

# Mignon

Barbara Sims

**M.** JULIEN FLAUBERT plodded homeward on feet that lagged because their destination held no element of pleasant anticipation or even mild interest for their owner. The feet would bear him across the square, down four blocks to 23 Rue Heidelberg, and up fourteen steps to the flat he had taken in one of the more imposing apartment houses of downtown Paris. Once inside the feet would be caressed and purred over by Mignon, the female cat, and indeed the only female resident of M. Flaubert's flat. There was no Marie or Josette or Emilie to greet her breadwinner with an embrace and an aroma of simmering pot roast drifting from the shining enamel kitchen at 23 Rue Heidelberg. There was only Mignon, who, being unable to open her coveted nightly tin of salmon herself, was therefore obliged to caress and cajole one more familiar with the mechanics of can opener and can.

M. Flaubert was a bachelor of some forty years, and, for the last five of those years, he had lapsed into musing over and sometimes privately lamenting his unmarried state. More accurately, he felt a little guilty about it, for the fact was that he had never once been in love with anyone, and he was quite certain that no one had ever been in love with him. This fact he concealed as a matter of pride, for, being a Frenchman of the old school, he felt that he had a tradition to uphold in matters of love. Anyway, he was getting on in years now, and what eligible woman would glance twice at the bejeweled, paunchy old figure M. Flaubert represented? Nevertheless, he sighed heavily as he usually did when sentimentality misted over his banker's heart, and he tried to feel a little eager about the letter he was certain to have received from his brother in the United States.

The feet plodded on, and little specks appeared on them as rain began falling from a gray, overhung sky. He felt his new black Homburg apprehensively; then, as the rain turned into a downpour, he glanced about for a protective doorway. Finding one near at hand, he ducked into it and shook the rain from his hatbrim. The downpour continued, and M. Flaubert, fidgeting, thought of Mignon, who would be impatient and disgruntled at his delay and was certain to be querulous and irritable all evening. To pass the time, he ran his eye

over the list of tenants in the dirty, musty building. One small, soiled card caught his attention. It read: M. Gustave Richeux, and beneath it was lettered: Problems of the Heart. He glanced at it, looked away, then looked back again. Months later he could not have explained what impulse moved him that rainy day, but some force propelled M. Flaubert's usually conservative feet up three flights of stairs to the flat of one Gustave Richeux, where his tentative rap was answered by a tiny pink gnome of a man who ushered the startled Julien Flaubert into the dingy flat. With a polite gesture, he seated Flaubert at a rickety table which supported a threadbare oilcloth and a half-eaten sandwich. These impediments the gnome brushed to the floor with a sweep of his gnarled little fist. He perched on the edge of the seat, folded his doll's hands, and peered at M. Flaubert, banker and conservative, through the scraggles and wisps of hair and beard that almost completely concealed his beady little eyes.

"You have come to me because you are sick at heart," he began. "I am able to help you because I understand that a sick heart is sometimes more painful than a diseased limb, and my advice to you will be worthwhile and valuable because I sympathize with you and comprehend your difficulties." M. Flaubert did not question the logic of this statement. The rain, the dingy room, and this bizarre little man extended him a protective cloak of isolation that had never before been offered him. He nodded dumbly. The bizarre one waited. M. Flaubert sighed heavily, opened up his sick heart, and told the whole shameful story in a matter of five minutes. The grotesque little creature clucked sympathetically.

"Your problem, my friend," he said, "is that you wish to love and eventually espouse an eligible woman, preferably young, who will, in turn, love you and agree to become your dutiful and obedient wife. What you fear most is rejection and disappointment because you are no longer young. But what is youth? Exuberance, overconfidence, wholesomeness, and fierce pride in one's honor and responsibilities. All are most easily feigned. My advice to you is to go where eligible women abound, cloak yourself in youth's armor, and captivate the lady of your choice."

He hopped up then, signifying that the interview had ended. M. Flaubert sat stupefied. It was childishly simple! One simply acted well, read his lines on cue, and carted home the prize after the performance was over. He was amazed that he had not thought of it himself; he had sought so many times for the answer to his dilemma. Of course, he must find a woman he could genuinely love, but that would be easy if he met eligible women in flocks, and, after all, it was different now because he really wanted to fall in love. Where he had once been only spasmodically serious about a mate, he was now eager and a little desperate. He dropped a handful of coins on the rickety table and, wordless, left the room and the building, feeling as if

blind chance had led him to Venus herself in the guise of a tiny pink gnome.

Two weeks later found him at the resort of Monte Carlo where women of every sort came in droves. Had one of Flaubert's business associates chanced to encounter him there, he would have hastened back to Paris to report the new Julien Flaubert who pranced and strutted and leered like a young turkey gobbler and gave every indication of having gone quite mad.

The fact was that M. Flaubert was not in the least mad; he was, rather, mildly delirious. The youth that had slipped so suddenly through his fingers had returned just as suddenly, and he was intoxicated at his prowess with the ladies. These latter found him privately amusing, but they flattered him, petted him and pretended they did not see the old Flaubert in this dashing creature who promenaded along the boardwalk each day with a different lady and danced every dance in the evenings under the arcade. Matchmaking mothers and predatory spinsters eyed him speculatively, but he was oblivious to all this and waited only for the day he would meet the woman he aspired to. He found her seated across the bridge table from him one evening on the porch of the resort hotel, and he prayed for blind chance to lead him into a grand slam so that she would be impressed and, above all, impressionable. The grand slam was not forthcoming, but the next few days found him constantly with her, purring over and caressing her in much the same manner that Mignon used to procure her nightly tin of salmon. It is certain that Mlle. Joyeuse Costaine did not find his youthful antics ridiculous, for she was a simple, light-hearted little thing who found his vigor overwhelming and eagerly consented to return to Paris with him and become his wife.

Now M. Flaubert's feet were airy things which moved him lightly and quickly homeward each evening to the charming Joyeuse who greeted him with a laughing, lilting song and an aroma of simmering pot roast drifting from the shining enamel kitchen. And, after supper, well-fed and contented, M. Flaubert read his journal and stroked Mignon who no longer reigned supreme at 23 Rue Heidelberg and who had lately become as grumpy and cross as a rheumatic old dowager queen in exile.

Let it be said that Julien Flaubert never for a moment forgot that his newfound happiness was due in a large measure to the wonderfully wise little man who had given him such sage and successful advice that rainy day some months before. One evening, homeward bound, M. Flaubert allowed his feet to lead him into the dingy doorway of yesterday's adventure. The small soiled card with its provocative message was gone and so, it seemed, was M. Gustave Richeux. A highly indignant landlady, still smarting from her loss, informed Flaubert that the gnome had been last seen being escorted to jail for failing to pay his board and lodging. M. Flaubert's feet

hurried him to that very institution. Here was a chance to help one who had done so much for him! It was a small price to pay.

A courteous gendarme ushered Flaubert to the gnome's cell, where he found the inmate perched on his bunk dealing and redealing a pack of greasy cards. M. Flaubert, puffing nervously on his cheroot, explained his mission and offered generous financial aid. After all, as he told the gnome, he owed all his happiness to him, did he not? The gnome was puzzled, and cudged his brain until he remembered the rainy day that had brought him this strange visitor. M. Flaubert was shocked to find the oracle in such ignominious surroundings. Just what, he inquired delicately, were the financial resources at the little man's disposal? The answer stunned him more than a stock market crash would have. The tiny creature, it seemed, eked out a living as fortune teller, mind reader, and mystic during the summer carnival and circus season. The winter months left him no alternative but to give pseudo advice to the gullible on matters of love, stolen goods, and other problems of personality and fortune. But where, M. Flaubert demanded a little desperately, had he found the wonderful advice he had sold that strange, rainy day? The gnome, who was by this time a little uncomfortable and beginning to regret his open answers, replied that that sort of palaver came easily enough to a man who earned his living fleecing the desperate and lonely refuse of humanity's backwash.

M. Flaubert slunk from the cell row and left the jail building with a mottled purplish color rising from his collar to his cheeks. He, Julien Flaubert, had been duped by a charlatan, a circus fakir! Mortification washed over him, and was followed by alternate waves of shame and rage.

Gone was the air from under M. Flaubert's feet this night, and gone the swagger from his shoulders. The airless feet carried him down the street to No. 23 and up the fourteen steps to the Flaubert flat. The voice of Joyeuse greeted him laughing and liltng. His brows knitted together. Every evening the same song! Was it that she knew nothing else but that idiotic thing about "*Le Petit Oiseau*"? He opened the door and the odor of simmering pot roast assaulted his slightly flared nostrils. It smelled old and a trifle burned tonight, did it not? Mignon saw him, yawned and stretched, and sallied forth to be greeted by the sharp, angry toe of M. Flaubert's shoe. Her liver, which had been rather shaky of late, was somewhat displaced by the blow, and she sailed out the open door with enraged yowls and vindictive hisses.

In the sordid narrow alley behind No. 23, she met a nondescript battle-scarred tom and followed him along the fence tops and rails until they were miles from Rue Heidelberg and the flat of Monsieur and Madame Julien Flaubert.