

The Story of a White Blackbird

Alfred de Musset

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Selected by Charles William Eliot

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[Bibliographic Record](#)

Contents

[Biographical Note](#)

Criticism and Interpretation

[By George Pellissier](#)

[Chapter I](#)

[Chapter II](#)

[Chapter III](#)

[Chapter IV](#)

[Chapter V](#)

[Chapter VI](#)

[Chapter VII](#)

[Chapter VIII](#)

[Chapter XI](#)

Biographical Note

LOUIS CHARLES ALFRED DE MUSSET was born in the heart of old Paris on November 11, 1810. His father, who held various important state offices, is remembered chiefly as the editor and biographer of Rousseau. Alfred was brought up in a literary atmosphere and his early experiments in poetry and the drama convinced Sainte Beuve that he possessed genius. When he was nineteen his "Contes d'Espagne et d'Italie" had a sensational success. Though he is reckoned a member of the romantic school, he was sufficiently detached and critical to be aware of its foibles, and in his "Ballade à la lune," contained in this first volume, he poked fun at the romantic worship of the moon, comparing it as it shone above a steeple to the dot over an *i*. He had a strong admiration for certain elements in classicism, and it seemed

at one time that he might find a new school combining the virtues of both the old and new. But his drama, "Une nuit vénitienne," was a failure on the stage, and in the future he wrote only to be read and so missed much of the influence he might have had on the theatre of his day. Many of his plays reached the stage years after they were written, notable among them being "Les Caprices de Marianne," "Il ne faut jurer de rien," "Il faut qu'une porte soit ouverte ou fermée," "Un Caprice," and "Bettine."

In 1833 De Musset went to Italy with George Sand, and that tempestuous and typically romantic love affair left him a wreck. The traces of it are to be found not only in his elegiac love poetry, but also in prose work like his "Confession d'un enfant du siècle," and in drama like "On ne badine pas avec l'amour," where one is shown the danger of trifling with love.

The gaiety and irresponsibility which marked the earlier years of his production had now given place to pain and bitterness. His later years were lightened by popular appreciation, but he suffered much from illness. He wrote little of importance after he was forty, and he died on May 2, 1857.

De Musset's reputation is primarily that of a poet, and he ranks among the greatest in French literature. His "Nuits" reveal with great beauty of expression all the passion and suffering of which a soul of extreme sensitiveness is capable. Though he resented the suggestion that he imitated Byron, he shows some resemblance to him in his self-pity; but in the delicacy and variety of the phases of sentiment and passion displayed in his poems he far surpasses the English poet. His plays and his reflective writings are often brilliant, and he had a fine satiric power.

His fiction is subordinate in importance to both his poetry and his dramas, yet it exemplifies some of his characteristic qualities. His first success was won in this field, and his "Confession" contains much besides the other side of the story told in George Sand's "Elle et Lui." "The White Blackbird" is a charming satire on the literary life of his time, exposing not merely the ease with which popular taste is imposed upon and some current types of literary humbugs, but also the universal tendency to confound mere eccentricity with genius. The allegorical form in which it is clothed is well sustained in the earlier part; but as the satire becomes more pronounced the blackbird and his pretended affinity tend to discard their disguise as birds and become frankly human beings—perhaps even human beings who can be identified. Yet, on the whole, the blackbird's story holds our attention, and in the telling of it there is a delightful mingling of grace, sentiment, and wit.

W. A. N.

Criticism and Interpretation

By George Pellissier

ALFRED DE MUSSET was above all else the poet of youth. Smiling upon life, the elect of genius, the betrothed of love, he appears with a candid, haughty eye, the bloom of spring on his cheek, a song on his lips. What gayety, what youthful freshness! What turbulent ardor in pleasure and dissipation! Back with "decrepit age!" Give room to eager, impetuous, triumphant adolescence! Make way for the poet of eighteen whose heart beats at the first summons, whose forehead is gilded by the first rays of glory! His heart opens; he suffers; he sings of his pain. The volatile ballads of the Cherubim are followed by Don Juan's impassioned accents. Every wave lures him, even the most impure, where he hopes to find a remote reflection of his adored ideal. And when love no longer blossoms on a prematurely withered

stalk, he feels that all the charm of life has vanished with the spring, that genius itself cannot survive the incapacity to love. Eleven years after the petulant fervors and cavalier graces of his *début*, when his years had scarcely sounded thirty, he sits down at his desk with his head in his hands to dream of a past of tarnished memories, of a future that favors no hope. For others, thirty is the age of vigorous, productive maturity; for Cherubim, it is the period of decline and lassitude. After several always more rare efforts to reform, follows a precocious old age, both idle and sterile, with no work assigned, no duty to accomplish. All is finished; he resigns himself to existence, lacking interest in life, rather detesting it. He assists in his own ruin, furthering it by recourse to fictitious intoxications. He seeks the waters of Jouvence even in the muddy pools of the gutters, always sinking lower into the depths of a mournful silence. With youth, the poet of youth had lost all; when he died to love, he was also dead to poetry.

Alfred de Musset abandoned his life to the hazards of fancy, and his genius to the caprices of inspiration. Later the poet bore the penance of a natural inconstancy, indolence, and aversion to all discipline, already foreshadowed by an idle, desultory youth. Nervous and whimsical as a child, he continues to allow himself to drift without the power to restrain himself. His youth is scattered to all winds, and his soul's treasures are squandered. He makes his entire life consist in the delirium of a morbid, exalted passion, which, although it at first feeds his genius, is not long in consuming it....

Of all our poets he has brought the most passionate fervor into poetry. He voices his emotion while it is still expanding, allowing it to gush forth in its eager violence, unreservedly surrendering it vibrating with ardent sincerity. Pain or joy—everything seeks to escape from his breast, and that immediately. Others part with their most personal impressions when the moment arrives; but, like the pelican whose anguish he has celebrated, he delivers up his own entrails for food. He allows not only his tears to flow, but also the blood from his wound.—From “The Literary Movement in France in the Nineteenth Century” (1893).

Chapter I

HOW glorious it is, but how difficult, to be an unusual blackbird in this world! I certainly am not a fabulous bird, and Monsieur de Buffon has described me. But, alas! I am extremely rare, and very difficult to find. Would to God that I were entirely impossible!

My father and mother were an excellent couple who had been living for a number of years in the depths of a retired old garden of the Marais. Their family life was exemplary. While my mother, sitting in a thick bush, laid regularly three times a year, and while she slept, kept her eggs warm with a truly patriarchal fervor, my father, who was still very neat and very impatient, in spite of his great age, picked busily around her all day, bringing her nice insects which he took delicately by the tip of the tail so as not to disgust his wife, and, when night came on, he never failed, if the weather was fine, to treat her to a song which delighted the whole neighborhood. Not the slightest quarrel, not the slightest cloud, had ever troubled this peaceful union.

I had scarcely come into the world, when, for the first time in his life, my father began to show ill humor. Although I was as yet only a doubtful gray, he could not recognize in me either the color or the appearance of his numerous progeny.

“Look at that dirty child,” he would sometimes say, with a cross glance at me; “it seems as if the young rascal must go and stick himself into all the old plaster and mud holes he can find, he always looks so ugly and dirty.”

“Heavens, my dear,” my mother would answer, as she sat rolled up like a ball in an old porringer where she had made her nest, “don’t you see that it is because of his age? And you too, in your younger days, were not you a charming scapegrace? Just let our little blackbird grow up, and you will see how handsome he will be; he is one of the best that I ever hatched.”

Although she spoke up bravely in my defense, my mother had no illusions about me; she saw my wretched plumage starting and it seemed to her a monstrosity; but she followed the custom of all mothers, who often love their children better just because nature has used them unkindly, as if they themselves were to blame, or as if they must try to resist in advance the injustice of the fate that may sometime overtake their children.

When it was time for my first moulting, my father grew very pensive and examined me carefully. As long as my feathers were falling, he still treated me rather kindly and even fed me when he saw me shivering almost naked in a corner; but as soon as my poor little trembling wings began to be covered with down, my father got so angry every time he saw a white feather appear that I was afraid he would pluck me bare for the rest of my life. Alas! I had no mirror; I did not know the cause of this fury, and I wondered and wondered why the best of fathers should be so cruel to me.

One day when the sunshine and my new feathers had made my heart rejoice, in spite of myself, as I was fluttering along a path, I began to sing, unfortunately for me. At the first note that he heard, my father sprang into the air like a rocket.

“What is that I hear?” he cried. “Is that the way a blackbird whistles? Is that the way I whistle? Is that any way to whistle?”

And, throwing himself down beside my mother with the most terrible expression on his face:

“Wretched bird!” said he, “who has been laying in your nest?”

At these words, my mother was so indignant that she threw herself out of her porringer, hurting one of her claws as she did so; she tried to speak, but her sobbing suffocated her; she fell to the ground half swooning. I saw her apparently dying; horrified and trembling with fear, I threw myself at my father’s feet.

“Oh father!” I said, “if I whistle all wrong, and if I am ill dressed, do not let my mother be punished for it! Is it her fault if nature has denied me a voice like yours? Is it her fault that I have not your fine yellow beak and your handsome French-looking black coat, which makes you look like a church warden swallowing an omelette? If the powers above have made me a monster, and if some one must bear the blame, let me at least be the only one to suffer!”

“That is not the question,” said my father. “What do you mean by daring to whistle in that absurd fashion? Who taught you to whistle like that, contrary to all rules and customs?”

“Alas, Sir,” I answered humbly, “I whistled as I could, because the fine weather made me feel gay, and perhaps I had eaten too many flies.”

“No one whistles like that in my family,” replied my father, beside himself. “For centuries we have been whistling from father to son, and I would have you know that right here, there is an old gentleman on the first story, and a young grisette in the attic, who open their windows to hear me whenever I sing at night. Is it not enough that I must always have before my eyes the hideous color of your foolish feathers

which makes you look as if you were covered with flour like a clown at the circus? If I were not the most peaceful of blackbirds, I should have plucked you bare a hundred times before now, like a chicken ready for roasting.”

“Very well!” I cried, indignant at my father’s injustice, “if that is how you feel, so be it! I will take my departure, I will relieve you of the sight of my unfortunate white tail by which you pull me about all day. I will leave you, Sir, I will fly; there will be enough other children to comfort you in your old age, since my mother lays three times a year; I will go far away and hide my misery from you, and perhaps,” I added sobbing, “perhaps I shall find, in our neighbor’s garden or in the gutters, some worms or spiders wherewith to support my sad existence.”

“As you please,” replied my father, who was not at all propitiated by my words. “Only let me see no more of you! You are no son of mine; you are no blackbird.”

“And what am I then, if you please, Sir?”

“I have not the slightest idea, but you are no blackbird.”

After pronouncing these astounding words, my father went slowly away. My mother picked herself up sorrowfully, and, limping as she went, returned to her porringer to weep her fill. As for me, sad and bewildered, I flew away as best I could, and as I had threatened to do, I went and perched on the gutter of a neighboring house.

Chapter II

MY father was so inhumane as to leave me for several days in this humiliating situation. In spite of his violent temper, he was good hearted, and I could tell from the sidelong glances that he cast at me, that he would have been glad to pardon me and call me back; and my mother, still more, constantly gazed up at me with eye full of tenderness, and even dared, from time to time, to call me with a little plaintive cry; but my horrible white plumage filled them in spite of themselves with terror and repugnance which I saw were wholly beyond remedy.

“I am not a blackbird!” I kept repeating; and in fact, when I was pluming myself in the morning, using the water in the gutter for a mirror, I could see only too clearly how little resemblance I bore to the rest of my family. “Oh heavens!” I repeated once more, “tell me then what I am!”

One night when there was a pouring rain, I was just ready to fall asleep, worn out with grief and hunger, when I saw alighting near me a bird wetter, paler, and thinner than I could have believed possible. He was almost the same color as I, as well as I could see through the rain which was pouring over us; he had scarcely enough feathers on his whole body to cover a sparrow, and he was bigger than I. At the first glance, he seemed to me a very poor and needy bird; but in spite of the storm which deluged his nearly bald head, he still had a proud air which fascinated me. With becoming modesty, I made him a low bow, to which he responded with a peck that almost knocked me off the gutter. When he saw that I was scratching my ear and that I was retiring ruefully without attempting to reply to him in his own language:

“Who are you?” he asked in a voice as hoarse as his head was bald.

“Alas! my Lord,” I answered (fearing a second jab), “I have not the slightest idea. I thought I was a blackbird, but I have been convinced that I am not.”

My unusual answer and my air of sincerity aroused his interest. He came close to me and made me tell him my story, which I did with all the sorrow and humility befitting my position and the terrible weather.

“If you were a carrier pigeon like me,” said he after he had heard my tale, “the foolish things that you grieve over would not give you a moment’s trouble. We travel, that is our whole life. And although we have our love affairs, I do not know who my father is. Our pleasure, indeed our very existence, is rushing through the air, flying through space, seeing mountains and plains at our feet, breathing the very azure of heaven, and not the exhalations of the earth, darting like an arrow towards an end which we never miss. I can travel farther in one day than a man can in ten.”

“Upon my word, Sir,” said I, plucking up a little more courage, “you are a gipsy bird.”

“That is another thing that I care nothing about,” answered he. “I am a bird without a country; I know only three things: my journeys, my wife, and my little ones. Wherever my wife is, there is my country.”

“But what have you there hanging around your neck? It looks like a ragged old curl paper.”

“Those are important papers,” answered he, puffing himself up proudly. “I am now on way to Brussels, and I am carrying a message to the celebrated banker —— which will lower the rate of exchange by one franc and seventy-eight centimes.”

“Good Lord,” I cried, “you certainly lead a fine life, and I am sure that Brussels must be a very interesting city to see. Could you not take me with you? Since I am not a blackbird, perhaps I am a carrier pigeon.”

“If you were,” he replied, “you would have struck back when I pecked you just now.”

“Very well, Sir, that’s easily remedied; let us not quarrel for so small a matter. Morning is coming and the storm is clearing away. I beg you to let me follow you! I am ruined, I have nothing left in the world—if you refuse me, there is nothing left for me to do but to drown myself in this gutter.”

“Very well, let us start. Follow me if you can.”

I cast one last glance at the garden where my mother was sleeping. A tear flowed from my eyes; the wind and the rain carried it away. I spread my wings, and I started.

Chapter III

I HAVE already said that my wings were not yet very strong. While my leader went like the wind, I was out of breath trying to keep up with him; I held out for some time, but presently I became so dizzy, that I felt as if I should soon faint away.

“Is it much further?” I asked in a weak voice.

“No,” answered he, “we have reached Bourget; we only have to go sixty leagues more.”

I tried to pluck up courage, not wanting to look like a wet hen, and I flew for another quarter of an hour, but for the time being, I was exhausted.

“Monsieur,” I stammered once more, “couldn’t we stop a moment? I am frightfully thirsty, and, if we

should perch on a tree...”

“Go to the devil! You are nothing but a blackbird!” the carrier pigeon answered angrily.

And without condescending to turn his head, he continued his furious flight. As for me, stunned and half blind, I fell into a wheat field.

I do not know how long my swoon lasted. When I recovered consciousness, the first thing that I remembered was the pigeon’s parting word: “You are nothing but a blackbird,” he had said. Oh my dear parents, I thought, you were mistaken, then! I will go home to you; you will recognize me as your own legitimate child, and you will allow me a place in that nice little pile of leaves under my mother’s porringer.

I made an effort to rise; but the fatigue of the voyage and the pain caused by my fall paralyzed all my limbs. As soon as I stood upon my feet, my faintness returned, and I fell back on my side.

My mind was already fixed upon the terrible thought of death, when I saw two charming ladies coming towards me on tiptoes, between the poppies and corn-flowers. One was a very prettily spotted and extremely coquettish little magpie, and the other a rose colored turtle dove. The dove paused a few steps from me, looking very modest and sympathetic; but the magpie came skipping towards me in the most delightful way.

“Heaven above! What are you doing there, my poor child?” she asked caressingly in a silvery voice.

“Alas! Madame la Marquise,” I replied (for she must have been at least a Marquise), “I am a poor devil of a traveller whose postilion has abandoned him on the road, and I am dying of hunger.”

“Holy Virgin! What are you telling me?” replied she.

And she began immediately to fly here and there among the bushes near by, going and coming this way and that, and bringing me a quantity of berries and fruits, which she put in a heap near me, all the while asking me questions.

“But who are you? Where did you come from? Your adventure seems perfectly unbelievable! And where were you going? Travelling alone, so young, for you are only getting through with your first moulting! What are your parents about? Where do they belong? How could they let you go in such a state? Why, it is enough to make one’s feathers stand on end!”

While she was talking, I had raised myself a little on my elbow, and was eating greedily. The turtle dove still stood motionless, gazing at me with pitying eyes. However, she noticed that I kept turning my head with a languid air, and she realized that I was thirsty. A drop of the rain that had fallen during the night still lingered on a sprig of chickweed; she took this drop timidly in her beak, and brought it to me quite fresh. Surely, if I had not been so ill, such a modest person would never have done such a thing.

I did not yet know what love was, but my heart beat violently. Torn between two conflicting emotions, I was overpowered by an inexplicable charm. She who had brought my food was so gay, and my cup bearer was so gentle and affectionate, that I could have wished my breakfast to last through all eternity. Unfortunately, all things come to an end, even the appetite of a convalescent. When the meal was finished and my strength had returned, I satisfied the little magpie’s curiosity, and told her my troubles just as truthfully as I had told them to the pigeon the evening before. The magpie listened more

attentively than one would have expected her to do, and the turtle dove showed the most charming signs of emotion. But, when I came to touch upon the principal cause of all my trouble, that is, my ignorance about myself:

“Are you joking?” exclaimed the magpie. “You, a blackbird! You, a pigeon! For shame! You are a magpie, my dear child, if ever there was one, and a very pretty magpie,” she added, touching me lightly with her wing, as one might wave a fan.

“But, Madame la Marquise,” I replied, “it seems to me that, for a magpie, I am such a color, saving your presence...”

“A Russian magpie, my dear, you are a Russian pie! Did you not know that they are white? Poor boy, what innocence!”

“But, Madame,” I replied, “how could I be a Russian magpie, when I was born in the heart of the Marais, in an old broken porringer?”

“Ah, how simple you are! You belong to the invasion, my dear; do you imagine that you are the only one? Trust to me, and let yourself go; I will take you away with me at once and show you the most beautiful things in the world.”

“And where shall we go, Madame, if you please?”

“To my green palace, my darling; you shall see how we live there. By the time you have been a magpie for a quarter of an hour, you will never want to hear of anything else. There are about a hundred of us there, not those big, village magpies who beg for alms along the public roads, but noble, well-bred society birds, quick and slender, and no larger than one’s fist. Not one of us has either more or less than seven black marks and five white marks; that is invariable, and we despise the rest of the world. To be sure, you have not the black marks, but your standing as a Russian will suffice to gain you admission. Our life consists of two things: chattering and prinking. From morning till noon, we adorn ourselves, and from noon till evening, we chatter. Each of us perches on a tree, the highest and oldest that we can find. In the midst of the forest there stands an immense oak, which, alas, is uninhabited! It was the dwelling of the late King Pie X, the goal of all our pilgrimages which cost us so many sighs; but apart from this mild sorrow, we enjoy ourselves wonderfully. With us, the wives are not prudish nor the husbands jealous, but our pleasures are pure and honest, because our hearts are as noble as our language is free and joyous. Our pride knows no bounds, and, if a jay or any other plebeian bird happens to come amongst us, we pluck him mercilessly. But for all that, we are the best people in the world, and the sparrows, the tom-tits, and the goldfinches, that live in our thicket, find us always ready to help, or feed, or defend them. There is no more constant chattering anywhere than we keep up, and nowhere is there less slanderous talk. Of course we have some religious old pies who say their prayers all day long, but the giddiest of our young females can pass close by the severest old dowager without any fear of being pecked. In a word, our life is made up of pleasure, honor, small-talk, glory, and finery.”

“All that is certainly very fine, Madame,” I replied, “and I should certainly be very ill bred not to obey the commands of such a person as you. But before I permit myself the honor of following you, allow me, if you please, to say a word to this sweet young lady.—Mademoiselle,” I continued, addressing the turtle dove, “tell me frankly, I beg you; do you think that I am really a Russian magpie?”

At this question, the dove hung her head, and turned pale red, like Lolotte’s ribbons.

“But, Monsieur,” said she, “I don’t know if I can...”

“For heaven’s sake, speak, Mademoiselle! My intentions are not such as to offend you, quite the contrary. Both of you seem to me so charming, that I register a vow to offer my hand and my heart to whichever will accept me, the moment I succeed in finding out whether I am a magpie or some other kind of bird. Because, when I am looking at you,” I added, speaking a little more softly to the young lady, “I feel a sensation curiously like a turtle dove, and it troubles me strangely.”

“But, truly,” said the turtle dove blushing still more deeply, “I do not know whether it is the sunlight reflected upon you from the poppies, but your plumage seems to me to have a slight tinge...”

She dared to say no more.

“Oh perplexity!” I cried, “how can I tell what to believe? How can I give my heart to either one of you, when it is so cruelly torn asunder? Oh Socrates! how admirable is your precept: ‘Know thyself!’ but how difficult it is to follow.”

Since the day when my unfortunate song had made my father so terribly angry, I had never used my voice again. But now, it occurred to me to try it as a means of finding out the truth. “Good gracious!” thought I, “since my father turned me out of doors at the very first couplet, the least I can expect is, that the second will produce some sort of an effect upon these ladies!” Therefore, after having bowed politely, as if to ask them to make allowances because of the rain to which I had been exposed, I began first to whistle, then to warble, then to trill, and then to sing with all my might like a Spanish muleteer in the open air.

The more I sang, the more the little magpie moved away from me with an air of surprise which soon changed to astonishment, and then to fright and annoyance. She circled around me like a cat around a bit of hot bacon which has just burned her, but which she is tempted to taste once more. Observing the effects of my experiment, and desiring to carry it to a conclusion, the more impatient the poor Marquise seemed, the louder I sang. She held out for twenty-five minutes in spite of my melodious efforts; finally, being unable to stand it any longer, she flew away with a rush, and went back to her green palace. As for the turtle dove, she had fallen sound asleep almost at the beginning of my song.

“Wonderful effect of harmony!” thought I. “I am more than ever determined to return to the Marais, to my mother’s porringer.”

Just as I was starting to fly away, the turtle dove opened her eyes again.

“Farewell” said she, “farewell, charming stranger, so charming and yet so troublesome! My name is Gourouli; remember me!”

“Lovely Gourouli,” I answered, “you are good, gentle, and charming; I wish that I could live and die for you. But you are *couleur de rose*. So much happiness is not for me!”

Chapter IV

THE SAD effect produced by my singing naturally saddened me also. “Alas, music! Alas, poetry!” I said to myself as I started for Paris once more, “how few are the hearts that understand you!”

As these reflections passed through my mind, I hit my head against that of a bird who was flying in the opposite direction. The blow was so severe and so unexpected, that we both fell into the top of a tree, which fortunately happened to be there. After we had shaken ourselves once or twice, I looked at the new comer, expecting a fight. I saw to my surprise that he was white. In fact, his head was a little bigger than mine, and he had a sort of plume on his forehead which gave him a mock-heroic air. Also he carried his tail very high, in quite a noble style; for the rest, I could not see that he had any disposition to fight. We accosted each other very civilly, and excused ourselves, after which we entered into conversation. I took the liberty of asking his name and from what country he came.

“I am astonished,” said he, “that you do not know me. Are you not one of us?”

“In fact, monsieur,” I replied, “I do not know to whom I belong. Every one asks me the same question and tells me the same thing; I think they must have made a wager.”

“You are joking,” replied he; “your plumage is too becoming for me to fail to recognize you as one of our fraternity. You certainly belong to the ancient and honorable race which is called in Latin *cacatua*, in the language of the learned *kakatoës*, and in the vulgar tongue cockatoo.”

“Faith, Sir, that is possible, and I should consider it a great honor. But let us suppose, for the moment, that I do not belong to that kindred, and pray tell me whom I have the honor of addressing.”

“I am.” answered the stranger, “the great poet Kacatogan. I have made long voyages, Monsieur, I have crossed arid tracts, and my wanderings have been cruelly difficult. I have been dealing with rhymes for a long, long time, and my muse has been through many vicissitudes. I sang softly under Louis XVI, Monsieur, I shouted for the Republic, I sang of the Empire in the noble style, I praised the Restoration cautiously, and I have even made an effort recently, and have adapted myself, not without difficulty, to the requirements of this tasteless age. I have given to the world piquant couplets, sublime hymns, graceful dithyrambs, pious elegies, dramas with long hair, romances with curly hair, vaudevilles with powdered hair, and tragedies with bald heads. In a word, I flatter myself that I have added some gay festoons, some somber battlements, and some ingenious arabesques to the temple of the muses. What more could you expect? I have grown old. But my rhymes still flow copiously, Monsieur, and just now, I was dreaming of a poem in one canto, which should have no less than six pages, when you gave me this bump on my forehead. For the rest, if I can be of any use to you, I am entirely at your service.”

“Indeed, Monsieur, you can help me,” I replied, “for at this very moment I am seriously embarrassed as to a poetical matter. I dare not call myself a poet, certainly not a great poet like you,” I added, with a bow, “but nature has given me a throat which torments me with the longing to sing whenever I am very happy or very sad. To tell you the truth, I know absolutely nothing of the rules.”

“I have forgotten them myself,” said Kacatogan, “do not give yourself any concern about that.”

“But something disagreeable always happens to me. My voice produces the same effect upon those who hear it as that of a certain Jean de Nivelles upon.... You know what I mean?”

“I know,” said Kacatogan; “I know that peculiar effect by my own experience. I am not acquainted with the cause, but the effect is indisputable.”

“Very well, Monsieur, do you not know of any remedy for this serious annoyance—you who seem to be the Nestor of poetry?”

“No,” said Kacatogan, “for my part, I have never been able to find a remedy. When I was young, I was very much troubled because I was always hissed; but now, I never think of it any more. I fancy that the repugnance of the audience arises from the fact that they read other writers than ourselves: that distracts their attention.”

“I agree with you; but you must admit, Monsieur, that it is hard for a well meaning creature to have people run away whenever he has a pleasant impulse. Would you please be so good as to listen to me, and give me your candid opinion?”

“Willingly,” said Kacatogan; “I am all ears.”

I began to sing, and had the satisfaction of seeing that Kacatogan neither flew away nor fell asleep. He gazed at me steadily, and, from time to time, nodded his head with an air of approval, or murmured some flattering words. But I soon saw that he was not listening, but only dreaming of his own poem. Taking advantage of a moment when I paused for breath, he suddenly interrupted me.

“I have found the rhyme I wanted, now!” said he, smiling and shaking his head. “It is the sixty thousand seven hundred and fourteenth that my brain has produced! And they dare to say that I am growing old! I shall read this poem to some of my good friends. I shall read it to them, and we shall see what they will say!”

So saying, he spread his wings and flew away, seeming to have no further remembrance of having met me.

Chapter V

BEING left solitary and disappointed, I had nothing better to do than to profit by the remainder of the day and to fly at full speed towards Paris. Unfortunately, I did not know my way. My voyage with the pigeon had been so trying that I was unable to remember the route exactly; so that, instead of turning sharply to the right, I turned to the left at Bourget, and, being overtaken by night, I was obliged to seek shelter in the woods of Morfontaine.

All the birds were going to bed when I arrived. The pies and jays, who, as everyone knows, are the most uneasy creatures in the world at bedtime, were pushing and scuffling in every direction. The sparrows were scolding and treading on each other in the bushes. At the water’s edge two herons were walking solemnly, balancing themselves on their long stilts, in a meditative attitude, the George Dandins of the place, patiently awaiting their wives. Huge crows, already half asleep, were perching clumsily on the tops of the tallest trees, and saying their evening prayers in nasal tones. Lower down, some amorous tom-tits were still chasing each other through the thicket, while a woodpecker with ruffled plumage was pushing his family from behind, to drive them into a hole in a tree. Whole flocks of hedge-sparrows were coming in from the fields, dancing in the air like puffs of smoke, and alighting on a shrub, covering it completely. Chaffinches, linnets, and robin redbreasts had grouped themselves lightly on some pruned branches like crystals on a chandelier. Voices sounded in every direction, saying quite plainly: “—Come, wife!—Come, daughter!—This way, sweetheart!—Come here, dearest!—Here I am, my dear!—Goodnight, my love!—Good-bye, friends!—Sleep well, children!”

What a position for a bachelor, to lodge in such a tavern! I felt tempted to accost some birds of about my size and ask for their hospitality.—At night, I thought, all birds are gray; and, for that matter, does it

do people any harm to sleep quietly near them?

I turned first toward a ditch where some starlings were assembled. They were making their evening toilette with special care, and I noticed that most of them had golden wings and varnished claws: these were the dandies of the forest. They were good-natured enough, but did not pay me the compliment of noticing me at all. But their talk was so silly, they recounted their quarrels and their successes with such self conceit, and they pressed against each other so closely, that I really could not stand it.

I then went and perched on a branch where there were half a dozen birds of different kinds sitting in a row. I modestly took the last place at the extreme end of the branch, hoping to be tolerated there. Unfortunately, my neighbor was an old dove, as dry as a rusty weather vane. As I approached her, the few feathers which covered her bones were the object of her tenderest care; she was pretending to plume them, but she was too much afraid of pulling one out: she was merely counting them over, to see if she still had the proper number. I had scarcely touched her with the tip of my wing, when she stood erect, with freezing dignity.

“What are you doing, Monsieur?” she said, pinching her beak together, with British modesty.

And, giving me a great push with her elbow, she threw me off the branch with a vigor that would have done credit to a porter.

I fell into a furze bush where a big wood hen was sleeping. Even my mother in her porringer had not such an air of complete beatitude. She was so plump, so well grown, so comfortably seated on her own fat stomach, that one might have taken her for a pasty which had had its crust eaten off. I slipped up to her furtively.—“She will not wake up,” I said to myself, “and, in any case, such a nice fat mother cannot be very spiteful.” In point of fact she was not. She half opened her eyes, and said with a little sigh:

“You are bothering me, little one, do go away.”

Just then I heard some one calling me. It was some thrushes, in the top of a service tree, who were making signs to me to come to them.—“There are some good souls at last,” I thought. They made room for me, laughing wildly, and I slipped into the feathery group as swiftly as a love letter into a muff. But it did not take long to find out that those ladies had eaten more grapes than were good for them; they could scarcely hold on to the branches on which they were sitting, and their highly spiced pleasantries, their peals of laughter, and their ribald songs drove me to move on.

I was beginning to despair, and was about to go to sleep in a solitary corner, when a nightingale began to sing. Every one kept silence at once. Ah me! how pure his voice was! how sweet even his melancholy seemed! Instead of disturbing any one’s sleep, his notes seemed only to soothe it. No one dreamed of telling him to be quiet, no one found fault with his singing at such an hour; his father did not beat him and his friends did not take to flight.

“I, then, am the only one who is forbidden to be happy! I will go away, I will fly from this cruel company! I would rather try to find my way in the dark, at the risk of being eaten by some owl, than to have my heart torn by the sight of others’ happiness!”

Moved by this thought, I started once more and wandered for a long time at random. At daybreak I saw the towers of Notre Dame. In the twinkling of an eye I was there, and I soon recognized our garden. I flew to it quicker than lightning... Alas it was empty... In vain did I call my parents. Nobody answered.

The tree where my father used to sit, my mother's bush, the precious porringer, all had disappeared. The axe had destroyed everything; instead of the green bordered path where I was born, nothing was left but a pile of fagots.

Chapter VI

I WENT at once in search of my parents through all the gardens in the neighborhood, but my trouble was in vain. They must doubtless have taken refuge in some distant place, and I have never been able to learn what became of them.

Overwhelmed with sorrow, I went and perched on the gutter to which my father's anger had exiled me. There I passed whole days and nights lamenting my sad life. I could no longer sleep, I ate scarcely anything, and I came very near dying of hunger.

One day when I was bemoaning my fate as usual, I said aloud: "So then, I am neither a blackbird, since my father used to pluck out my feathers; nor a pigeon, since I fell by the way when I was trying to fly over to Belgium; nor a Russian magpie, since the little Marquise stopped up her ears as soon as I opened my mouth; nor a turtle dove, since Gourouli herself, gentle Gourouli, snored like a monk while I was singing; nor a cockatoo, since Kacatogan would not condescend to listen to me; nor any kind of a bird, in fact, since at Morfontaine they left me to sleep all alone. But nevertheless I am covered with feathers and I have claws and wings. I am certainly not a monster, as was proved by Gourouli and the little Marquise herself, for they found me pleasing enough. By what inexplicable mystery is it, that these feathers, wings, and claws do not form a whole to which one could give a name? May I not be, perhaps..."

I was about to continue my lamentations, when I was interrupted by two porters' wives, who were quarreling in the street.

"Goodness gracious!" said one of them to the other, "if you ever succeed, I will make you a present of a white blackbird!"

"The Lord be praised!" I cried. "Now I have it. Oh heavens! I am the son of a blackbird, and I am white: I am a white blackbird!"

This discovery, I must confess, modified my ideas considerably. Instead of pitying myself as I used, I began to puff myself up and walked proudly up and down the gutter, gazing forth into space with a victorious air.

"It is something," I said to myself, "to be a white blackbird. It is more worth while than the jog trot of a donkey. I did not need to grieve over not meeting with others like myself: it is more fate of genius and it is my fate! I meant to flee from the world, I will astonish it! Since I am that unique bird whose very existence is denied by the vulgar, it is both my right and my duty to behave accordingly, as the Phoenix does, and to despise all other birds. I must buy Alfieri's memoirs and Lord Byron's poems. Such substantial nourishment will inspire me with a noble pride, to say nothing of that with which the Lord has endowed me. Yes, I will try, if possible, to increase the prestige given me by my birth. Nature made me rare, I will make myself mysterious. It shall be regarded as a favor, an honor to see me.—And, in fact," I added in a lower tone, "how if I should actually exhibit myself for money?"

"For shame! What an unworthy idea! I will write a poem like Kacatogan, not in one canto, but in twenty-four, like all the great men; but that is not enough, there must be forty-eight, with notes and an

appendix! The universe must be made to realize the fact of my existence. In my verses, I shall not fail to deplore my isolation; but I shall do it in such a way, that even the happiest people will envy me. Since Providence has denied me a mate, I will say the most dreadful things about other peoples. I will prove, that all grapes are sour except those that I eat. The nightingales had better look out for their laurels; I will prove, as clearly as two and two make four, that their complaints make one's heart ache, and that their wares are of no value. I must go and see Charpentier. First of all I must win a real foothold in the world of letters. I mean to surround myself with a court composed, not merely of journalists, but of real authors, and even of literary women. I shall write a role for Mademoiselle Rachel, and, if she refuses to play it, I will publish with a great flourish of trumpets that her talent is quite inferior to that of some old provincial actress. I will go to Venice, and rent the beautiful palace Mocenigo, which is on the Grand Canal, in the midst of that fairy-like city, and costs four livres and ten sous a day. I shall find inspiration in all the souvenirs which the author of Lara must have left there. From the depths of my solitude, I shall flood the world with a deluge of interlocking rhymes, modeled after Spenser's strophes, in which I shall relieve my great soul; I shall make all the tom-tits sigh, all the turtle doves coo, all the woodpeckers weep, and all the old owls screech. But, as for my own person, I shall be inexorable and unbeguiled by the wiles of love. In vain they may urge and entreat me to take pity on the unhappy mortals who have been won by my sublime songs. To all such advances I shall simply reply: 'Fiddlesticks.' Oh, it will be too much glory! My manuscripts will sell for their weight in gold, my books will cross the ocean; fame and fortune will pursue me wherever I go; still alone, I shall seem indifferent to the murmurs of the crowd that will surround me. In a word, I shall be a perfect white blackbird, a genuine eccentric author, fêted, spoiled, admired, envied, but perfectly churlish and unbearable.

Chapter VII

IT did not take me more than six weeks to bring out my first work. It was, as I had intended, a poem in forty-eight cantos. There was, indeed, some careless work here and there, owing to the great rapidity of my production; but I thought that the public of today, being used to the literature which is printed at the foot of the page in the papers, would not criticize me for that.

My success was worthy of me, that is to say, it was unparalleled. The subject of my work was simply myself: In this choice of subject I was following the usual custom of the present time. I narrated my past sufferings with charming fatuity; I acquainted the reader with a thousand of the most intimate domestic details. The description of my mother's porringer filled no less than fourteen cantos: I counted the grooves, the holes, the lumps, the splinters, the slivers, the nails, the spots, the various tints, the reflections; I pictured the inside, the outside, the edges, the bottom, the sides, the sloping surfaces, the straight surfaces; passing on to the contents, I made a study of the blades of grass, the straws, the dead leaves, the bits of wood, the pebbles, the drops of water, the fragments of dead flies, the broken legs of June bugs which were in the nest; it was a ravishing description. But don't imagine that I printed it all in one place; some readers would have had the impertinence to skip it. I skillfully cut it in pieces, and mixed it in with the story, in order that nothing should be lost; so that, at the most interesting and dramatic moment, you would suddenly find fifteen pages of porringer. I believe that this is one of the great secrets of art, and as I am not avaricious, any one who wishes may profit by it.

All Europe was in an uproar over the appearance of my book; and devoured the intimate revelations which I had condescended to make. How could it have been otherwise? I not only gave all the facts relating to my own person, but I gave the public a complete picture of all the reveries that had passed

through my head since the age of two months; I even interpolated, in one of the most beautiful passages, an ode composed when I was in the egg. And, as a matter of course, I did not neglect to touch, in passing, on the great subject which is now occupying the attention of so many; that is to say, the future of humanity. This problem appeared interesting to me, and in a leisure moment, I outlined a solution which was generally considered satisfactory.

Every day I received complimentary verses, letters of congratulation, and anonymous declarations of love. As to visits, I followed strictly the plan that I had formed; my door was closed to all the world. Nevertheless I could not refuse to receive two strangers who had sent word that they were relatives of mine. One was a blackbird from Senegal, and the other a blackbird from China.

“Ah, Monsieur,” said they, smothering me with caresses, “what a great blackbird you are! How well you have painted, in your immortal poem, the profound sufferings of misunderstood genius! If we were not already as little understood as possible, we should be so after having read your work. How we sympathize with your sorrows, with your sublime contempt of the commonplace! We too, Monsieur, we know by our own experience, the secret sufferings which you have sung! Here are two sonnets which we have written, the one supplementing the other. We beg you to accept them.”

“And here is something more,” added the Chinese bird, “some music which my wife composed to a passage in your preface. She renders the author’s meaning wonderfully.”

“Gentlemen,” said I, “as far as I can judge, you seem to be endowed with generous hearts and enlightened minds. But pardon me if I ask you a question. What is the cause of your melancholy?”

“Eh! Monsieur,” answered the native of Senegal, “look how I am built. My plumage, indeed, is good to look at, and my coat is of that fine green color that you see glistening on the backs of ducks; but my beak is too short and my feet are too big; and see what a tail I am encumbered with! My body is not two-thirds the length of my tail. Isn’t that enough to make any one go to the devil?”

“And as for me, Monsieur,” said the Chinese, “my misfortune is still more distressing. My friend’s tail sweeps the street; but the little scalawags make fun of me because I have none at all.”

“Gentlemen,” I replied, “I pity you with all my heart. It is always troublesome to have too much or too little of anything whatever. But allow me to inform you that there are in the Jardin des Plantes several persons who resemble you, and who have already been there for some time, quite peaceably stuffed. Just as mere shamelessness is not sufficient to enable a literary woman to write a good book, so mere discontent is not enough to turn a blackbird into a genius. I am the only one of my kind, and I grieve for it; I may be wrong, but I have a right to my opinion. Gentlemen, I am white; turn white, and we will see we will see what you can manage to say then.”

Chapter VIII

IN spite of the resolution I had made and the calm I affected, I was not happy. I found my isolation none the less burdensome for being glorious, and I could not think without horror of the necessity of passing my whole life in a state of celibacy. The return of spring, especially, caused me much uneasiness, and I began once more to grow very melancholy, when an unforeseen incident changed the course of my life.

It is needless to say that my writings had crossed the channel, and that the English were snatching them away from each other. The English will snatch at anything, unless it is something that they can

understand. One day I received, from London, a letter signed by a young lady blackbird:

“I have read your poem,” said she, “and my admiration was so great that I resolved to offer you my hand. God created us for each other! I am like you, I am a white blackbird!...”

It is easy to imagine my surprise and joy. “A white blackbird!” said I to myself, “is it possible? Then I am no longer alone upon the earth!” I hastened to answer the fair unknown, and I wrote in a way which showed plainly enough how pleased I was with her proposal. I urged her to come to Paris or to allow me to fly to her. She replied that she preferred to come to me, because her family might give her some trouble, that she would put her affairs in order and that I should see her soon.

In fact, she arrived a few days later. Oh joy! she was the prettiest little blackbird in the world, and she was even whiter than I.

“Ah, Mademoiselle,” I cried, “or rather Madame, for I regard you as my lawful wife from this very moment, is it possible that so charming a creature should have existed in the world, without her fame having reached me? I am grateful for my past misfortunes and for the sharp pecks that my father gave me, since heaven had such an unexpected consolation in store for me. Until now, I believed that I was condemned to eternal solitude, and, to speak plainly, it was a heavy burden to carry; but when I look at you, I feel quite like the father of a family. Pray accept my hand at once; let us be married in the English fashion, without ceremony, and we will start for Switzerland together.”

“That is not my idea at all,” answered the young blackbird; “I want our wedding to be a magnificent affair, and I want all the blackbirds in France, who have any social standing at all, to be solemnly assembled. Such people as we are owe it to their own high position not to be married like cats in the gutter. I have brought a supply of bank-notes. Send out your invitations, go and do the necessary shopping, and do not skimp on the refreshments.”

I followed the white blackbird’s orders blindly. Our wedding was almost oppressively luxurious; no less than ten thousand flies were eaten. A Reverend Father Cormorant, who was arch-bishop *in partibus*, pronounced the nuptial benediction. The day ended with a grand ball. In fact, my happiness was complete.

The more I learned of my charming wife’s character, the more my love increased. In her small person, all the graces of mind and body were united. The only defect was a slight prudishness; but I attributed this to the effect of the English fogs in which she had lived hitherto, and I had no doubt that the French climate would soon drive away this one little cloud.

One thing which gave me more serious anxiety, was a sort of mystery with which she would from time to time surround herself, with a strange exclusiveness, locking herself up with her chambermaids, and passing whole hours over her toilette, or so she pretended. Such fanciful behavior about the house is very displeasing to a husband. Twenty times I had knocked at the door of my wife’s room and had failed to induce her to let me in. This conduct tried my patience cruelly. One day, when I found the door locked, I insisted so crossly, that she felt obliged to yield and opened the door rather hastily, complaining bitterly of my persistence. I noticed, as I went in, a large bottle full of a sort of paste made of flour and whiting. I asked my wife what she did with this medicine; she answered that it was an opiate for her chilblains.

This opiate struck me as being a trifle suspicious; but yet how could one suspect so gentle and good a person, who had given herself to me with such warmth and sincerity? I had not known at first that my

beloved was a literary lady; she confessed it to me after a while, and even showed me the manuscript of a novel which she had imitated both from Walter Scott and from Scarron. I leave you to imagine how delighted I was with this pleasant surprise. I not only found myself possessed of an incomparable beauty, but I now felt sure that my companion's intelligence was fully worthy of my own genius. From that time on, we worked together. While I was composing my poems, she scrawled over reams of paper. I would recite my verses aloud to her, and that did not hinder her from writing at the same time. She hatched out her romances with an ease almost equal to my own, always choosing the most dramatic subjects, such as parricides, seductions, murders, and even pocket-picking, always taking care, in passing, to attack the government and to preach the emancipation of female blackbirds. In a word, no effort was too much for her mind, no *tour de force* was too much for her modesty; she never crossed out a line, nor formed a plan before beginning to work. She was the very type of a literary blackbird.

One day when she was working with unusual zeal, I noticed she was perspiring freely, and I was surprised to see a big black spot on her back at the same time.

"Heavens above!" said I, "what is the matter? Are you sick?"

At first she seemed a little startled and almost embarrassed, but her training and her society manners soon came to her aid and she recovered her admirable self control. She told me that it was an ink spot, and that she was very apt to get them in her moments of inspiration.

"Is it possible that my wife is changing color?" I said softly to myself. This thought would not let me sleep. The bottle of paste recurred to my mind. "Oh heavens!" I cried. "What a suspicion! this heavenly being only a daubed and painted creature? Has she been whitening herself to deceive me?... When I thought I was pressing to my heart a sister soul, a privileged being created for me alone, was I wedded to nothing but flour?"

Haunted by this horrible thought, I formed a plan to allay my doubts. I purchased a barometer, and waited impatiently for it to bring a rainy day. I meant to take my wife into the country, choosing a doubtful Sunday, and try the experiment of a washing. But it was the middle of July and the weather was terribly fine.

The outward signs of happiness and my habit of writing had greatly excited my sensibilities. As I was rather simple, it sometimes happened, while I was working, that my sentiments were more powerful than my ideas, and I would begin to weep while I was waiting for a rhyme. My wife was very fond of these rare occasions: any masculine weakness flatters a woman's pride. On a certain night, when I was smoothing over an erasure, according to Boileau's precept, I felt that I must open my heart.

"Oh my only beloved!" said I to my dear mate, "without whom my life is but a dream, who can change the whole world for me with a glance or a smile, heart of my heart, do you know how I love you? A little care and study will easily help me to find words to put into verse some trivial idea that has already been used by other poets; but where shall I ever find words to express to you the inspiration with which your beauty fills me? I do not know whether even the remembrance of my past sufferings could provide me with words with which I could tell you of my present happiness. Before you came to me, my isolation was that of an exiled orphan; today it is that of a king. Do you know, my angel, my beauty, that in this frail body whose semblance I bear until death destroys it, in this feverish little brain where useless thoughts arise, there can be nothing, nothing that is not for you? Only listen to what my brain can tell you, and then feel how much greater is my love! Oh that my genius were a pearl, and that you were

Cleopatra!”

As I was expressing this lover’s folly, I wept over my wife, and she changed color before my eyes. At every tear that I shed, there appeared a feather, not even a good black, but dingy and rusty (I believe that she must have changed color somewhere else already). After some minutes of tender folly, I found myself confronted by a bird quite free from paste and flour, and precisely like the most tiresome and ordinary blackbirds.

What should I do? What should I say? Reproaches were useless. It is true, I could have considered the case as a legal impediment, and annulled my marriage; but how could I dare to publish my disgrace? Was not my sorrow in itself trouble enough? I took my courage in my two claws and resolved to leave the world, to abandon the career of letters, to flee to the desert, and if possible, to avoid forevermore the sight of any living creature, and to seek, like Alceste,

... A region remote,

Where a blackbird is free to be white if he choose!

Chapter XI

THEREUPON I flew away, still weeping; and the wind, which is the good or ill luck of birds, carried me to a branch in Morfontaine. This time, every one had gone to bed.—“What a marriage!” said I to myself. “What a trick! The poor child certainly whitened herself with the best of intentions; but I am none the less to be pitied, nor is her color less rusty.”

The nightingale was still singing. Alone, in the deep night, he was enjoying with all his heart that gift of God which makes him so superior to poets, and was expressing himself freely to the surrounding silence. I could not resist the temptation of going to speak to him.

“How fortunate you are!” I said: “Not only have you the privilege of singing all you like, and finely too, and every one listens; but you have a wife and children, a nest, and friends, a good pillow made of moss, a full moon, and no newspapers. Rubini and Rossini are nothing, compared to you: you are the equal of the one and you foretell the other. I too have sung, Monsieur, and it was pitiful. I arranged words in battle array like Prussian soldiers, and I was stringing my foolishness together while you were here in the woods. Can you teach your secret?”

“Yes,” replied the nightingale, “but it is not what you think. My wife bores me, and I do not love her; I am in love with the rose: Sadi, the Persian poet wrote about it. All night long I sing my best for her, but she sleeps and does not hear me. Her calyx is closed now, and she is cradling an old beetle in it,—and tomorrow morning, when I have gone back to bed, worn out with suffering and fatigue, she will open, and let some bee suck from her very heart!”

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