

## *I Meet Maxim de Winter*

What would I be today if I had not gone to Monte Carlo with Mrs Van Hopper? I would have lived another life. I would have become a different person.

Mrs Van Hopper was not a pleasant woman. She loved to meet people who were rich and famous. Every summer, Mrs Van Hopper stayed at the Hotel Côte d'Azur, the biggest and most expensive hotel in Monte Carlo. Here, Mrs Van Hopper found out which well-known people were staying in the town. She always found an excuse to speak to them. Then, pretending to know them well, she asked her victims<sup>6</sup> rude questions in her loud American voice.

I was young and shy. I hated my life with Mrs Van Hopper, but she paid me a little money to be her companion. I was not exactly a servant and certainly not a friend.

We must have looked a strange pair as we walked into the hotel restaurant that day. Mrs Van Hopper walked in front of me on her high-heeled shoes. Her fat, heavy body swayed above her short fat legs. I followed slowly, my eyes looking down at the floor. With my straight hair and badly-fitting clothes I looked like an awkward<sup>6</sup> schoolgirl.

Mrs Van Hopper sat down at her usual table and stared at everyone in the restaurant.

'There isn't one well-known person here,' she said in her loud voice. 'There's no one I want to talk to.'

Mrs Van Hopper was very greedy. She ordered a large lunch for herself. Soon she was eating a large plateful of spaghetti. We ate in silence. The rich sauce ran down Mrs Van Hopper's chin. I looked away. Then I saw that a new guest was sitting down at the next table. Mrs Van Hopper saw him too. She put down her

fork and stared at him hard. I saw an excited look come into her small eyes.

'It's Max de Winter,' she said to me. 'The man who owns Manderley. You must have heard of it – a beautiful old house in the west of England. He looks ill, doesn't he? His wife died suddenly last year. They say he's broken hearted<sup>2</sup>.'

I felt sorry for de Winter already. He was Mrs Van Hopper's next victim. She finished her meal as quickly as possible. I knew what she was going to do.

There was a long seat in the hotel lounge, with a low table in front of it. The seat was between the restaurant and the main door of the hotel. Everyone who left the restaurant had to walk past this seat.

'I'll take my coffee in the lounge,' Mrs Van Hopper told the waiter, 'straight away.'

She turned to me, her eyes shining: 'Go upstairs and find that letter from my nephew, Billy. Bring it to me in the lounge and the photographs too. Billy met Max de Winter in London. Be quick.'

I went up to Mrs Van Hopper's rooms as slowly as I could. I hoped that de Winter would get away before I returned.

When I came back with the letter, Mrs Van Hopper was already on the seat in the lounge. De Winter was sitting next to her. He was a dark-haired, handsome man. His face was pale and his dark eyes had a sad, lost look. De Winter stood up politely as I gave Mrs Van Hopper her letter.

'Mr de Winter is having coffee with us. Go and ask the waiter for another cup,' Mrs Van Hopper told me.

'No, you are my guests,' said de Winter. He called the waiter.

In a moment, de Winter was sitting on a small chair and I was next to Mrs Van Hopper on the long seat.

'I recognized you at once,' Mrs Van Hopper said. 'I met you at my nephew's party, in London. But I don't suppose you remember an old woman like me?' And Mrs Van Hopper gave de Winter one of her biggest smiles.



*Max de Winter's face was pale and his dark eyes had a sad, lost look.*

'You are wrong, I could never forget you,' said de Winter in a cold, hard voice.

'Billy's on holiday now,' Mrs Van Hopper went on. 'He loves travelling. But if he had a home like Manderley, he would never leave it. People say that Manderley's one of the most beautiful houses in England. I wonder what you are doing here in Monte Carlo?'

For a few moments there was silence. Then de Winter spoke. 'Manderley was looking very lovely when I came away.' There was another silence. De Winter had not answered Mrs Van Hopper's question. She was not silent for long, of course. She started to tell de Winter all the unpleasant gossip<sup>6</sup> of Monte Carlo.

After his moment of rudeness, de Winter listened to her politely. I looked down at the floor and tried not to hear Mrs Van Hopper's loud voice. At last she had to stop. A waiter came up to her with a message. Mrs Van Hopper's dressmaker was waiting for her upstairs.

De Winter stood up at once. 'You mustn't keep your dressmaker waiting,' he said.

Mrs Van Hopper smiled. 'You must have a drink with me,' she said. 'Why not tomorrow evening? I'm having a few friends . . .'

'I'm sorry,' de Winter said quickly. 'I shall be away all day tomorrow. If you will excuse me . . .'

He turned and walked out of the lounge.

'What a strange man Max de Winter is,' said Mrs Van Hopper when we were standing in the lift. 'He left so suddenly. But he is certainly an attractive man. By the way, dear, you were rather rude to him. You must look at people when they are speaking. You are not a child, you know.'

Mrs Van Hopper was soon busy with her dressmaker. I sat on a window seat, looking at the bright day outside. I could not go out. Some of Mrs Van Hopper's friends were coming to tea. They were fat, rude women like herself. My job was to talk to them, light their cigarettes and tidy the room after they had gone.

There was a knock on the door. A waiter came in with a note in his hand. 'Madame is in the bedroom,' I told him. But the note was for me. There were a few words in an unknown handwriting.

'Forgive me. I was very rude after lunch.' The note was not signed, but I knew it was from de Winter.

'Is there an answer?' the waiter asked me. I looked up. 'No. No answer,' I said.

After the waiter had gone, I put the note in my pocket. Mrs Van Hopper called me from her bedroom. I got up slowly, thinking about de Winter and about Manderley.