

THE GREEN EYES

I. Freyschutz

I had an uncle. That uncle had a cat.

My uncle adored his cat, and only loved his nephew moderately.

My uncle enjoyed an income of thirty thousand livres and seventy years. The nephew only possessed his seventeen springs.

As for the cat; it had attained the most extreme old age for cats, over twelve years. It was the Methuselah off tomcats.

My uncle called himself the Chevalier de Saint-Harem. He was a Knight of Malta, which inflicted celibacy on him in perpetuity.

This is his description: medium height, aquiline nose, the complexion of a mummy; thin lips and thick eyebrows.

But the eyes! Oh, eyes such as you have never seen, and I hope never to see again.

Those eyes were green, but a bright, ardent green for which I can find no better comparison than one of those pharmacist's bottles containing a clear emerald-colored liquid to which a gas-jet gives the appearance of a great luminous scarab, but of which the real objective is perhaps only to dazzle pedestrians in the midst of the shadows and cause a host of accidents and fractures very profitable to the learned fraternity of Monsieur Purgon's colleagues.

I recall that, while I was still very young, when my uncle fixed his gaze like a steel blade upon me, I experienced pain in my heart and stomach, similar to those caused by a stormy sea during a bad crossing.

My uncle was the calmest of men for six months of the year, an epoch blessed by me, his nephew, and by Junon, his old cook, when gout quit the Chevalier's toenails in order to go lodge in those of his friends and acquaintances.

Thus, six months of peace and six months of storms, tempests, rages and blasphemies, which had won him the reputation of a true agent of Hell—and never was any reputation better deserved.

Even his physician, an enraged philosopher thoroughly stuffed with the axioms and Messieurs Laharpe, Diderot, Helvetius and Voltaire, plugged his ears when my uncle, in the middle of one of his fits, reeled off what Junon and I called the Devil's chaplet.

My uncle then summoned one of his two favorite authors, Albertus Magnus and Paracelsus. He went to sleep regularly over the chapter entitled "Commentaries of Pythagoras on the Transmutation of Souls." What purpose would it have served to reread it, anyway, since he had known it by heart for twenty years?

The doctrines of the old Greek were his own; he preached them at every opportunity, and believed them with a faith worthy of a better objective. His convictions were such, and he supported them with such singular examples, that they had ended up attaining my young brain and poor Junon's old head.

One of the consequences of the Pythagorean religion, in my uncle, was a profound sympathy for all species of animals, whatever they were, from the most innocent to the deadliest, the bodies of those interesting creatures sooner or later, according to him, having the honor of offering us hospitality after our decease in this world.

My uncle would not have killed a flea; and when he excited the voracity of one of those accursed little vampires, he contented himself with opening his window and confiding his enemy to the winds, which took charge of finding it another destination.

In consequence of his veneration for all the animals in creation, my uncle only ate cereals, vegetables and fruits. As that cenobitic diet is extremely favorable to gout, my uncle's physician approved of it

strongly, but imagine what a seventeen-year-old stomach must suffer from such an abstinence! So, the days of vacation from school were fatal days for me.

Thus, I did everything in my power to put off those days, and, with the aid of my idleness, I easily swallowed the shame of being incessantly in detention, and delighted in the slightly thin broth of the boarding-school on thinking about the spinach, cucumber and salsify of my uncle the Chevalier.

One day, however, one day of vacation—a day of joy for all schoolboys and fasting for me—old Junon, who had raised me and saw me wasting away by the week, put me in communication with a magnificent veal cutlet, to which I paid such assiduous court that in a matter of minutes I had arrived at gnawing the bone of my good fortune voluptuously.

Then a long, thin hand, seizing the last debris of my pittance, snatched it away from me violently, and the Chevalier's nasal voice made me hear the terrible words: "Wretch! You're not thinking, then, that you might one day become a calf yourself!"

All the superstitions with which my uncle had cradled my infancy came back to my memory: one horrible story above all, which the Chevalier had told me one evening in his large drawing room, illuminated by two candles covered with a somber lampshade, in which he remembered perfectly being *the fattened ox of 1789*. And he shivered with terror as he enumerated its tortures.

Extracted from its lush pasturage in Normandy, it was taken in triumph to Paris. There, well-nourished and pampered, it was crowned with roses and green vine-branches, and then paraded through the midst of an immense crowd that uttered cries of joy and admiration at the sight of it. But having returned to its warm cowshed it heard one evening, with the marvelous perception of transmuted souls, the following dialogue between two savages of its cortege, apprentice butchers by profession:

"You're lucky, Pierrot; it's you the inspector has charged with delivering the hammer-blow to the animal. That'll be with four six-livre coins, at least.

"Don't complain Jérémie, you'll have the chance to bleed it; but don't make any mistake. Look, he said, approaching me and touching my huge breast, 'it's there, not an inch more or less.'

"At that moment," the Chevalier continued, "I understood everything. I understood everything, and uttered such a bellow that my two terrified torturers fell down in my litter.

"One might think he'd understood,' exclaimed Pierrot.

"Oh, that's beasts for you; they have presentiments, like humans,' replied Jérémie.

"The following day, a further parade: the last, alas!

"Then commenced the frightful anguish of the condemned.

"Firstly, my manger wasn't filled.

"Don't give him anything this evening,' the inspector had said, passing by. 'The flesh is better when the belly is empty.'

"Then came the preparations for the torture: my beautiful gilded horns, treacherously attached; my poor legs fettered with solid iron rings; the sinister entry of the sacrificers; the heavy sledgehammer circling over my head.

"Then, a terrible blow, an enormous, unprecedented pain that I can still feel when I think about it...

"Finally, my fall on to the slab, and the most frightful of all the sufferings, the large knife of the operator penetrating my breast; and my blood spurting all the way to the ignoble face of my executioner..."

At that last detail of my uncle's story, I remember that I fainted. And all of that came back to mind, when my uncle pronounced those stupefying words:

"Wretch! You're not thinking, then, that you might one day become a calf yourself!"

On the evening of that day, I was taken back to school. It took more than a month for me to decide to consume my meager ration of beef, and I only did so with violent remorse, telling myself that if I had been born sooner, I might have been able to eat my uncle.

A few more words about an important character in this story: the Chevalier's cat, which I identified to you at the beginning of this chapter.

He was big, fat and black, and bore the name Freyschutz.

My uncle had baptized him thus in memory of an old German ballad on which a celebrated opera has been based.¹

The cat was the most detestable animal one could ever see: wheedling with its master alone, treacherous, thieving, cruel, voracious, lustful and libertine; it was not lacking a single vice, and as the Chevalier accorded it a limitless impunity, there was no nasty trick that it did not play on old Junon and me. It lacerated my underwear, drank my breakfast milk, ripped up my school exercise books, turned our old maidservant's kitchen upside-down, pitilessly scratched all those its claws could reach and only spared the mice in the house, to the great joy of my uncle, all of whose provisions they nibbled day and night.

As for Junon, who did not possess any of the attractions of the proud goddess, her patron, she was a poor black woman brought back from the colonies many years before by Monsieur de Saint-Harem.

Junon had never known love, but she experienced, in revenge, all the furies of hate: a muted, profound, ferocious hatred that would have led her to crime if the terror that her master caused her had not restrained her in her vengeance.

She would have committed a felicide, for the object of her hatred was the damned Freyschutz. She would have poisoned it, thrown it from the sixth floor, boiled it alive in her saucepan and served it in a fricassee to her master, as the Sire de Vergy served the heart of Gabrielle to her lover,² if, firstly, the Chevalier had eaten fricassees, and secondly if she had had the courage to commit the sin. For not everyone can be a murderer; that fine profession demands a certain aplomb, with which not all human creatures are endowed, fortunately for the wellbeing and security of their fellows.

Now, all our characters having been introduced, prepared and conscientiously exhibited, I shall begin telling this strange story.

¹ *Der Freischütz* (1821) by Carl Maria von Weber, with a libretto by Friedrich Kind, a famous product of German Romanticism featuring a Faustian bargain with the diabolical "Black Huntsman;" the "Wolf's Glen" scene in which the bargain is made had the reputation for many years of being the most gruesome known expression of music. A French version was organized by Hector Berlioz for the Paris Opéra in 1841.

² In Dormont de Belloy's tragedy *Gabrielle de Vergy* (1777), based on a Medieval legend; it was adapted into several operas, including one by Donizetti not produced during his lifetime but reconstituted posthumously.

II. The Death of Freyschutz

Three years had gone by.

My uncle, rendered increasingly taciturn by gout, old age and Pythagorean ideas, had felt the need to separate himself from me. My youth inconvenienced him. My innocent and joyful laughter, which he sometimes heard from his room, when I was teasing Junon or playing some prank on Freyschutz, aggravated Monsieur de Saint-Harem's nerves

I was, therefore, placed with Maître Bridaine, an advocate in the lower court, of 104 Rue de la Harpe, and I accumulated the two honorable professions of junior clerk and law student. I was nourished, lodged, heated and lighted at Maître Bridaine's expense.

This is how:

Lodgings: Poorly-furnished room on the sixth floor.

Nourishment: dry bread for breakfast; water at discretion.

Dinner: on account...or very nearly.

Heating: by the sun's rays in summer, by the flues of neighboring chimneys in winter—but as there were no neighbors, my fingertips were perpetually numb with cold in that blissful season.

Every Sunday I went go and fast with my uncle, who gave me a regular allowance of five francs a week.

Those five francs literally saved my life, for they served to procure me an indispensable supplement to the Pantagruelian meals of the honorable advocate of the lower court.

One day, however, my employer's doorkeeper, entered in Maître Bridaine's budget for the sum of eighteen francs fifty centimes per month, confessed to me that she did not have a sou to buy broth for her sick daughter. I took my weekly allowance out of my pocket and gave it to her.

I spent that week on the raft of the *Medusa*.

Thus, I had a violent appetite when I returned the following week to Monsieur de Saint-Harem's. And, while blessing Parmentier for his marvelous discovery, I devoured almost entirely by myself the enormous plate of the tuber that has classed the worthy savant among the benefactors of humankind.³

"Marvelous!" my uncle said. "That's what you need: vegetables, my friend, are healthy and refreshing. And then," he added, suddenly becoming somber, "if you're to be called someday to nourish yourself, in the form that destiny has given you, it will be a fully-acquired habit.

"Freyschutz, alas, must have been a celebrated gourmand in his previous existence, for he disdains his excellent milk soup for fine morsels from the neighborhood kitchens, and if he succeeds in stealing some fat poultry, you'll observe that it's always the wing to which he gives preference."

"So," I hazarded to say, "our souls only ever have as a refuge the bodies of mewling barking, ruminating, crawling, bleating, roaring, galloping animals, and the others of creation? Do they never find more noble domiciles, envelopes more comfortable and worthier of them?"

"A superior power presides over their destinies," the Chevalier replied, "but generally, the new life we enjoy is in inverse relation to the one we have quit. One can be reborn alternately slave or king, black or white; one can have the beauty of Adonis or the hump of Aesop; one very often changes sex.

"Xipharis, the sage Xipharis renowned for his virtues, Pythagoras—who knew him—tells us, subsequently became a celebrated courtesan, and counted as many lovers as they were pearls in her necklace.

"In that regard," my uncle continued, "listen to the astonishing story of the Nabob and the bayadere..."

At that moment, I uttered a cry of fright; I had just felt a sharp claw digging into what ought to have been the fleshy part of my leg, although my uncle's cuisine had long since put it in good order.

³ Antoine-August Parmentier (1737-1813) became famous as the man who popularized the planting of potatoes in France as a staple crop at the end of the 18th century.

Nevertheless, the pain was so sharp that I got up from the table precipitately, and I saw Freyschutz fleeing through the ground floor window, while I went back to my little room.

My uncle, annoyed by having been so abruptly interrupted, went back to his own room—which meant, my dear readers, that neither you nor I will ever know the astonishing story of the Nabob and the bayadere.

A terrible drama took place that same evening in peaceful household of the Chevalier de Saint-Harem.

I had just gone back into the modest room, or rather mansard—I was avowed to mansards—of which, in spite of my exile, my uncle had left me the enjoyment. It was there that I shut myself away for a part of my days of leave.

I evoked in my solitude the short moments of happiness that I had enjoyed in my infancy. My mother was still alive then—the only creature that had loved me on earth. I was orphaned at the age of eight, but the memory of the person I cherished was ineffaceable for my heart. I was surrounded in my little room by objects that I had inherited from her, poor and holy relics for my filial piety: a little rosewood chiffonier next to which she worked; her portrait painted by Boily, a painter of the first empire whose pitiless brush never gave any mercy to the imperfections of his models: a red nose remained red, little eyes were not magnified.⁴

It was Boily who replied one day to a client, imploring a few strands of hair that nature had refused him: “Very well, I understand, and will give Monsieur a wig.” But he had the gift of resemblance, and, thanks to him, I rediscovered my mother, with her gaze full of benevolence, her indulgent smile and the attractive charm that rendered her dear to everyone who knew her.

Worthy Boily, how many times I have blessed you in contemplating your work!

One of my treasures, the one of which I was fondest, was a ravishing Sèvres porcelain cup, my mother’s favorite cup, the one in which she was offered pectoral beverages during her last illness. Her trembling hand often took it from my infantile hand. That was a proof of confidence that the poor invalid gave me, of which I was very proud and very glad.

I would not have been separated from that precious cup at the price of my blood. I only looked at it with a holy respect, and my eyes moistened with tears on thinking about the dear lips that had touched it.

Dusk was falling as I got ready to quit my redoubt in order to return to the home of Maître Bridaine, my employer.

A storm was in muted preparation; thunder was rumbling in the distance, large raindrops were beginning to batter the roof of my mansard, and I thought sadly of the immersion that threatened my own coat in the long journey from the Place Royale to the summit of the Rue de la Harpe, where I lived.

Just as I was about to close my small skylight, a violent impact struck me full in the chest, and I was almost knocked over backwards, dazed and stunned by that sudden commotion.

I did not have to search for the cause for long. Freyschutz was sitting in the middle of my room, and seemed to be laughing in his malevolent feline fashion as he contemplated my misadventure and my bewilderment.

The sharp and recent memory of his claw-thrust, combined with his new crime against my person, caused me such anger that, seizing my walking stick, I ran at my enemy, determined to administer a vigorous correction to him.

Divining the punishment that awaited him, Freyschutz launched himself on to my table, from there to my bed and then on to the little rosewood chiffonier, upsetting everything in his vertiginous course.

Finally seeking a refuge on my shelves, where I had place my cherished trinkets and my most beloved treasure, my mother’s cup, he precipitated it on to the floor-tiles of my room, where I saw it shatter.

⁴ Louis-Léopold Boily, or Boilly (1761-1845), a prolific painter of portraits, famous for his depictions of bourgeois life.

My anger became rage; distraught and beside myself, I bounded upon my enemy, and at the moment he touched the ground I launched such a violent kick at him that the poor animal turned over twice, uttered a plaintive mewl, and went to fall at the extremity of my room, where he remained, inanimate.

At that moment I perceived my uncle on the threshold of the doorway.

Pale and trembling, his terrible green eyes launched such flashes of fury at me that I was frightened.

He ran to Freyschutz, seized him in his arms, hugged him to his bosom, dissolved in tears, and vanished.

At the sight of that dolorous spectacle, a cold sweat inundated my brow.

I remained petrified by terror for a few seconds; then I left the room and went rapidly down the stairs, shouting for help and calling Junon.

“My uncle’s up there and he’s had a bad turn,” I cried.

“Bah! Why?”

“Freyschutz is dead, and it’s me who killed him.”

“Bounty of Heaven!” said Junon. “You’ve struck a fine blow there! But no matter—the wretched cat only got what it deserves.”

I confess that, at that moment, Junon’s words appeared to me barbaric; I still had before my eyes the brief and dolorous death-throes of my victim, the chagrin of my uncle, whom I had deprived of his greatest affection, the tears that he had just shed, and the dangerous shock that he owed to my brutality.

For a moment, I wanted to go back upstairs, throw myself at his feet and implore my forgiveness, but I recalled the gaze full of hatred that he had launched at me. My heart failed, my courage was wanting, and I ran out of the house, distraught, almost mad, stuffed with remorse, marching at random, bumping into all those whose ill fortune placed them in my path, and no longer having any thought in my head but one: to flee as quickly as possible from a house where I had left death and despair.

Night had fallen, the storm was growling with all its force, the thunder rolling without interruption. Pale lightning-flashes blanched the flagstones of the sidewalk at intervals, and then everything fell back into complete obscurity. A torrential rain turned the gutters into muddy lakes.

In the midst of that frightful cataclysm, bare-headed, my poor garments streaming with glacial water, nothing stopped me, and, like the Jew Ahasuerus, pursued by the sword of the exterminating angel, I continued walking.

Fatigue and cold ended up appeasing somewhat the kind of delirium that had taken possession of me. I stopped, trying to recognize the place where I was.

The Seine was flowing at my feet; a somber vault hung over my head. The vault was that of the Arche-Marion.⁵ How and by what route had I arrived there? That was an eternal mystery to which I never paid any heed.

I reflected then...or rather, I remembered.

It seemed to me that I emerged from a long slumber and as, at the moment of awakening, the sad events that are overwhelming us always prevent themselves to our mind with a cruel clairvoyance, my misfortunes and their consequences appeared to me all at once, rapidly and violently, as if they had been waiting for the door of dreams to close in order to come and bring me their bleak realities.

I saw myself banished forever from my uncle’s presence.

My employer, of whom the Chevalier de Saint-Harem was a client, would certainly not keep me in his establishment, for fear of displeasing him, and I was about to find myself devoid of money, devoid of shelter, and deprived even of Maître Bridaine’s modest daily fare, henceforth the sole resource of my juvenile appetite. A violent despair seized me.

The Seine was there, bathing my aching feet; the somber murmur of the waves seemed to be calling me.

⁵ The Arche-Marion was a superstructure that once overhung a side-street of that name in the vicinity of the modern Rue des Bourdonnais, Marion being supposedly the name of the one-time keeper of a bath-house there. It collapsed in the mid-19th century.

An instant of resolution, and my chagrins, my anxieties, my unhappy days and my imminent poverty would all be engulfed with me.

I took a step toward the gulf. I was about to hurl myself into it, when a dolorous moan struck my ear, and then a second, more heart-rending than the first.

The accent of that moan had nothing human about it, but it was imprinted by such suffering, and such a poignant terror, that I felt the birth of a violent desire to go to the aid of the creature, whatever it was, that was soliciting a savior.

My ears pricked, I tried to divine where the plaintive sounds had come from. With my eyes fixed on the surface of the water, then mirroring a pale moonlight, I tried in vain to discover the individual whose cries of distress had reached me.

Then, a few brasses from the bank, a head that seemed monstrous suddenly appeared. Only the head was above the surface of the water, and I was perhaps about to distinguish the creature to which it belonged when the sudden veiling of the moon enveloped the river in a profound obscurity, and everything disappeared from sight.