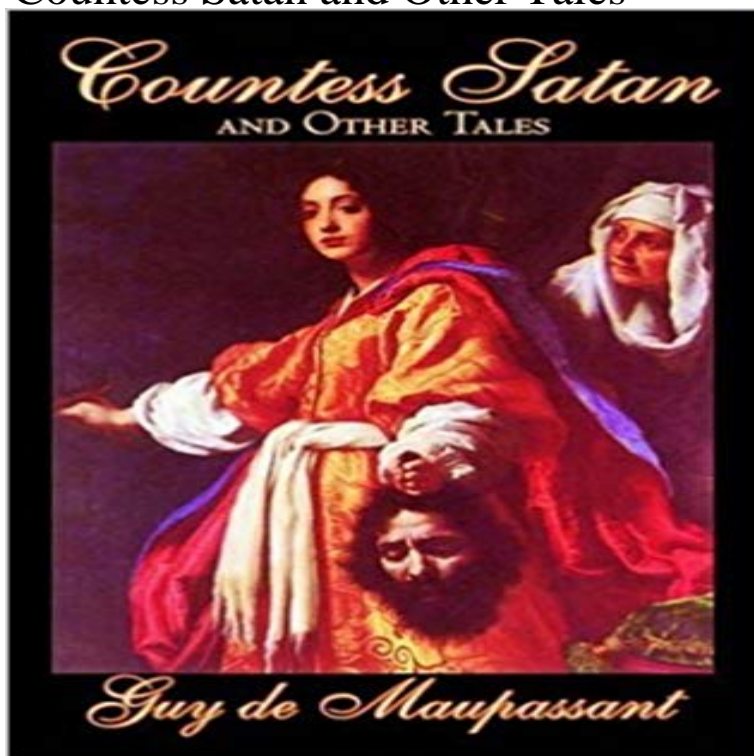


Countess Satan and Other Tales



Maupassant has been called a literary nihilist -- but (and this is the second trait of his singular genius) in him nihilism finds itself coexistent with an animal energy so fresh and so intense that for a long time it deceives the closest observer. In an eloquent discourse, pronounced over his premature grave, Emile Zola well defined this illusion: We congratulated him, said he, upon that health which seemed unbreakable, and justly credited him with the soundest constitution of our band, as well as with the clearest mind and the sanest reason. It was then that this frightful thunderbolt destroyed him. It is not exact to say that the lofty genius of de Maupassant was that of an absolutely sane man. We comprehend it today, and, on re-reading him, we find traces everywhere of his final malady. But it is exact to say that this wounded genius was, by a singular circumstance, the genius of a robust man. A physiologist would without doubt explain this anomaly by the coexistence of a nervous lesion, light at first, with a muscular, athletic temperament. Whatever the cause, the effect is undeniable. The skilled and dainty pessimism of de Maupassant was accompanied by a vigor and physique very unusual. His sensations are in turn those of a hunter and of a sailor, who have, as the old French saying expressively puts it, swift foot, eagle eye, and who are attuned to all the whisperings of nature.

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