

THE MAN WHO MARRIED A MERMAID

I. The Crow-Catcher

One morning in the month of March 1848, on going from my bedroom to my study, I found a pile of newspapers on my desk, as usual, and on that pile of newspapers a pile of letters.

Among those letters there was one whose large red seal immediately attracted my gaze. It did not bear any postage stamp, and was addressed quite simply to Monsieur Alexandre Dumas, Paris, which indicated that it had been delivered by a third person. The handwriting had a strange character, suspended between English and German styles. The person who had traced it evidently had the habit of command, a certain firmness of mental resolution, mitigated by emotional impulses and capricious thoughts, which sometimes made him a person quite different from the apparent individual.

When I receive a letter in an unknowing handwriting, and when that letter appears to come from an important person, I rather like to anticipate and to obtain from the insignificant lines traced by that person in the address an idea of his rank, habits and character.

Having made my reflections I opened the letter and read the following:

The Hague, 22 February 1848

Monsieur,

I do not know whether Eugène Vivier, the great artist who came to visit us during the winter, and whose acquaintance I was fortunate enough to make, has told you that I am one of your most assiduous readers, and whether I say can so, numerous as they are, for to say that one has read Mademoiselle de Belle-Isle, Amaury, Les Trois Mousquetaires, Vingt ans après, Bragelonne and Monte-Christo would be to accord you a compliment that is too banal.

I have therefore thought for some time of offering you a memory and, at the same time, making known to you one of our greatest national artists, Monsieur Backuisen.

Permit me then, Monsieur, to send you herewith four drawings by that artist, which represent the most striking scenes of your novel, Les Trois Mousquetaires.

Now, I shall bid you adieu, and be you to believe, Monsieur, that I am your affectionate,

William, Prince of Orange¹

I confess that that letter, dated 22 February 1848—which is to say, the day on which the Parisian Revolution burst forth, received a day or two after an attempt had been made to kill me on the pretext that I was “a friend of princes,” gave me a sensible pleasure.

In fact, for a poet, the foreigner is posterity, being placed outside our petty literary hatreds and artistic jealousies. The foreigner, like the future, judges a man on his works, and the crown that crosses a frontier is woven from the same flowers as those that are thrown on a tomb.

Curiosity, however, prevailed over gratitude. I began by opening the folder that had been deposited on a corner of my desk and I did indeed find within it four charming drawings. One represented

¹ The William, Prince of Orange, in question (1817-1890) ruled the Netherlands as William III from 1849 to his death. He had married his cousin Sophie of Württemberg in 1839. The first reference in his letter is to the prolific writer, composer and librettist Eugène Vivier (1817-1900) but the reference to Backuisen is puzzling, as the 17th-century master of that name cannot have produced illustrations to *Les Trois Mousquetaires*.

d'Artagnan's arrival at Meung with his yellow horse; the second the ball at which Milady cut the diamond tags from Buckingham's doublet; the third the bastion of Saint-Gervais and the fourth Milady's death.

Then I wrote to the Prince to thank him.

I had known for some time that the Prince was an artist. I knew that he was a distinguished composer, and two other artists who are rarely mistaken about men or the arts, the Duc d'Orléans and Prince Jérôme Napoléon,² had often mentioned him to me.

It is well-known that the Duc d'Orléans engraves in a charming fashion; I have prints emerged from his hands that are models of etching and aquatinting. As for Prince Napoléon, I have read—something that he has probably forgotten—Republican verses that earned him a good pension from the College of Stuttgart, and which were given to me in Florence in 1839 or 1840 by the beautiful Princesse Mathilde.

I had, above all, heard mention of the Princesse d'Orange as one of those superior women who, when they are not called Elizabeth or Christine, are called Madame de Sévigné or Madame de Staël.

In consequence, when the Prince of Orange was called upon to succeed his father on the throne of Holland, it naturally came to my mind to undertake a voyage to Amsterdam to witness the new king's coronation and to present my compliments to the ex-Prince of Orange.

I therefore departed on 9 May 1849.

On the tenth, the newspapers reported that I had gone to Amsterdam in order to write an account of the coronation celebrations. The same thing had been announced when I had left for Madrid on 3 October 1846. I beg the pardon of the newspapers who are kind enough to take an interest in me, but when I go to the weddings of princes, I go as a guest, not as a historian. Having said that, I shall return to my departure.

In addition to the pleasure of locomotion, and the need to breathe from time to time air other than that what normally breathes, an excellent surprise was reserved for me. As I was about to leave the waiting room at the railway station, I felt someone tug the flap of my frock-coat.

"Where are you going like this?" asked the person who had just attracted my attention by means of that gesture.

I uttered an exclamation of surprise. "And you?"

"To Holland."

"Me too."

"To see the coronation?"

"Yes,"

"Me too. Have you been invited directly?"

"No, but I know the King as an artist prince and as, since the death of the Duc d'Orléans, there are not many artist princes left, I'm going to see this one crowned.

My traveling companion was Biard.³

You know Biard by name if you do not know him personally; his is the intelligent brush that has depicted *La Revue de la garde nationale dans un village*, *Le Baptême du Bonhomme Tropicque* and *Les Honneurs partagés*. His is the poetic brush that has shown you, at the foot of a cracking and splitting mountain of ice, two Laplanders passing one another in pirogues and embracing in passing. Finally, he is the author of all those ravishing portraits of women full of coquetry and light, which you might have seen at the last Exposition and again at the present one. Above all, however, and more than all that—for I have the bad habit of putting the man before the artist—he is the charming intelligence, the indefatigable storyteller, the voyager of the south and the north, the benevolent friend, the colleague devoid of jealousy, who forgets himself when he speaks about others. In sum, he is the traveling companion with whom I

² The Duc d'Orléans in question is Ferdinand-Philippe (1810-1842), the eldest son of Louis Philippe. Jérôme-Napoléon Bonaparte (1784-1860), Napoléon I's youngest brother, was King of Westphalia from 1807-1813, and later used the title of Prince de Montfort.

³ The painter François-Auguste Biard (1799-1882) was a great traveler whose most famous paintings included scenes of Africa, including graphic representations of the slave trade, and several depicting such Arctic scenes as hunting walrus and fending off attacks by polar bears.

wish my reader could go around the world, and whom I was delighted to have found in order to go to Holland.

It was a year or two since we had last seen one another. Ours is a strange life; we like it when we meet one another, we are glad to see one another, we spend hours, days or a week joyfully in the coupling that chance has determined; we come back in the same railway carriage, and continue in the same cab, we shake hands and say, in the most serious fashion in the world: "But it's stupid not to see one another, let's keep in touch!"—and we do not see one another again, for each of us goes back to his own life, throws himself into his work, builds his ant-like or giant edifice, to which posterity alone will assign its veritable height, and time its veritable duration.

It was a good night that my son and I spent with Biard on the road to Brussels. There were five or six other people with us in the same diligence; did they understand anything we said? I doubt it. After fifty leagues of road and five or six hours of traveling, did we seem to them to be intelligent men or imbeciles? I have no idea. Our mentality is so strange; it leaps so rapidly from the heights of philosophy to the depths of the pun; it has such a peculiar, individual and eccentric character. It belongs so particularly to a caste that it requires a long intellectual initiation of sorts to comprehend it.

But as one wearies of everything, even laughter, by two o'clock in the morning, the conversation dried up, and by three o'clock we were asleep. At five o'clock we woke up again to visit our trunks, and finally, at eight o'clock, we arrived in Brussels.

In Brussels, everything was perfectly tranquil, and if we had not heard so many bad things said about France, in French, we might have been able to forget that France existed.

We had reentered the heart of monarchy.

Belgium is a singular country, which keeps its King because its King is always ready to leave. It is true that Leopold I is a highly intelligent man. At every Revolution that occurs in France or every mob that complains in Brussels, he runs to his balcony, his hat in his hand, and signals that he wants to speak, and people listen.

"My children," he says, "you know that I have been made King reluctantly; I had no desire to be one before being one, and since I am one, I desire no longer to be one. If, therefore, you are like me, and have had enough of royalty, give me an hour, and in an hour's time I will be out of the kingdom; that is the only reason that I have encouraged railways. Be good, though; don't break anything; you can see that there's no need."

To which the people respond: "We don't want you to go. We felt the need to make a little noise, that's all. We've done that; we're content. Long live the King!"

After which, the King and the people part, more satisfied with one another than ever.

All along the route, Biard had told me not to worry, that when we arrived in Brussels he would show me something that I had never seen before. And in my pride, every time that he made me that promise, I shrugged my shoulders. I had been to Brussels ten times over; in those ten voyages I had seen the Park, the Botanical Gardens, the Prince of Orange's palace, the Church of Saint Gudule, the Boulevard de Waterloo, the shops of Méline and Cans and the palace of the Prince de Ligne. What, then could be left for me to see?

So, scarcely had we arrived than I said to Biard: "Let's go see what I haven't seen before."

"Come on," he said, laconically. And Alexandre, Biard and I set forth.

Our guide took us straight to a rather fine house situated in the vicinity of the cathedral, stopped at a coaching entrance, and rang the bell without hesitation.

A domestic came to open up. His appearance was immediately striking. He had blood on his fingertips; his waistcoat and trousers were literally covered with feathers, or rather down, belonging to all kinds of birds. Furthermore, he moved his head in a singular fashion, a semicircular movement similar to that of a wryneck.

"My friend," Biard said to him, "would you be kind enough to tell your master that foreigners passing through Brussels would like to visit his collection?"

"My master isn't here, Monsieur," said the domestic, "but in his absence, I'm charged with doing the honors of his showcases."

“Damn!” said Biard. Then, turning to me, he said: “It won’t be as curious, but it doesn’t matter; let’s go anyway.”

The domestic was waiting; we nodded our heads, and he went ahead of us.

“Watch him walking,” said Biard. “That’s already a curiosity.”

In fact, the worthy man who was guiding us did not have a human gait, but that of a bird, and the bird from which he seemed to have borrowed his particular gait was the magpie.

To begin with we traversed a rectangular courtyard populated by a cat and two or three storks. The cat seemed suspicious; the storks by contrast, immobile on their long red feet, seemed full of confidence.

While we were traversing the courtyard, I did not observe anything extraordinary in the stride of our guide, except for the rotation of the head I have mentioned and a grave impression given to him by his fashion of putting one leg in front of the other. In fact, as I have said, he walked like a magpie, when magpies walk gravely.

We arrived in the garden.

The garden was a kind of small botanical garden, rectangular like the courtyard but larger, with a multitude of labeled flowers divided into a number of plots separated by pathways, in such a fashion that the flower-beds could easily be tended.

As soon as we were in the garden, our guide’s gait changed, from the grave tread to a hopping motion. At a distance of three or four paces, he perceived an insect, a caterpillar or a beetle; immediately, with an indescribable thrust of the hips, he made three or four little forward jumps with his feet together, then a sideways hop landing on one foot, leaning over at the same time, captured the animal, without ever missing, between his thumb and index finger, threw it down on the pathway and brought the foot that was still in the air down upon it, with the full weight of his body. In that fashion, there was not a second lost between the discovery, the capture and the execution of the animal.

The execution terminated, he returned, with a little sideways leap, to the same path as us. Then, at the first glimpse of another animal, he recommenced the operation—but so rapidly, I repeat, that we could continue our route without stopping, toward a detached building that appeared to house the first part of the exhibition.

The door was wide open. The building, square in form, was full of racks. At first sight, it seemed to me that those racks were full of seeds, and I expected to see interesting varieties of peas, beans, lentils and vetches. On moving closer and looking more attentively, however, I perceived that what I had mistaken for dried vegetables were quite simply the eyes of birds: the eyes of eagles, vultures, parrots, falcons, crows, magpies, starlings, blackbirds, finches, sparrows, titmice and, in sum, every species. One might have thought that they were lead shot of all dimensions, from twelve to a pound to the finest-ground.

Thanks to a chemical preparation, doubtless invented by the owner of the establishment, all those eyes had conserved their coloration, their solidity and, I might almost say, their expression—except that, extracted from their orbits and deprived of their eyelids, the eyes had taken on a ferocious and threatening expression.

Above each rack, a label indicated the bird to which the eyes belonged.

Oh, Coppélius, Doctor Coppélius, fantastic brainchild of Hoffmann, you who were always demanding eyes beautiful eyes, if you had come to Brussels, how easily you would have found there what you sought with so much perseverance for your daughter Olympia!⁴

“Messieurs,” said our guide, when he thought that we had examined that first collection sufficiently, “would you care to pass into the crows’ gallery?”

We nodded our heads as a sign of assent, and followed our guide, who introduced us into the crows’ gallery.

No gallery every justified its title more fully. Picture a long corridor, ten feet broad and twelve high, illuminated by windows overlooking a garden, entirely decorated with crows nailed on their backs with their wings extended and their feet and neck drawn out. Those crows formed along the walls the most

⁴ The reference is to E. T. A. Hoffmann’s classic story “Der Sandmann” (1816). Hoffmann was a great favorite of the French Romantics, frequently discussed in their *cénacles*.

fantastic and extravagant designs. Some were crumbling to dust, others exhibited all the degrees of putrefaction; others were fresh and yet others were agitating and screeching. There might have been eight or ten thousand.

I turned to Biard, full of gratitude; I had, indeed, never seen anything like it.

“And it’s your master who has taken the trouble to trace all these cabalistic figures on the wall?” I asked the domestic.

“Oh, yes, Monsieur, no one touches his crows but him. He wouldn’t like it if anyone else put a hand on them.”

“But he must have suppliers of crows all over Belgium?”

“No, Monsieur, he catches them himself.”

“What! He catches them himself? Where?”

“Up there, on the roof.” And he showed me a roof, on which I could indeed see a kind of mechanism, the ingenious details of which I could not make out.

I am a great hunter of birds, although I do not take the love of ornithology as far as a mania, like our worthy native of Brussels. In my youth, I had made decoys and wire snares, so that detail began to interest me.

“Tell, me, then,” I said to the domestic, “how your master catches them. The crow is one of the cleverest, subtlest, wiliest and most suspicious of birds that exist.”

“Yes, Monsieur, against the old means, the rifle, *nux vomica* and bird-lime, but not with regard to the bass fiddle.”

“What! Not with regard to the bass fiddle?”

“Of course, Monsieur. A crow can suspect a man holding a rifle, and even a man who isn’t holding anything, but how can he suspect a man who is playing a fiddle.”

“So your master attracts crows like Orpheus, by playing a bass fiddle?”

“I’m not saying that, exactly.”

“What are you saying, then?”

“Well, I’ll explain it to you. My master has a traitor.”

“A traitor?”

“Yes, a domesticated crow, Look—that old vagabond strolling over there in the garden.” And he pointed out a crow hopping along the pathways. It was a hooded crow, almost white with old age. “He gets up at four o’clock in the morning...”

“The crow?”

“No, my master. As for the crow, does he ever sleep? Day and night his eyes are always open. He ruminates evil. Personally, I believe that he’s not a real crow but a demon. So, my master gets up at four, before dawn; he goes downstairs in a dressing-gown; he puts his old tramp of a crow in the middle of the net that you can see up there on the roof on the far side of the garden; he attaches a string to his foot that connects to the net; he picks up his bass and starts to play *Une fièvre brûlante*.⁵ His crow screeches; the crows of Saint Gudule hear him, they come down, they see a comrade eating white cheese and a monsieur playing the bass. They don’t suspect anything, you understand, those animals. They come down near the traitor, and he more of them descend, the more my master saws away with his bow. Then, all of a sudden, *zing!* He lifts his foot and, *snap!* the net closes, and the imbeciles are caught. There you go.”

“Then your master nails them?”

“Oh, then, you see, my master is no longer a man but a tiger. He puts down his bass, detaches his string, runs to the wall, climbs the ladder, takes the crows, jumps down, fills his mouth with nails, takes up a hammer, and *bang, bang!* there’s another crow crucified. It goes *caw! caw!* but that only excites him, my master. Anyway, you can see.”

“And has your master been suffering from this malady for a long time?”

⁵ The tune in question originated in André Grétry’s opera *Richard Coeur-de-lion* (1784), supposedly played by Blondel, and thus a pastiche of Medieval music, but it is nowadays better known because of a series of variations on the theme composed by Beethoven for the piano.

“Oh, ten years now, Monsieur. It’s his life, that man. If he goes three days without catching a crow, he falls ill; if he went a week he’d die of it. Now, would you like to see the tits’ gallery?”

“Gladly.”

That wallpaper of feathered corpses, the air impregnated with the miasmas of a fry fetor, and the convulsive movements and screeches of the agonized crows were making me feel sick.

We traversed the garden again, and it was then, while looking at the hooded crow with one eye and our domestic with the other, that I perceived the similarity of their movement in the research and punishment of insects. It was evident that the crow had copied the domestic, or that the domestic was imitating the crow. Personally, as the public notoriety of the crow went back a hundred and twenty years and the domestic was only forty, I suspected the domestic of being the plagiarist.

We arrived at the tits’ gallery; it was a small detached building located at the opposite corner of the garden, decorated with the wings and heads of house-sparrows, embroidered with the wings, heads and tails of tits. Imagine a large gray curtain with yellow and blue designs. Those designs represented wheels, flowers, stars and arabesques—in sum, all the fantasies that an unhealthy imagination can design with the bodies, feet and beaks of birds.

In the intervals of the designs the heads of cats were attached to the wall, mouths open, faces wrinkled, eyes sparkling; those cats’ heads surmounted cats’ paws, crossed like the bones with which funereal ornamentation ordinarily accompanies skulls.

The heads were surmounted themselves by captions conceived in these terms:

Misouf, sentenced to death 10 January 1846, for having damaged two finches and a blue-tit.

The Doctor, sentenced to death 7 July 1847, for having stolen a sausage from the grill.

Blucher, sentenced to death 10 June 1848 for having drunk from a jug of milk reserved for my breakfast.

“Aha!” I said. “It appears that your master, like our ancient feudal overlords, has arrogated the right of high and low justice.”

“Yes, Monsieur, as you can see; he uses it without appeal. He says that if everyone did as he does and destroyed pillagers, thieves and murderers, only mild and benevolent animals would soon remain on earth, and then humans, only having good examples, would become better.”

I inclined before that axiom; I respect collectors without understanding them. In Ghent I visited an amateur who collected buttons; well, that appeared ridiculous at first, but ended up becoming interesting. He had divided up his buttons into series, from the ninth century to our time; the collection began with a button from Charlemagne’s robe and ended with one of Napoléon’s uniform buttons; there were buttons of all the uniforms that had ever existed in France, from Charles VII’s archers to the riflemen of Vincennes; there were buttons made of wood, lead, copper, zinc, silver and gold, or rubies, emeralds and diamonds. The material value of his collection was estimated at a hundred thousand francs; it had probably cost him three hundred thousand.

I knew an Englishman in London who collected hangman’s ropes. He had traveled all over the globe; he had correspondents, and he had entered into communication with executioners in all four continents. As soon as a man was hanged in Europe, Asia, Africa or America, the executioner cut a piece off the end of the rope and sent it to our collector with a certificate of authenticity, who returned the price of its postage. He had one rope that had cost him a hundred pounds sterling; it is true that it had had the honor of strangling Selim III—a strangulation with which, as everyone knows, English politics was not entirely foreign.⁶

I had just copied the epitaph of Master Blucher, the milk-drinker, when half past nine chimed on Saint Gudule; we only had half an hour to catch the train for Antwerp. I added my tip to the one that Biard had already given when we came in, and we exited the necropolis at a run.

⁶ Selim III (1762-1808), the reformist Sultan of the Ottoman Empire was, in fact, hacked to death by his assassins—a circumstance that helps to emphasize that this chapter, like the next two, is a tissue of fantasies rather than authentic reportage.

Our guide, full of gratitude, accompanied us, hopping along, as far as the door, and followed us with his eyes, while twisting his neck, as far as the street corner.

We arrived on the platform just as the engine was sounding its departure whistle.