conspicuously remove the key from his pocket and unlock the door. Mademoiselle would collect clean linens for the bed, then Michel would follow her into the room, close the door, and bolt it, as he always did.

When her son and the maid left her presence on this day, Madame chided herself that she had failed to ask Michel to help water the garden. He had dismissed the twice-a-week gardener, saying he could better care for the flowerbeds and grounds that Madame and his father had lovingly laid out some forty years before. That would be how Michel would earn the privilege of staying there, he had promised, though he paid hardly more than lip service to keeping the garden. Occasionally, he would throw himself into pruning

a wall of hedges or pulling out an orchard tree that displeased him, working every minute there was daylight until he tired of the project. Once, when a friend had come to the countryside to visit his mother, Michel had claimed that it was he who had created the gardens. Madame's dignity prevailed. She didn't want to suffer one of Michel's embarrassing outbursts, so she did not dispute her son's claim in his presence. Later, she whispered to her guest that the gardens had been the pride of her husband, Edouard, and that he himself had designed them in the style of one of LeNotre's small gardens surrounding a chateau near Paris.

Outside in the garden, where the neighbors might see, Madame moved with the resolute erectness of a woman of comfortable means. It was essential that the parched garden be watered every day, and she had forgotten it yesterday. Such a bother, forgetting, and then a bother to remember, too. Especially about her own son behaving so badly, such a pity.

It hadn't seemed, when he was growing up, that Michel was any more obstreperous than other boys. He had been remote toward his father, who had perhaps expected too much of his son. But he had been loving to his mother. Madame remembered how Michel would present her with pilfered blossoms from the neighbor's garden, as it had been strictly forbidden to pick from his own. Now that she thought of it, her son had always made his own rules.

"Good morning, Tatou." Madame sang to the neighbor's cat, which lived mostly in her garden under an old iron bench. Fine place for a cat to pass the day, she mused, always happy to see the white-socked feline, snoozing in shade, or rolling in the fragrant catmint she kept for it. "Attention. I am going to make some rain," she warned.

The center of the flowerbeds contained an ornamental metal sprinkler, two metres in height, which bestowed a gentle shower when turned on. That posed no problem for her; the hose was already connected and she could easily turn that faucet, but she required assistance in dragging the cumbersome watering hoses to the spigots at the corners of the garden.

This reminded her that Michel had occupied himself behind a locked door, apparently tending to the supervision of cleaning his quarters. She determined to voice her displeasure when he emerged, both at his unavailability for the garden chores, and more so for the inappropriateness of his behavior with the household help. But any disagreement with Michel's actions would create a scene of such intensity that Madame would retreat. His tantrums were unbearable. She wanted no repetition of yesterday. There would be no police in her house today, she promised herself, which reminded her to telephone Cedrique. She wanted to tell her . . . oh, she would remember it shortly, she was sure.

Or was it Jean-Claude she had intended to call? No, of course not. Her eldest son, who admirably carried on the family insurance enterprise, was all business and bluster. He did come dutifully to see her for Noel, and he would bring his austere wife and two well-behaved children to visit before they left on holiday in August. Even as near as he lived, in Toulouse, now only forty minutes by car on the new road, he rarely visited.

She saw even less of Cedrique, though they talked on the telephone several times each week. Madame considered the mother-daughter relationship an excellent one. But Cedrique's career in television kept her from coming to visit any time except at Noel. In the earlier days, when Madame had been able to get around better, she would take the train to Paris to spend a few days with Cedrique and that husband she had. Whatever was his name? Such a bother, not being able to remember anything anymore. But it wasn't necessary to remember him anyway, since Cedrique had dispensed with him some years before.

Madame had learned long ago to avoid discussion with either Jean-Claude or Cedrique of their brother's repeated failures. Even so, it was evident they knew, as they argued bitterly when she underwrote any of Michel's enterprises. But he was, after all, her youngest child. He was still her son and she must look after him, no matter how badly he behaved. Now where had he gone off to? She needed his help with the garden hoses.

Outside, the cloudless skies were an intense blue, a blue like no other skies in the world. Madame, being French, believed this to be the absolute truth. The grass on the lawn had died weeks ago and the earth was hard, cracked in places from the lack of rain. She turned on the sprinkler at the center of the flowerbeds and moved down the gravel path as fast as she could, so she wouldn't get wet. But the drops on her skin and her clothing brought to mind the rain showers that she and her Edouard had let drench them when they were creating the garden. She hadn't forgotten that: the sight of him, long-legged in his yellow-hooded slicker, the touch of the rain, the touch of her husband. Even now, sometimes she wished for it. She stopped at the garden's edge, holding her bared arms out to catch all the drops of water that she could. In the distance, far to the west, she saw wisps of white in the sky.

* * * * *

For dinner, Madame baked a chicken, which she pulled into small portions, setting the pieces around the edge of an octagonal serving platter. In the center she laid slender green beans, blanched to a high color. Late that morning, she had sent Mademoiselle into the village to buy two baguettes, one for dinner and one for the next day. The girl had returned with the bread, and strawberries, too, fragrant and sweet.

Madame and her son had hardly spoken all day. He was still angry with her—though it wasn't her fault at all, Madame was sure of that—over the episode the day before with the police. She remembered again that she had intended to telephone Cedrique in Paris, to assure her that furniture, as such, was of no consequence, really, it wasn't. What mattered was not igniting Michel's irksome temperament. She would remember to ring her daughter immediately after dinner was finished.

She called out to Michel, and they sat across from each other at the places she had set, saying nothing. Madame broke the silence. "Thank you, my son, for helping me this morning.

“If,” he raised his voice, “only you had been more patient, I would have done it entirely myself. You are old and feeble. You might hurt yourself. And then where would I be? Caring for an invalid old woman? I think not.” His mother squeezed her brow. She hadn’t meant to irritate him. “And besides, there’s not enough water on the east side. And too much on the pomegranate bushes. They will rot.”

Madame looked away, recognizing that Michel was still in his mood and that she must accede to his bad temperament or suffer through a scene of no small intensity.

“You must remember that I, Michel, your son,” he paused for emphasis, “I take care of everything now. Every. Thing. I am the only one you can depend upon. Cedrique and Jean-Claude, they don’t care. They don’t care for this house. They don’t care for this garden. They don’t care for you.”

Her jaw quivered. He was saying that because of the unfortunate episode last Christmas, the three of them shouting and Jean-Claude’s children crying. What was it they were squabbling about? She couldn’t remember, only that Cedrique had shut herself inside her room, and that Jean-Claude had gathered his family and driven away before the dinner was served.

Shielding herself against Michel’s fit of temper, she set her gaze across the room. Her eyes fell on the void where the armoire had been until yesterday, when the antiques dealer from Toulouse had come to take it. She could forget it. She only wished she didn’t have to be reminded by the empty space, by the years of dust that had accumulated on the wall behind the majestic old cabinet. It was the one thing, more than any other in all the years she had shared with her husband, that seemed to embody his presence. For a moment, she caressed in her mind the spot that glowed with the patina of thousands upon thousands of touches, each time she had descended or ascended the steps, steadying herself, placing her hand against the armoire, against the comfort of the memory of Edouard.

Madame tried to hide her sigh. She had long worried about Michel. He had been able to manage so little in his lifetime and had completely alienated his siblings with his

ill-tempered disposition. Jean-Claude wouldn't allow him to even enter the door of their father's business in Toulouse. And while Michel had spent a number of years in Paris, making futile attempts as a dealer of undistinguished antiques, Cedrique had chosen to avoid him, in fact even refused to acknowledge her brother when she encountered him on the street. Madame had privately fueled her son's small bank account the times it became evident that his latest scheme had not succeeded or that he had squandered what little he had on rare old books and bibelots of questionable integrity.

She must remember to ask Mademoiselle to wipe the dust from the wall. She could forget her embarrassment when the dealer from Toulouse, and then the police, had arrived. It must have been Cedrique who had called them, for Madame had phoned her daughter in Paris to say that this time Michel had gone entirely too far. Now he had made some business arrangement to sell her most cherished piece of furniture, the Louis Quatorze armoire of burl walnut that Edouard had presented her more than thirty years ago, on her fiftieth birthday. On the inside of one of the doors she had pasted his note, the de Berthier family crest engraved at the top: "To my beloved wife. Like this armoire, you become more beautiful with the passing years."

Her mind went back to the day before, when Monsieur Marivaux had appeared in his fine car, and behind him, a truck bearing the ornate script *Antiquites*. Madame, still in her nightclothes, had met him at the door.

"Ah, Madame de Berthier," he had greeted her. "It is good to see you looking so well."

"Surely it is a mistake," she had replied when he had told her his reason for being at her home with a truck and two men. Madame left him standing on the terrace and went to find Michel, who had locked himself in his turret and wouldn't answer. She could not send the man away, as he had assured her that he had already paid Michel for the purchase. Having no idea what to do, she had telephoned Cedrique.

"It is not his to sell. Do not let them take it." Cedrique had been very firm.

The gendarmes, being only a kilometer away in the nearby village, appeared almost immediately. Yes, surely it was Cedrique who had phoned them. Michel had come out of his turret, apparently when he had heard the third car, the police car, come around into the gravel drive. Monsieur Marivaux met them as the two uniformed men climbed out of their tiny black and white car. As they conversed quietly, Michel took confident strides across the drive to where they stood.

Madame watched from inside, through the glass of the doors, listening intently to catch every word of Michel's explanation. Through his agent Marivaux, he would sell the armoire to The Louvre.

"Pffft." Another of Michel's bombastic contrivances. The armoire was a fine piece, but it was absurd to think that such a museum would have interest in it.

Michel was smiling, at his most charming. Monsieur Marivaux looked perturbed. When Michel led Marivaux's two men into the house, Madame made a pact with herself to stand up to her son and positioned her body in front of the cabinet.

"Maman," was all Michel said in a tone of voice that broke her will. She felt she was crumbling inside, as Monsieur Marivaux gently took her arm and led her out of the way of his men. As they began to move the heavy cupboard, she stumbled about, embarrassed, confused, saying it was not possible, it was not possible. In only minutes, Monsieur Marivaux, his two men, and even the police, were gone. And so was the armoire.

As Madame and her son ate the chicken, no words passed between them. For dessert, she brought out the strawberries heaped in a bowl with a saucer of sugar. She dabbed one of the fragrant berries into the sugar. Michel cocked his head, listening to something in the distance.

"What is it, my son?"

“Shhh,” he quieted her.

She listened, and though her hearing wasn't as good as it once had been, Madame thought she might have heard a distant rumble. She bit the berry from the stem. For a moment, she caught a glimpse of herself in the woods with her dear Edouard. They were so young then, feeding one another wild strawberries. The juice of the fruit was intense and sweet. She could feel a trickle run down her chin.

She noticed it was darker than usual for this time of evening. The wind had picked up, scurrying bits of dead blossoms and desiccated leaves across the terrace.

The lights flickered, then went out. Michel charged outside, leaving the door ajar, the wind fluttering the tablecloth, blowing the bill-of-sale papers left on the library table from yesterday—oh, dear—onto the floor.

When the rain came, it fell in torrents. Lightning turned the sky green, illuminating the pummeled garden. The pelting drops made rivulets in the hard-packed clay that surrounded the house.

Michel came back inside, slammed the door against the wind, and, without a word to his mother, hurried into his turret. He appeared moments later, his father's long legs emerging from bathing trunks, over which he wore a short rubber mackintosh. Something familiar, yes, it had been Edouard's, when he worked the garden in rainy autumns. Michel pulled its yellow hood over his head and clomped across the room in combat boots left from his days in the military, so many years ago.

“Well, do something, old woman. Get some candles, at least.”

Madame pushed herself from the table, dipping one last strawberry in the sugar as she rose, and moved by the illumination of the almost incessant lightning into the darkened kitchen. She felt above the stove for the matches, lit two of the burners for light,

and rattled the drawers in the dimness, feeling her way for candles. She found two small ones and held them up for no one to see, took them into the salon, and inserted the stubs into empty silver candlesticks. The light was feeble, but they were all she had found.

Just outside one of the doors to the terrace sat the neighbor's cat. In the flicker of lightning, Madame could see the rain that glistened on its fur. The animal stared at the puddling water. Madame went to the door and called, "Tatou, Tatou. I am sorry you cannot come in out of the storm. It is one of Michel's rules." She tapped on the glass pane. The cat, mesmerized by the rising water, paid no attention. Nor did Michel, who shoveled furiously with a garden spade, shouting at the rain and the wind as he dug a small trench to divert the water from the house. Madame looked back towards the darkened wall where the armoire had stood and was glad for the dimness, relieved that the weak candlelight didn't reach as far as that space. She turned back to the cat, but Tatou had vanished.

Water had risen now over the stone apron that surrounded the house. It seeped under the door, down the single step that led into the salon and across the floor. Madame watched what at first was only a narrow dark line on the stone, then several of them, under each of the doors that crossed the front of the house. In a matter of only a minute, the dark wet lines converged, and Madame found herself standing in water all around her. It was pouring in now. She walked unsteadily towards a chair, sat next to the telephone, and lifted the receiver to call her daughter. Five-three-five. No, now it begins with zero one. Zero-one-five . . . it was too much to remember. Madame yawned, exhausted. She didn't need to phone Cedrique. After all, Michel was there, to take care of such problems.

Madame pushed herself up from the chair and walked unsteadily across the old Persian carpet. Her shoes made sucking sounds on the water-soaked wool. Yes, it was good it was finally raining. And Michel, in the yellow coat and with the garden spade, could almost be his father. She had no need to worry. She could go to bed now.

At the edge of the staircase, where the armoire had stood, she put her hand out to reassure herself before ascending the uneven steps. For a moment, she tipped forward

slightly, and thought she might fall. Her hand felt gritty where it brushed against the emptiness of the dusty wall. She had lost her balance but only a bit. Straightening herself, she brushed the dust from her hand against her dress.