

Aloysius Bertrand

Gaspard de la Nuit

(Fantasies in the manner of Rembrandt and Callot)



*Gaspard de la Nuit, 1868
Félicien Rops (French, 1833-1898) - National Gallery of Art*

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Contents

Translator's Introduction	5
Bertrand's Prologue	6
Gaspard's Preface	16
Dedication: To Victor Hugo	17
Gaspard de la Nuit: Book One	18
The Flemish School – I: Harlem	19
The Flemish School – II: The Mason	19
The Flemish School – III: The Schoolboy from Leiden	20
The Flemish School – IV: The Pointed Beard	21
The Flemish School – V: The Tulip-Seller	22
The Flemish School – VI: The Fingers of One Hand	23
The Flemish School – VII: The Viola da Gamba	23
The Flemish School – VIII: The Alchemist	24
The Flemish School – IX: Leaving for the Sabbath	25
Gaspard de la Nuit: Book Two	26
Old Paris – I: The Two Jews	26
Old Paris – II: The Beggars	27
Old Paris – III: The Lantern	27
Old Paris – IV: The Tour de Nesle	28
Old Paris – V: The Model of Refinement	29
Old Paris – VI: The Evening Office	30
Old Paris – VII: The Serenade	31
Old Paris – VIII: Messire Jean	32
Old Paris – IX: Midnight Mass	32
Old Paris – X: The Bibliophile	33
Gaspard de la Nuit: Book Three	34
Night and its Enchantments – I: The Gothic Chamber	34
Night and its Enchantments – II: Scarbo	35
Night and its Enchantments – III: The Madman	35
Night and its Enchantments – IV: The Dwarf	36
Night and its Enchantments – V: Moonlight	36
Night and its Enchantments – VI: The Dance Under the Belltower	38

Night and its Enchantments – VII: A Dream	39
Night and its Enchantments – VIII: My Great-Grandfather.....	40
Night and its Enchantments – IX: Ondine.....	40
Night and its Enchantments – X: The Salamander.....	41
Night and its Enchantments – XI: The Sabbath Hour	42
Gaspard de la Nuit: Book Four	42
The Chronicles – I: Master Ogier (1407)	43
The Chronicles – II: The Postern Door to the Louvre.....	44
The Chronicles – III: The Flemings.....	45
The Chronicles – IV: The Hunt (1412).....	45
The Chronicles – V: The Retreat-Seekers	46
The Chronicles – VI: The Big Battalions	47
The Chronicles – VII: The Lepers	49
The Chronicles – VIII: For a Bibliophile	50
Gaspard de la Nuit: Book Five	51
Spain and Italy – I: The Cell.....	51
Spain and Italy – II: The Muleteers	52
Spain and Italy – III: The Marquis of Aroca	54
Spain and Italy – IV: Henriquez	55
Spain and Italy – V: The Alarm.....	55
Spain and Italy – VI: Father Pugnaccio	56
Spain and Italy – VII: The Song of the Mask.....	57
Gaspard de la Nuit: Book Six	58
Sylvan Pieces – I: My Cottage.....	58
Sylvan Pieces – II: Jean des Tilles.....	59
Sylvan Pieces – III: October	59
Sylvan Pieces – IV: Chèvre-Morte	60
Sylvan Pieces – V: Another Spring	61
Sylvan Pieces – VI: Mankind For A Second Time	61
Afterword – To Monsieur Saint-Beuve	63
Pieces Extracted from the Author’s Portfolio.....	63
Le Bel Alcade: The Handsome Judge	63
The Angel and the Faery.....	64
The Rain.....	65
The Two Angels.....	66
Evening on the Water	67
Madame de Montbazon	68

The Night After the Battle	69
The Citadel of Wolgast	70
The Dead Horse	71
The Gibbet	72
Scarbo	72
To Monsieur David d'Angers, sculptor	73

Translator's Introduction

Louis Bertrand (1807-1841), better known by his pen name Aloysius Bertrand, was born in Ceva, Piedmont (then in France, now in Italy). He studied at the Collège Royal in Dijon, from 1818 to 1826. Praised for his early writings by Hugo and Saint-Beuve, he moved to Paris in 1828 but was relatively unsuccessful there, returning to Dijon in 1830 where he became editor of a Republican newspaper, *Patriote de la Côte-d'Or*. In 1833, he was back in Paris where the manuscript of *Gaspard de la Nuit* was accepted for publication, though the work was not printed until after his death. In Paris, he led a financially precarious life as a poet and playwright, contracting tuberculosis which resulted in his death in 1841.

In *Gaspard de la Nuit* Bertrand is credited with inventing the prose-poem, which later inspired Baudelaire to pen his set of prose-poems *Le Spleen de Paris*, while Bertrand was also admired by Mallarmé and the Symbolists, and later the Surrealists. *Gaspard de la Nuit* inspired a painting by Magritte, and three piano solos by Ravel.

Bertrand's Prologue

'On our way to Cologne, my friend, of a Sunday,
There in Dijon, at the heart of Burgundy,
Did we not admire spires and gateways, for hours,
Old mansions in courtyards, and lofty towers.'

Saint-Beuve — The Consolations

A Gothic Dungeon,
A Gothic Spire,
To the skies aspire,
And there's Dijon.
Her vineyards, joyful,
Possess no equal;
Her bell-towers, then,
At a count, made ten.

Guyton's *Rat* sculpted
Pints there, or painted.
There, portals, well-made,
Fanlike, are displayed.
Moult te tarde! Dijon,
While my lute, nose-flat,
Sings your mustard, *bonne*,
And your Quarter-Jack!

I love Dijon as the child does his nurse whose milk he sucked, as the poet does the girl who inspired his heart. — Childhood and poetry! How ephemeral the one, how deceptive the other! Childhood is a butterfly that hastens to burn its pale wings in the flame of youth, while poetry is like the almond tree: its flowers are fragrant, its fruits are bitter.

One day I was sitting alone in the Jardin de l'Arquebuse — so named for the weapon which in other days was so often a feature of the Knights of the Papeguay there. Immobile on a bench, one might have compared me to the statue on the Bazire bastion. That masterpiece by the figurist Sévallée and the painter Guillot represented an abbot sitting and reading. Nothing was missing from his costume. From a distance, he might

be taken for a real person; nearer-to, you could see that it was a plaster-cast.

A cough from a passer-by dispersed my swarm of dreams. He was a poor devil whose exterior announced only wretchedness and suffering. I had already noted, in those same gardens, his threadbare overcoat which buttoned to his chin, his shapeless felt hat which had never been brushed, his long hair hanging down like a weeping willow, and tangled like brushwood, his gaunt hands, like ossuaries, his mocking, sulky and sickly physiognomy thinned by a Nazarene beard; and my conjectures had charitably ranked him among those minor artists, fiddle-players, and portrait painters, whom an insatiable hunger and an inextinguishable thirst condemn to roam the world in the footsteps of the Wandering Jew.

There were now two of us on the bench. My neighbor was leafing through a book, from the pages of which a dried flower escaped without his knowledge. I rescued it, and returned it to him. The stranger, thanking me, raised it to his withered lips, and replaced it in the mysterious book.

– ‘That flower,’ I ventured to say to him, ‘is doubtless the symbol of some sweet love, long-buried? Alas! We all have a time of happiness in the past which disenchants us with the future.’

– ‘Are you a poet?’ he replied, smiling.

The thread of conversation was knotted now; on what reel would it be wound?

– ‘A poet, if to be a poet is to have sought out art!’

– ‘You searched for art! And did you find it?’

– ‘Would to heaven that art was not a chimera!’

– A chimera! ... Yet I too sought it!’ he exclaimed with the enthusiasm of genius, and an emphatic air of triumph.

I begged him to tell me to which maker of spectacles he owed his discovery, art having proved to me like a needle in a haystack...

– ‘I had resolved,’ he said, ‘to seek art as, in the Middle Ages, the Rosicrucians sought the philosopher’s stone; art, is the philosopher’s stone of the nineteenth century! An initial question exercised my scholastic powers. I asked myself: What is art — Art is the poet’s Science — A definition as clear as a diamond of the first water. But what are the elements of art? A second question which I hesitated for several months to answer.

— One evening as I was digging amidst the powdery dust of a second-hand bookstore by the light of a smoky lamp, I unearthed a small book, written in an unintelligible and baroque language, the title of which, emblazoned with a heraldic winged-serpent, displayed, on a banner, these two words: “Gott — Liebe”. A few sous paid for this treasure. I climbed to my attic room, and there, as, filled with curiosity, I attempted to spell out the words of that enigmatic book, before my window bathed in moonlight, it suddenly seemed to me to me as if the finger of God was touching the keyboard of some universal organ. So do buzzing moths emerge from the hearts of flowers whose lips pale beneath the kisses of night. I leaned from the window and looked down. A surprise! Was I dreaming? There was a terrace whose existence I had not suspected exhaling the sweet emanations of its orange-trees; a young girl dressed in white, who played on a harp; and an old man dressed in black who prayed on his knees! — The book fell from my hands.

I descended to join the occupiers of the terrace. The old man was a minister of the Reformed religion who had exchanged the cold homeland of his native Thuringia for the lukewarm exile of our Burgundy. The musician was his only child, a blonde, frail beauty, seventeen years of age, who was suffering from a wasting sickness; and the book I had claimed was a German prayer-book for the use of churches of the Lutheran rite and bearing the arms of a prince of the house of Anhalt-Coëthen.

Ah! sir, let us not stir the dormant ashes! Elisabeth is no more than a Beatrice in an azure dress. She is dead, sir, dead, and here is the prayer-book over which she poured out her timid heartfelt prayer, the rose into which she breathed her innocent soul — like her a withered flower, a book, closed like the book of her fate! — Blessed relics that she will not fail to recognize in eternity, relics drenched with tears, when, the Archangel’s trumpet having broken the stones of my tomb, I will fling myself beyond the worlds to be with that adored virgin, to sit beside her at last, beneath God’s gaze! ...

— ‘And art?’ I asked him.’

— ‘That which in art is *sentiment* was my painful conquest. I had loved, I had prayed. “*Gott — Liebe*”, God and Love! — But that which in art is *idea* still drew my curiosity. I believed I would find the complement of art in nature. So, I studied nature.

I would leave my house in the morning and not return till evening. Sometimes, leaning on the parapet of some ruined bastion for many an hour, I loved to breathe the wild and penetrating perfume of the scented stock which speckles with golden bouquets the ivy-covered fabric of Louis XI's feudal and defunct citadel; to view the tranquil landscape troubled by a gust of wind, a shaft of sunlight, or a shower of rain, the ortolans, and the fledglings piping from their nest in the hedgerows, dappled with light and shade, the thrushes hastening from the hill-slopes to feed on vines tall and bushy enough to hide the fabled deer, the crows descending from every corner of the sky, in wearisome flocks, to pluck at the carcass of a horse abandoned by the flayer of horses in some green valley; to listen to the washerwomen beating the clothes joyfully on the banks of the Suzon, and to the child singing a plaintive melody while turning the rope-maker's wheel beneath the walls. — Sometimes I chose for my reveries a path of moss and dew, silence and tranquility, far from the city. How often have I robbed the bushes of their red and acid fruits among the haunted thickets of the Fount of Youth, and the hermitage of Notre-Dame-d'Étang, that Fount of the Spirits and the Fairies, and that Devil's hermitage! How often have I gathered petrified whelk, and fossilised coral on the stony heights of Saint-Joseph, ravaged by a storm! How often have I fished for crayfish in the disheveled fords of the Tilles, those streams filled with watercress that shelter the icy salamander, and water lilies whose indolent flowers yawn! How often have I spied a grass snake on the mired strands of Saulons, which hear only the monotonous call of the coot and the funereal cry of the grebe! How many times have I illumined with a candle the underground caves of Asnières, where stalactites slowly distill their eternal water-drops from the clepsydra of the centuries! How many times have I sounded my horn, on the vertical cliffs of Chèvre-Morte, as the coach climbed, painfully, the track three hundred feet below my fogbound-throne! And the nights, those summer nights, balsamic and diaphanous; how many times have I not I moved like a lycanthrope about the fire that I lit in the grassy, deserted valley, until the first blows of the woodcutter's axe shook the oaks! Ah, sir, how many attractions solitude offers to the poet! I would have been happy to live in the woods and make no more noise than the bird quenching its thirst at the spring, the bee buzzing about the hawthorn, and the falling acorn breaking through the leaves!' ...

— 'And art?' I asked him.

— ‘Patience! Art remained in limbo. I had studied the spectacle of nature; I now studied the monuments of men.

Dijon has not always spent its idle hours at concerts performed by its harmonious children. It donned the hauberk — capped its head with the morion helm — brandished the partisan — unsheathed the sword — primed the arquebus — aimed the cannon from its ramparts — coursed the field with beating drums and torn ensigns, and, like the grey bearded minstrel who sounded the trumpet before scraping at the rebec, it would have wondrous stories to tell you, or rather, its crumbling bastions would, that contain in their soil mixed with debris the leafy roots of its horse-chestnut trees, and its ruined castle would, whose bridge trembles under the exhausted step of the gendarme’s mare returning to barracks, — everything attests to two Dijons: the Dijon of today, the Dijon of yesteryear.

I had soon disinterred that Dijon of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries about which ran a ring of eighteen towers, with eight gates, and four *portelles* or posterns — the Dijon of Philippe-le-Hardi, of Jean-sans-Peur, of Philippe-le-Bon and Charles-le-Téméraire, with its cob houses, their gables pointed like a madman’s cap, their facades barred with Saint Andrew’s crosses; and its fortified *hôtels*, with narrow barbicans, double wicket-gates, and cobbled courtyards: — with its churches, its holy chapel, its abbeys, its monasteries, forming processions of bell towers, spires, needles, deploying as banners their stained-glass windows of gold and azure, parading their miraculous relics, kneeling to the dark crypts of their martyrs, or the repository of their flowering gardens; — with its flowing Suzon whose course, replete with little wooden bridges and flour mills, separated the territory of the abbot of Saint-Bénigne from the territory of the abbot of Saint-Étienne, like a bailiff in parliament setting his rod and his cry of ‘Hold!’ between two litigants puffed-up with anger; — and, finally, with its populous suburbs, one of which, that of St-Nicolas, spread its twelve streets to the sun, like no more nor less than a fat pregnant sow displaying her twelve udders. — I had galvanized a corpse into life, and the corpse had risen.

Dijon rises; rises, walks, runs! Thirty church-bells chime away, in an ultramarine blue sky such as old Albrecht Dürer painted. The crowds flock to the inns of the Rue Bouchepot, to the bathhouses of Porte aux Chanoines, to the promenade on Rue St-Guillaume, to the exchange on Rue Notre-Dame, to the arms factories of Rue des Forges, to the fountain on

Place des Cordeliers, to the communal oven on Rue de Bèze, to the market halls on Place Champeaux, to the gibbet on Place Morimont; bourgeoisie, nobles, freemen, scoundrels, priests, monks, clerics, merchants, servants, Jews, Lombards, pilgrims, minstrels, officials belonging to parliament and the 'chamber of accounts', tax-officials, officers of the duke's household: proclaiming, whistling, singing, moaning, praying, grumbling — in carts, litters, on horseback, on mules, on Saint Francis' nag. — How can we doubt this resurrection? There floats in the breeze the silk standard, half green, half yellow, embroidered with the city's coat of arms, red with golden vines leafed with green (*gueules au pampre d'or feuillé de sinople*).

But what cavalcade is this? It is the duke, off to enjoy the chase. The duchess has already preceded him to the Château de Rouvres. The magnificence of the equipage, the endless procession! Monseigneur the duke spurs on a dappled grey, which shivers in the sharp, pungent air of morning. Behind him prance and strut the *Rich* of Châlons, the *Nobles* of Vienne, the *Braves* of Vergy, the *Pride* of Neuchâtel, the *Good Barons* of Beaufremont — And these two who ride at the back of the file? The younger, distinguished by his oxblood-velvet suit and his quivering cap, screams with laughter; the older, clad in a black cloth cape from beneath which he removes a voluminous psalter, lowers his head in confusion: one is the King of the Rascals, the other is the duke's chaplain. The fool asks the wise man questions the latter cannot answer; and while the populace shouts Noël! — how the palfreys neigh, the bloodhounds bark, the horns sound their fanfare, they, the reins loose on the necks of their ambling mounts, discourse in a familiar manner of the wise lady Judith, and the brave Maccabeus.

A herald, however, blows his trumpet on the tower of the duke's dwelling. He points to the huntsmen, in the plain, letting fly their falcons. It is rainy weather; a greyish mist in the distance hides the abbey of Citeaux from him, its woods bathed by the marshes; but a shaft of sunlight reveals to him the Castle of Talant, closer and more distinct, whose terraces and platforms raise their crenellations to the clouds, — the manors of the Lord of Ventoux and the Lord of Fontaine, whose weathervanes pierce the mass of greenery, — the monastery of Saint-Maur whose dovecotes stand like spires in the midst of a flock of pigeons, — the leprosarium of St-Apollinaire which has only one door and no windows, — the chapel of St-Jacques de Trimolois, which looks like a pilgrim covered in shells; — and

under the walls of Dijon, beyond the farms of the abbey of St-Bénigne, the cloisters of the Charterhouse, white as the robes of the Carthusian disciples of Saint Bruno.

The Charterhouse of Dijon! The Saint-Denis of the Dukes of Burgundy! Oh, why must children be jealous of their fathers' masterpieces! Visit the site of the Charterhouse, nowadays, and your feet will stumble over stones in the grass, stones which were once the keystones of arches, altar tabernacles, tombstones, oratory slabs; stones about which incense has smoked, wax has burned, the organ has murmured, where dead dukes have bowed their foreheads. — O nullity of grandeur and glory! We plant pumpkin seeds in the ashes of Philippe-le-Bon! — The Charterhouse is no more! Yet I am wrong. — The church portal and the bell-tower's turret are still standing; the turret slender and light, a tuft of wallflower in its ear, resembles a youth leading a greyhound on a leash; the portal of hammered stonework would still be a jewel if hung about the neck of a cathedral. In addition to this, in the courtyard of the cloister, a gigantic pedestal is set, from which the cross is absent and about which are nestled six statues of prophets, admirable in their desolation. — And what do they mourn? They mourn the cross that the angels have borne back to heaven.

The fate of the Charterhouse was that of most of the monuments which embellished Dijon at the time of the union of the duchy with the royal domain. The city is nothing more than a shadow of its former self. Louis XI stripped it of its power, the revolution decapitated its bell-towers. There remain but three churches from seven churches, a holy chapel, two abbeys and a dozen monasteries. Three of the city's gates are blocked-up, its posterns demolished, its suburbs razed, its Suzon stream plunged into the sewers; its population has shed its leaves, and its nobility have fallen to earth. — Alas, only too clearly, we see Charles-le-Téméraire and all his chivalry departing for battle — nigh-on four centuries ago — and not returning.

And I wandered among these ruins like the antiquary who searches for medals in the furrows of a Roman fort after a heavy rainstorm. Dijon, though expired, still retains something of what it was, similar to those rich Gauls who were buried with a gold coin in their mouth, and another in their right hand.'

— 'And art?' I asked.

— ‘I was occupied one day, in front of the church of Notre-Dame, in gazing at the Quarter-Jack (*Jacquemart*) and his wife and child, who were hammering away at noon. — The exactitude, the weightiness, the phlegmatic appearance of Jacquemart would attest to his Flemish origin, even if we ignore the fact that he dispensed the hours to the good bourgeois of Courtrai (*Kortrijk, Belgium*) during the sack of that city in 1383. Gargantua stole the bells of Paris, Philippe-le-Hardi the clock of Courtrai; each prince according to his stature. A burst of laughter was heard above, and I saw, on a corner of the Gothic building, one of those monstrous figures that the sculptors of the Middle Ages attached by their shoulders to the cathedral eaves; an atrocious face of the damned who, a prey to suffering, stuck out his tongue and gnashed his teeth, while wringing his hands. — It was he that had laughed.

— ‘You had a speck of dust in your eye!’ I cried.

— ‘Neither a speck in the eye, nor wax in the ear. — The stone face had laughed, — laughed with a grimacing, dreadful, infernal laugh — but sarcastic — incisive — picturesque.’

I felt ashamed for having granted this a monomaniac so much of my time. However, with a smile, I encouraged this Rosicrucian of art to continue his droll story.

— ‘The experience,’ he continued, ‘gave me food for thought. — I reflected that, since God and Love were the primary aspects of art, that which in art is *sentiment* — Satan could well be the secondary aspect, that which in art is *idea* — Was it not the devil who built the cathedral of Cologne?

Behold me in quest of the Devil. I reddened over Cornelius Agrippa’s books of magic, and I slaughter my neighbor the schoolmaster’s black hen. The Devil no more appears than at the end of a devotee’s rosary! Nonetheless he exists: — Saint Augustine, with his pen, made the thing official: *Daemones sunt genere animalia, ingenio rationabilia, animo passiva, corpore aerea, tempore aeterna* (*Devils are living beings, intellectually rational, spiritually passive, ethereal in body, eternal in time*). This is certain. The Devil exists. He speaks in the chamber, he pleads in the palace, he plays the stock market. We engrave him in vignettes, weave him into novels, dress him up in plays. We see him everywhere, as I see you. It was the better to pluck hairs from his beard than pocket mirrors

were invented. Punchinello missed his enemy and ours. Oh, if only he'd hit the back of his head with his truncheon!

I drank the Paracelsian elixir in the evening before going to bed. It gave me colic. Nowhere did the Devil in horns and a tail appear.

A further disappointment: that night a storm soaked to the bone the old city crouched in sleep. How blindly I groped among the crevices of Notre-Dame, to commit my sacrilege. There is no lock to which crime lacks the key. — Pity me! I had need of a holy wafer and a sacred relic — A light pricked the darkness, several more appeared, successively, and I could soon distinguish the figure whose hand, extended by a long lamplighter's pole, distributed flame to the candles of the high altar. It was the quarter-jack, Jacquemart, who, no less imperturbable than usual beneath his patched iron *shell*, completed his work without appearing worried by, or even aware of, the presence of a profane witness. Jacqueline, his wife, kneeling on the steps, remained perfectly motionless, rain flowing from her lead skirt arranged in the Brabant fashion, from her sheet-metal throat-piece piped like Bruges lace, from her varnished wooden face with the cheeks of a Nuremberg doll. I was stammering out a humble question to her regarding the Devil and art, when Maritorne's arm sprang forth with the sudden and brutal force of a spring, and, to the hundred-fold echoing sound of the heavy hammer which she grasped in her fist, the crowd of abbots, knights, and benefactors who populate the Gothic vaults of the church with their Gothic effigies, flocked in procession around the altar, bright with the vivid winged splendours of the Christmas crib. The black Virgin, the Virgin of barbarous times, a cubit high, with her shimmering golden crown, her stiff dress of pitch and pearl, the miraculous Virgin before whom a silver lamp glows, leapt down from her seat, and flew across the flagstones with the speed of a spinning-top. She approached from the depths of the nave, with graceful, uneven leaps, accompanied by a little Saint John of wax and wool, which was ignited by a spark, and which melted in blue and red. Jacqueline had armed herself with scissors, to shear the occiput of her swaddled child; far off a candle illuminated the baptistery chapel, and then...

— 'What then?'

— 'And then, the sun shining through a crack, the sparrows pecking at my windows, and the bells muttering an antiphon to the clouds woke me. It was a dream.'

— ‘And the devil?’

— ‘Does not exist.’

— ‘And art?’

— ‘That exists.’

— ‘But where?’

— ‘In God’s breast!’ — And his eye, where a tear swelled, probed the sky — ‘We are, sir, only the Creator’s copyists. The most magnificent, the most triumphant, the most glorious of our ephemeral works is never more than a shameful counterfeit, the extinguished spark of the least of His immortal works. All originality is an eaglet that only breaks from its shell in the sublime and thunderous region of Sinai — Yes, sir, I have long sought absolute art! O delirium! O madness! Behold this forehead furrowed by the iron crown of misfortune! Thirty years! And the mystery, the arcanum I have solicited with so many stubborn vigils, to which I have sacrificed youth, love, pleasure, fortune, that arcanum dwells, inert and insensible, like the meanest pebble, among the ashes of my illusions! Nullity fails to grant life to nullity.’

He rose. I showed my commiseration in a hypocritical and banal sigh.

— ‘This manuscript,’ he added, ‘will inform you of the many shapes my lips attempted before arriving at one which sounds a pure and expressive note, the many brushes I employed on my canvas before seeing the vague dawn of chiaroscuro appear. Here are recorded various procedures, new perhaps, involving harmony and colour, the only result, the only reward that my lucubrations may have obtained. Read; you can return it to me tomorrow. Six o’clock strikes from the cathedral; the hours chase the sun which slips away from that row of lilacs. I shall lock myself away and write my will. Good evening to you.’

— ‘Monsieur!’

Bah! He was far away. I remained as quiet and sheepish-looking as a president whose clerk has caught a flea that was riding his nose. The manuscript was entitled: *Gaspard de la Nuit, Fantasies in the manner of Rembrandt and Callot*.

The next day was a Saturday. Nobody occupied the garden of the Arquebus except some Jews who were celebrating their Sabbath. I ran through the town enquiring for Monsieur Gaspard de la Nuit of every passer-by. Some replied: ‘Oh! You joker!’ — Others: — ‘May he wring

your neck!’ — And they all immediately abandoned me to my own devices. I approached a wine-seller from the rue Saint-Felebar, dwarfish and hunchbacked, who stood in his doorway laughing at my embarrassment.

— ‘Do you know Monsieur Gaspard de la Nuit?’

— ‘What do you want from that fellow?’

— ‘I want to return a book he lent me.’

— ‘A grimoire, a book full of spells!’

— ‘What, a grimoire!... Say where he lives, I beg you.’

— ‘Over there, where that claw-head hangs.’

— ‘But that house... that’s the house of a priest.’

— ‘I’ve just seen someone tall and dark-haired enter, one who changes their black clerical garb for white.’

— ‘What do you mean?’

— ‘I mean that Monsieur Gaspard de la Nuit sometimes dresses as a young and pretty girl to tempt devout people — witness his adventure with Saint Anthony, my patron.’

— ‘Spare me your malice; tell me where Monsieur Gaspard de la Nuit may be.’ — ‘In Hell, if he’s not elsewhere.’

— ‘Ah! I think I understand, at last! Then, Gaspard de la Nuit must be ...

— ‘Why, yes... the Devil!’

— ‘Thanks, my friend!... If Gaspard de la Nuit is in Hell, let him roast there! I’ll publish his book.’

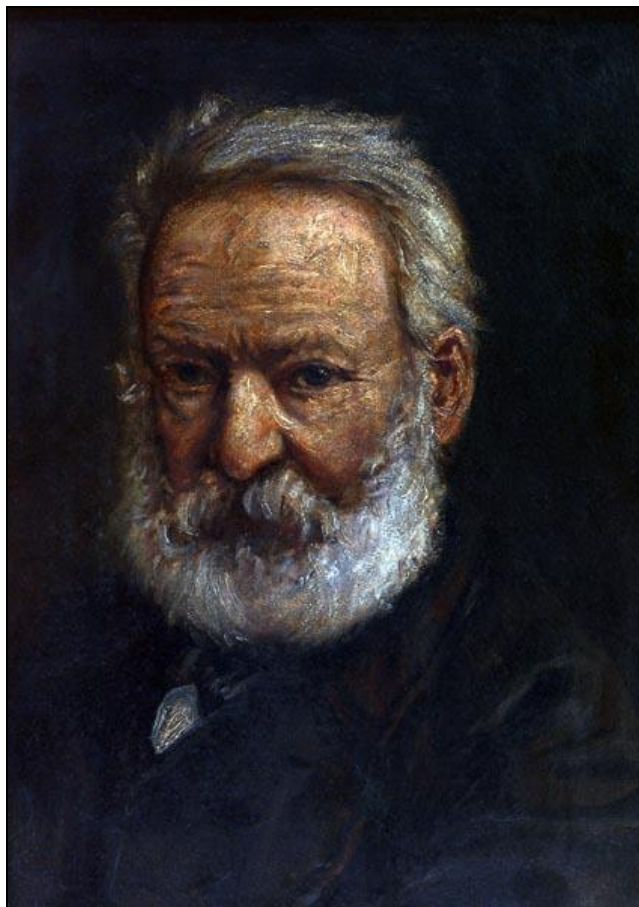
Gaspard’s Preface

Art always has two antithetical sides, as a medal for example, might show on one side the likeness of Paul Rembrandt and the other side that of Jacques Callot — Rembrandt as the white-bearded philosopher who curls up in his corner, absorbed in meditation and prayer, who closes his eyes to collect himself, who converses with the spirits of beauty, science, wisdom and love, and who is wholly concerned with penetrating the mysterious symbols of nature — Callot, on the other hand, as the swaggering and ribald foot-soldier who struts in the square, makes a noise in the tavern, caresses the gypsy girls, swears only by his rapier and his carbine, and is concerned with nothing but the waxing of his moustache — Well, the

author of this book has considered art according to this dual personification; but was none too exclusive, since here, in addition to fantasies in the style of Rembrandt and Callot, are studies as per Van Eyck, Lucas de Leyden, Albrecht Dürer, Pieter Neefs, Breughel the Elder, Breughel the Younger, Van Ostade, Gerrit Dou, Salvator Rosa, Murillo, Fuseli and several other masters of the various schools.

And if we ask why the author does not, at the start of his work, advocate some fine literary theory, he will be forced to answer that nor does Monsieur François Séraphin reveal the mechanism of his ‘Chinese shadows’, and that Punchinello hides from the curious crowd the thread that works his arm. — He is content to sign his work: *Gaspard de la Nuit*.

Dedication: To Victor Hugo



Portrait of Victor Hugo (anonymous) - Wikimedia Commons

‘Glory knows not my unknown dwelling.
All alone, I sing my song of mourning,
Possessing a charm for none but me.’

Charles Brugnot – Ode.

‘A straw for your wandering spirits!’ said Adam Woodcock;
‘I mind them no more than an earl cares for a string of wild-geese –
they have all fled since the pulpits were filled with honest men
and the people’s ears with sound doctrine.’

Walter Scott – The Abbot, chapter XVI

Your graceful volume of verse, will be the cherished possession in a hundred years’ time, as it is today, of powerful ladies, gentlemen, and minstrels; an anthology of chivalry, a Decameron of love, to lend charm to the noble idleness of mansion houses.

But this little book, that I dedicate to you, will suffer the fate of everything mortal, after having, for a morning perhaps, entertained both the court and the city which both amuse themselves with petty things.

Then, if some bibliophile takes it into his head to exhume this mouldy and worm-eaten work, he will find, amidst its first pages, your illustrious name, that will have failed to save mine from oblivion.

His curiosity will free my frail swarm of spirits, so long imprisoned by the silver-gilt locks of their parchment jail.

And it will be for him a discovery no less precious than that of some printer’s legend in Gothic lettering, emblazoned with a unicorn or two storks, is to us.

Paris, September 10, 1836.

Gaspard de la Nuit: Book One

Here begins the first
Book of the Fantasies
Of Gaspard
De la
Nuit

The Flemish School – I: Harlem

‘When Amsterdam’s gold rooster crows, that day,
The golden hen of Harlem will lay.’

The Centuries of Nostradamus

Harlem, that admirable ‘bambochade’ (*scene of ordinary life*) which sums up the Flemish school; Harlem painted by Jean Breughel, Pieter Neefs, David Teniers and Paul Rembrandt;

And the canal, where blue water trembles, and the church where gold glazing blazes, and the ‘stoël’ (*stone balcony*) where laundry dries in the sun, and the roofs, green with hops;

And the storks that beat their wings about the city clock, stretching their necks from the heights and catching the raindrops in their beaks;

And the carefree burgomaster who strokes his double chin with his hand, and the love-struck florist who wastes away, his gaze fixed on a tulip;

And the gypsy who swoons over her mandolin, and the old man who plays the ‘Rommelpot’ (*friction drum*), and the child inflating a bladder;

And the drinkers who smoke in the one-eyed tavern, and the maid-servant who hangs a dead pheasant from the window.

The Flemish School – II: The Mason

Master Mason: – ‘Look now at those
Bastions, buttresses, you’d suppose
Built to endure through all eternity.’

Schiller – William Tell, Act I, Scene III

The mason Abraham Knupfer sings, trowel in hand, in the scaffolded air, at such a height that, reading the gothic verses of the lowest bell, his feet are level both with the church and its thirty flying buttresses and the city with its thirty churches.

He sees the dragon-shaped stone gargoyles vomiting water from the slates onto the confused abyss of galleries, windows, pendants, bell-towers, turrets, roofs and wooden frames, over which the motionless indented tercelet's wing casts a grey shadow.

He sees the star-shaped fortifications, the citadel puffed up as if by the filling in a cake, the palace courtyards where the sun dries the fountains, and the monastery cloisters where shadows wheel about the pillars.

The imperial troops are lodged in the suburbs. Behold, a horseman drumming there. Abraham Knupfer can see his three-cornered hat, his aiguillettes of red wool, his cockade traversed by a braid, and his queue tied with a ribbon.

Further off, he sees soldiers who, in the park plumed with gigantic branches, on its wide emerald lawns, riddle with arquebus-shots a wooden bird stuck on the tip of a Maypole.

And, at evening, as the harmonious nave of the cathedral fell asleep, arms extended in the shape of a cross, he saw from his ladder a village on the horizon set alight by the soldiers, which blazed like a comet in the azure.

The Flemish School – III: The Schoolboy from Leiden

We cannot take too many precautions
at the current time, especially,
since the counterfeiterers have
established themselves in this country.

The Siege of Bergen op Zoom

He sits in an armchair upholstered with Utrecht velvet, Messire Blasius, his chin in his fine lace ruff, like a fowl some cook has roasted, set on an earthenware pot.

He sits down at his bank-counter to tell over the half-florins; I, a poor schoolboy from Leiden, with a cap and openwork breeches, standing on one foot like a heron on a paling.

Here are the portable scales which emerge from their lacquer box, with its bizarre Chinese figures, like a spider that, folding its long arms, takes refuge in a tulip tinted with a thousand colours.

Might one not say, on seeing the long face the master pulls, the trembling of his fleshless fingers unpicking the gold coins, that one looked upon a thief caught in the act and forced, with a pistol at his throat, to render to God what he'd won with the Devil's assistance?

My florin that you examine, with distrust, through your magnifying glass shows less equivocation and suspicion than your little grey eye, smoking like a poorly-quenched lantern.

The portable scales have returned to their lacquer box with its glowing Chinese figures, Messire Blasius has half risen from his armchair upholstered with Utrecht velvet, and I, bowing to the ground, exit backwards, the poor schoolboy from Leiden with openwork stockings and breeches.

The Flemish School – IV: The Pointed Beard

'If our heads aren't held high,
Our beards curly, say I,
Moustache proud and spry,
Ladies scorn us, and sigh.'

Charles d'Assoucy - Poems

Now, it was a holy day in the synagogue, which was dimly starred with silver lamps, and the rabbis, in robes and spectacles, were kissing their Talmuds, mumbling, muttering, spitting or blowing their noses, some seated, others not.

And suddenly, among the crowd of many rounded, oval, and square beards, which foamed, curled, and exhaled amber and benzoin, a pointed beard attracted notice.

A scholar named Elebotham, crowned with a flannel turban that sparkled with precious stones, stood up and cried: 'Profanation! There's a pointed beard here!'

— A Lutheran beard! — A short cloak! — Slay the Philistine.' — And the tumultuous onlookers, stamped with anger in their pews, while the priest bellowed: — 'Samson, lend me your donkey's jaw!'

But the knight, Melchior, had produced an authentic parchment with the Imperial coat-of-arms: —'Order,' it read, 'for the arrest of the butcher Isaac van Heck, to be hanged as a murderer; a swine of Israel, between two swine of Flanders.'

Thirty halberdiers detached themselves, with a ponderous clicking of the feet, from the corridor's shadows. 'To Hell with your halberds!' sneered Isaac the butcher. — And hurled himself from a window into the Rhine.

The Flemish School – V: The Tulip-Seller

The tulip is, among the flowers,
what the peacock is, among birds.
One lacks scent, the other voice;
the one takes pride in her dress,
the other takes pride in his tail.

The Garden of Rare and Curious Flowers

Not a sound, except the rustling of sheets of vellum under the fingers of Doctor Huylden, who only took his eyes from his Bible, strewn with Gothic illuminations, to admire the gold and purple of a pair of fish imprisoned between the damp sides of a jar.

The hinged sides of the doors rolled open: it was a florist who, his arms loaded with several pots of tulips, apologized for interrupting the reading of so learned a person.

— 'Master,' he said, 'here is the treasure of treasures, the wonder of wonders, the sort of flower-bulb of which only one blooms each century in the seraglio of the Emperor of Constantinople!'

— 'A tulip!' the angry old man cried, 'A tulip! That symbol of the pride and the lust which engendered, in the miserable city of Wittenberg, the detestable heresies of Luther and Melanchthon!'

Master Huylden stapled the clasp of his Bible, returned his spectacles to their case, and drew back the curtain over his window, to reveal, in the sunlight, a passion-flower with its crown of thorns, its sponge, its whip, its nails, and the five wounds of Our Lord.

The tulip-seller bowed respectfully, and in silence, disconcerted by an inquisitive look from the Duke of Alba, whose portrait, a masterpiece à la Holbein, hung on the wall.

The Flemish School – VI: The Fingers of One Hand

An honest family in which
there was never a bankruptcy,
and no one at all was ever hanged.

The lineage of Jean de Nivelles

The thumb is this fat Flemish innkeeper, of a mocking and ribald humour, who smokes on his doorsill, beneath a sign promoting double-strength ‘Spring’ beer.

The index-finger’s his wife, a virago as dry as a hake, who from morning to night beats her servant of whom she’s jealous, and caresses the bottle with which she’s in love.

The middle-finger’s their son, a fellow hewn with an axe, who’d be a soldier if he wasn’t a brewer, and a horse if he wasn’t a man.

The ring-finger’s their daughter, the nimble, annoying Zerbine, who offers lace to the ladies but won’t offer smiles to their cavaliers.

And the little-finger’s the Benjamin of the family, a crying brat, always clutching at his mother’s belt like a little child hanging from the fangs of an ogress.

The hand’s five fingers form the most fantastic five-leaved wallflower that ever embroidered the flowerbeds of the noble city of Harlem.

The Flemish School – VII: The Viola da Gamba

He recognized, without doubt, the pale face
of his intimate friend Jean-Gaspard Dehureau,
grand buffoon of the Théâtre des Funambules,
who regarded him with an indefinable look
of malice and bonhomie.

Théophile Gautier – Onuphrius

‘All in the bright moonlight,
My good friend Pierrot
Lend me your pen to write
Just a word or so.
My candle’s dead, I say,
My fire is no more;
For the love of God, I pray,
Open wide the door.’

The popular song – ‘Au claire de la lune’

The choirmaster had barely addressed the sounding viol with his bow when it responded, as if it had indigestion in its belly from some Italian comedy, with a farcical gurgle of florid and risible sounds.

At first it seemed the duenna, Barbara, was scolding that imbecile of a Pierrot, for having, maladroitly, dropped Monsieur Cassandre’s wig-box, and spilt the powder all over the floor.

Then it was Monsieur Cassandre, picking up his wig, most pitifully, as Harlequin kicked the idiot in the behind, Columbine wiped away a tear of mad laughter, and Pierrot’s floury grimace widened from ear to ear.

But not long after, in the moonlight, Harlequin, whose candle had died, was begging his friend Pierrot to open the door and grant him some light, which he did, that traitor, and kidnapped the girl along with the old man’s casket.

— ‘To the Devil with Job Hans, the instrument-maker who sold me that E-string!’ cried the choirmaster, returning the dusty viol back to its dusty case. — The string had broken.

The Flemish School – VIII: The Alchemist

Our art is learned in two ways, that is to say through a master’s teaching, mouth to mouth, not otherwise; or by divine inspiration and revelation; or equally from books, many of which are obscure and confusing; such that to find agreement and truth in them it is necessary to be subtle, patient, studious, and vigilant.

Nothing yet! — For three days and nights, have I leafed, in vain, through the hermetic books of Raymond Lulle, by the lamp's dim light.

No, not a thing, except the hissing of the glittering retort, and the mocking laughter of a salamander that makes a game of troubling my meditations.

Sometimes it sets my beard aflame, sometimes it shoots a fiery bolt from a crossbow into my robe

Or if it polishes its armor, ashes from the furnace blow over the pages of my formula, and into the ink on my writing desk.

And the ever-more-glittering retort hisses the same tune as the Devil does when Saint Eloi pinches his nose in his forge.

But nothing yet! — For three more days and nights I'll leaf through the hermetic books of Raymond Lulle by the lamp's dim light!

The Flemish School – IX: Leaving for the Sabbath

She rose at night, and, lighting the candle,
took a box and anointed herself,
then with a few words she was transported to the Sabbath.

Jean Bodin - Démonomanie des Sorciers

A dozen of them were eating soup and drinking beer, each with the bone of a dead man's forearm to use as a spoon. The fireplace shone red with embers, the candles were fading to smoke, and the plates gave off the smell of a ditch in spring.

And when Maribas laughed or wept, you heard the groan of a bow on the three strings of a dilapidated violin.

Meanwhile the paid-help spread open, diabolically, on the table, by the light of the tallow, a book of spells on which a roasted fly frolicked.

This fly was still buzzing when, dragging its enormous, hairy belly, a spider climbed the edge of the magical folio.

But the wizards and witches had already flown up the chimney, some astride brooms, some on pokers or tongs, and Maribas on the frying-pan's tail.

Gaspard de la Nuit: Book Two

Here begins the second
Book of the Fantasies
Of Gaspard
De la
Nuit

Old Paris – I: The Two Jews

‘Sixty or more,
Jealous old bore,
Husband, be sure
To bolt the door.’

Old Song

Two Jews, who had halted beneath my window, were counting, mysteriously, the slow hours of the night on their fingertips.

— ‘You have money, Rabbi?’ the younger asked of the older. ‘It’s not a bell, this purse,’ replied the other.

But then a crowd of folk rushed noisily from the neighboring dens; their cries bursting over my stained-glass windows like a silvery flood from a pipe.

They were thievish beggars who ran joyously towards the Market Square, from which the wind blew burning straw and a scorched odour.

— ‘Oh! Oh! Lanturelu!’ — ‘My reverence to Madam Moon!’ — ‘This way goes the Devil’s cowl! Two Jews outside during curfew!’ — ‘Beat them! Beat them! Daylight for Jews, night-time for beggars!’

And the cracked bells chimed, on high, from the Gothic towers of Saint-Eustache: ‘Ding-dong, ding-dong, sleep on, ding-dong!’

For Monsieur Louis Boulanger, painter

Old Paris – II: The Beggars

‘I endure
Cold and more;
Tough, for sure.’

The song of a poor devil

— ‘Ah! Sort yourselves, so we can get warm!’ — ‘All you need do is straddle the fire! This clown has legs like pincers.’

— ‘One o’clock!’ — ‘The wind’s howling! Know you, my screech-owls, what makes the moon so bright? It’s cuckolds’ horns they’re burning.’

— ‘Red embers flare in the coals!’ — ‘How the flame on them dances blue! Oh! Who’s the rascal whose beating his rascal?’

— ‘My nose is frozen!’ — ‘My ears are roasted!’ — ‘Can you see aught in the fire, Choupille?’ — ‘Yes, a halberd!’ — ‘And you, Jeanpoil?’ — ‘An eye’.

— ‘Make way, make way for Monsieur de la Chousserie!’ — ‘Are you there, Mister Prosecutor, warmly furred and gloved for the winter!’ — ‘Yes, it’s true! Tomcats don’t get frostbite!’

— ‘Ah, here are the Gentlemen of the Watch!’ — ‘Your boots are steaming.’ — ‘The cloak-snatchers? We killed two of them with our arquebuses; the others escaped across river.’

And so, at the fire that night, the beggars were joined by a gallivanting parliamentary prosecutor and the Gascon Gentlemen of the Watch who recounted, unsmilingly, the exploits of their worn-out arquebuses.

Old Paris – III: The Lantern

The Mask. — ‘It’s dark;
lend me your lantern.’

Mercurio. — ‘Bah! cats have
two eyes to light them.’

Carnival night

Ah! Why did I, little guttersnipe that I am, think there was room this evening to hide from the storm in Madame de Gourgouran's lantern!

I laughed to hear some sprite, soaked in the downpour, buzzing around the bright mansion, unable to find the door through which I'd entered.

In vain, complaining hoarsely, he begged me to allow him at least to relight his 'cellar-rat' candlestick from my candle to find his way.

Suddenly the lantern's yellow paper ignited, shattered by a gust of wind, that caused the street-signs hanging like banners to creak and groan. — 'Jesus! Have mercy!' cried the Beguine, crossing herself with the fingers of one hand. 'Devil take you, witch,' I cried, spitting more sparks than a serpentine firework.

Alas! I, who, again, this morning, rivalled in grace and adornment the goldfinch with earflaps of scarlet cloth, the pet of the young Lord of Luynes!

Old Paris – IV: The Tour de Nesle



Paris with Tour St. Jacques and Notre Dame at evening
Anton Melbye (1818–1875) - SMK.Open

There was a guardhouse in the Tour de Nesle
in which the watch lodged at night.

Brantome (Pierre de Bourdeille)

‘Jack of Clubs! — Queen of Spades, to win!’ And the soldier, who lost, sent his stake flying to the floor as he punched the table.

But then Messire Hugues, the provost, spat into an iron brazier with the grimace of a beggar who has swallowed a spider while eating his soup.

— ‘Ugh! Are the pork-butchers scalding their pigs at midnight? God’s belly! There’s a boatload of straw burning on the Seine!’

The fire, which at first was just an innocent will-o’-the-wisp lost in the mists of the river, soon made the devil of a noise like a volley of cannon-fire and that of violent arquebusades across the water.

An innumerable crowd of thievish rascals, beggars on crutches, heretics all, rushed to the shore, dancing a jig in front of the spirals of smoke and flame.

Which reddened the face of the Tour de Nesle, from which the watch emerged shouldering carbines; and the Tour du Louvre, from whose windows, the king and queen saw all, without being seen.

Old Paris – V: The Model of Refinement

A show-off

A refined fellow

The poetry of Scarron

‘Each bar of my moustache, shaped to a point, is like the tail of a monstrous lizard, my linen white as the restaurant’s tablecloths, my waistcoat no older than the crown wallpaper.

Would you ever imagine, given my dapper appearance, that lodged in my stomach, hunger — the executioner’s wife! — pulls on the rope there and strangles me like a man being hung!

Oh, if only a roast fowl had fallen into the crown of my hat, from that window, where the gaslight crackles, to replace these withered flowers!

The Place Royale, this evening, is as bright with its lights as a chapel! — ‘Clear the rubbish away! — Fresh lemonade! — Naples Macaroons!’ — Now, my friend, let me taste your trout in herb sauce with my finger! How droll! Your April Fool’s jest lacks spice.

Is that not Marion Delorme on the Duke of Longueville’s arm? Three little long-haired dogs follow her, yapping. Her eyes are fine diamonds, that young courtesan! — His nose bears fine rubies, that old courtier!’

And the model of refinement stood fist on hip, elbowing the men passing by, smiling at the ladies. He’d had nothing to eat; he’d purchased a bunch of violets instead.

Old Paris – VI: The Evening Office

When, at Christmas or Easter, the church at evening,
Is filled with confused footsteps, and candles flaring.

Victor Hugo – The Songs of Twilight.

Dixit Dominus Domino meo: sede a dextris meis.

The Lord said to my Lord, sit thou at my right hand.

The Office of Vespers

Thirty monks, poring, leaf by leaf, through Psalters as soiled as their beards, praised God and sang the Devil to scorn.

— ‘Madame, your shoulders are banks of lilies and roses’. As the rider leant down, he blinded his servant in the eye with the tip of his sword.

— ‘Joker,’ she simpered, ‘do you seek to distract me?’ — ‘Is that the *Imitation of Christ* that you read Madame?’ — ‘No, it’s the *Game of Love and Gallantry*.’

But the service was done. She closed her book and rose from the chair. ‘Let’s go,’ she said, ‘enough prayers for one day!’

And I, a pilgrim, kneeling to one side below the organ, seemed to hear the angels descending melodiously from heaven.

I received, from afar, a drift of perfume shed by the censer, and God allowed me to glean the poor man's ear of corn, after such rich harvest.

Old Paris – VII: The Serenade

At night, all cats are grey

Popular proverb

A lute, a bass guitar and an oboe. A discordant, ridiculous symphony. Madame Laure on her balcony, behind a blind. No lanterns in the street, no lights in the windows. A horned moon.

— 'Is it you, d'Espignac?' — 'No, alas!' — 'So, it's you, little Fleur d'Amande?' — 'Neither one nor the other' — 'What! You again, Monsieur de la Tournelle? Bonsoir! Go make trouble elsewhere.'

The Musicians in capes: 'Monsieur the Counsellor's set for a cold. Has he no fear of the husband?' — 'Oh, the husband's in the West Indies!'

And what were those two whispering together? 'A hundred louis a month' — 'I'm charmed!' — 'A carriage and pair' — 'Superb!' — 'A manse in the princes' quarter!' — 'Magnificence, indeed!' — 'And my heart full of love! — 'Oh, that pretty slipper fits my foot!'

The Musicians still in their capes: 'I can hear Madame Laura laughing' — 'That cruel flirt grows almost human' — 'Yes! Orpheus's art seduced tigresses in days of old!'

Madame Laura: 'Come closer, my darling boy, so I can slip you my key, tied in a ribbon!' But the counsellor's wig was wetted with dew not distilled by the stars. 'Now, Gueudespain!' cried the naughty cocotte, shutting the balcony doors: 'Run quickly, find me a whip to dry Monsieur!'

Old Paris – VIII: Messire Jean

A grave personage whose gold chain
and white wand intimated his authority.

Walter Scott – The Abbot, chapter IV

— ‘Messire Jean,’ said the queen, ‘go and see why those two greyhounds are fighting each other in the palace yard!’ And off he went.

When he arrived, the seneschal was scolding the greyhounds who fought over a ham-bone.

But, pulling at his black breeches, and biting his red stockings, they toppled him as easily as a gouty man on crutches.

— ‘Help! Help! Aid me!’ And the guards at the gate, came running bearing their polearms, the muzzles of the two hollow-flanked creatures having already searched the good fellow’s tasty codpiece.

Meanwhile the queen was fainting with laughter at a window, in her tall Mechlin-lace wimple as stiff and pleated as a fan.

— ‘And why were they fighting, sir?’ — ‘They were fighting, Madame, because the one maintained, contrary to the other, that you are the most beautiful, wisest, and greatest princess in the universe.’

For Monsieur Sainte-Beuve

Old Paris – IX: Midnight Mass

‘Christus natus est nobis;
venite, adoremus.’

‘Christ is born to us;
Come, let us adore him.’

The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ

‘We’ve neither fire nor station.
Grant us the Lord’s portion.’

Old song

The good lady and noble lord of Chateaufieux were breaking the evening bread, and the chaplain blessing the food, when the clattering of clogs was heard at the door. Here came the little children, carol-singing.

— ‘Good lady of Chateaufieux, hurry now, people are off to church; hurry now, lest the candle, which burns on your prie-dieu in the chapel of the Angels, dies, and scatters its drops of wax on the Book of Hours’ vellum, and the shelf’s velvet! — There’s the first peal of bells for midnight mass!’

— ‘Noble Lord of Chateaufieux, hurry now, lest the Lord of Grugel, who is passing-by with his paper lantern, seizes, in your absence, the place of honour on the bench of the confreres of Saint-Antoine! — There’s the second peal of bells for midnight mass!’

— ‘Monsieur the Chaplain, hurry now! the organ’s roaring, the canons are chanting, hurry, the faithful are gathered and you still at table! — There’s the third peal of bells for midnight mass!’

The little children blew on their fingers, but they’d not long to wait, and on the Gothic threshold, white with snow, the chaplain gave them each, in the name of the masters of the house, a griddle-cake and a silver coin.

Now the bells no longer rang. The good lady plunged her arms up to her elbows in a muff, the noble sire smothered his ears beneath his cap of state, and the humble priest, in his hooded shoulder-cape, walked behind them, his missal under his arm.

Old Paris – X: The Bibliophile

An Elzevir edition roused in him
sweet emotions; but what plunged
him into ecstatic rapture was one
that was printed by Henri Etienne.

Biography of Martin Spickler

It wasn’t some painting of the Flemish school, a David Teniers, or a Breughel the Younger, so darkened by smoke not a devil could be seen.

It was a manuscript nibbled by rats at the edges, with involved writing, and blue and red ink.

— ‘I suspect this author,’ the bibliophile said, ‘lived near the end of Louis XII’s reign, that king of rich paternal instincts.’

‘Yes,’ he murmured with a serious and meditative air, ‘yes, he’ll have been a clerk, in the household of the lords of Chateauvieux.’

Here, he leafed through a massive folio entitled *The Nobility of France*, in which he found only the lords of Chateauneuf mentioned.

— ‘No matter,’ said he, a little confused, ‘Chateauneuf, Chateauvieux, new or old, it’s the same chateau. Just as it’s time to rename the Pont-Neuf, Pont-Vieux.’

Gaspard de la Nuit: Book Three

Here begins the third
Book of the Fantasies
Of Gaspard
De la
Nuit

Night and its Enchantments – I: The Gothic Chamber

Nox et solitudo plenae sunt diabolo.

At night my room is full of devils.

The Church Fathers

‘Oh, the earth,’ I murmured to the night, ‘is an embalmed calyx whose pistil and stamens are the moon and stars!’

And, with eyes heavy with sleep, I closed the window inlaid with a Calvary cross, black against the yellow halo of the stained-glass pane.

Still, — if only it were not midnight, — the hour emblazoned with dragons and devils! — the gnome who gets drunk on the oil from my lamp!

If it were only the nurse rocking a stillborn infant, in my father’s cuirass, to her monotonous song!

If it were only the mercenary’s skeleton prisoned in the woodwork, his forehead touching his elbow and knee!

If it were only my ancestor descending on his own two feet from his worm-eaten picture-frame to dip his gauntlet into the fount's holy water.

But it's Scarbo, the goblin, who bites my neck and cauterizes the blood-stained wound, by plunging his iron finger, red from the furnace, within!

Night and its Enchantments – II: Scarbo

'God, grant me at the hour of my death,
A praying priest, the cloth for a shroud,
A pinewood coffin, and a dry grave.'

The Paternosters of Monsieur le Maréchal

'Whether you die absolved or damned,' Scarbo muttered that night, in my ear, 'your shroud will be a spider's web, and I'll bury the spider with you!'

— 'Oh, grant me at least, for a shroud,' I replied, my eyes red from weeping so, 'an aspen leaf in which the lake's murmurs will cradle me.'

— 'No,' — sneered the mocking gnome — 'you'll be food at eve for the snail that hunts dead midges made blind by the setting sun!'

'So, you'd rather,' I replied, eyes still filling with tears, 'you'd rather see me sucked up by that tarantula with an elephant's trunk?'

'Well,' he added, 'console yourself; your shroud will be gold-spotted strips of snake-skin, with which I'll swaddle you like a mummy. And from the dark crypt of St-Bénigne, where I'll stand you upright against the wall, you'll be able to listen, at leisure, to the children weeping in limbo.'

Night and its Enchantments – III: The Madman

'A golden coin of King Charlemagne, dear sir,
Or a Golden Lamb of King John, if you prefer.'

Manuscripts in the Royal Library

The moon disentangled her hair with an ebony comb, silvering the hills, meadows, and woods with a shower of glow-worms.

On the roof, Scarbo, the gnome, whose treasures abound,
winnowed, to the cry of the weather vane, ducats and florins leaping in
rhythm, the counterfeit coins littering the street.

How that madman sneered, roaming the empty city each night, one
eye on the moon and the other — punctured!

— ‘Perish the moon!’ he grumbled, gathering the devil’s tokens,
‘I’ll buy a pillory and warm myself in the sun!’

But the moon, the setting moon, still shone — and Scarbo in my cellar,
silently minted florins and ducats to the strokes of a pendulum.

While, with its outstretched horns, a snail, wandering the night,
sought its path on my luminous stained-glass window.

Night and its Enchantments – IV: The Dwarf

‘You, on horseback!’ ‘And why not then?
I’ve oft-times ridden a greyhound’s back;
Twas the bitch of the Laird of Linlithgow.’

Scottish Ballad

I captured from my seat, in the shadow of the curtains, this furtive moth
hatched from a ray of moonlight or a drop of dew.

A quivering insect which, to free its captive wings from between
my fingers, paid me a ransom in fragrances!

The errant creature, suddenly, flew away, to leave in my lap — oh,
horror! — a deformed and monstrous larva with a human head!

— ‘Where is your soul, for me to ride!’ — ‘My soul, lame and sore
from the day’s weariness, now rests on the golden litter of dreams.’

It escaped in fear, my soul, through the livid spider’s-web of
twilight, over the black horizon, jagged with black Gothic bell-towers.

But the dwarf, hanging upon its neighing flight, rolled like a
spindle among the wisps of its white mane.

Night and its Enchantments – V: Moonlight

‘Awake, all those that sleep aright.

Pray for those that died this night.'

The Night Watchman's cry

Oh, how sweet it is, as the hour chimes in the bell-tower at night, to gaze at the moon whose nose seems like a golden coin of Charlemagne's!

Two beggars were whining under my window, a dog howled at the crossroads, and the cricket on the hearth was chirping quietly.

But soon my effort to hear was answered only by deep silence. The lepers had returned to their kennels, to the sound of Jacquemart beating his wife.

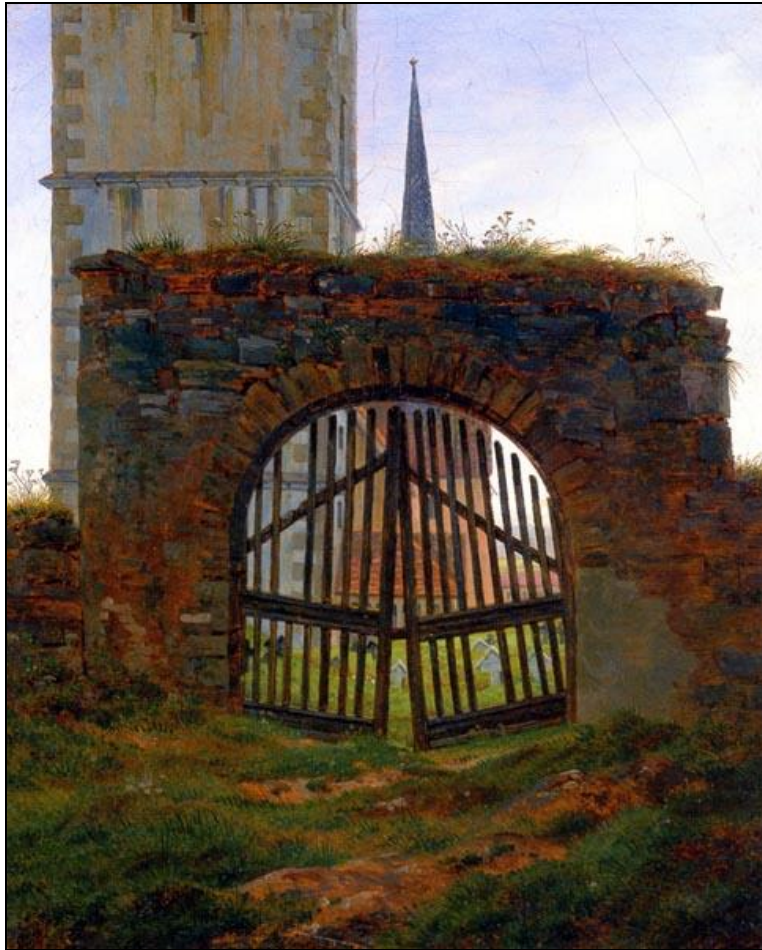
The dog had gone down an alley, in front of the guards' polearms rusted by rain and chilled by the wind.

And the cricket had fallen asleep, as soon as the last spark had emitted its last glow in the ashes of the hearth.

And it seemed to me — so bemusing is a fever — that the moon, its face a grimace, thrust out its tongue at me like one who's been hanged!

For Monsieur Louis Boulanger, painter

Night and its Enchantments – VI: The Dance Under the Belltower



The cemetery gate (the churchyard)
Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) - Wikimedia Commons

It was a heavy building, almost square,
surrounded by ruins, whose principal tower
which still possessed its clock,
dominated all the neighborhood.

Fenimore Cooper

Twelve magicians danced a round-dance under the tall belltower of Saint-Jean. They evoked the storm one after the other, and from the depths of my bed I counted, with horror, twelve voices which traversed the darkness in turn.

At once, the moon hastened to hide behind the clouds, and a rainstorm mingled with lightning and whirlwinds lashed at my window, while the weathervanes cried like a flock of cranes standing sentinel over those who burst through the woodland downpour.

The upper-string of my lute, hanging from the partition, snapped; my goldfinch beat its wings against its cage; and some questing spirit turned over a leaf of the *Roman de la Rose* which lay sleeping on my desk.

But suddenly lightning roared on the summit of Saint-Jean. The enchanters swooned, struck dead, and I saw from afar their books of magic spells burning like torches in the black bell tower.

That fearful glow painted the walls of the Gothic church with the red flames of hell and purgatory, and cast the gigantic statuesque shadow of Saint John onto the neighboring houses.

The weather vanes rusted; the moon melted the pearl-grey clouds; the rain fell only drop by drop from the edges of the roof, and the breeze, opening my half-closed window, threw on my pillow flowers of my jasmine shaken loose by the storm.

Night and its Enchantments – VII: A Dream

I've dreamed again and again,
But understood not a word.

Pantagrue, Book III

It was the depths of night. Firstly, I saw — and what I saw, I relate — an abbey, its walls pierced by moonlight — a forest intersected by winding paths — and the Morimont, Dijon's place of execution, teeming with capes and hats.

Then I heard — and what I heard, I relate — the funereal toll of a bell to which a funereal sobbing from the prison replied — plaintive cries and ferocious laughter that shook every leaf on the trees — and the murmured prayers of the black-clad penitents who accompany the criminal to execution.

Lastly, I dreamed — and the end of my dream, I relate — of a dying monk lying among the ashes of the dying — a young girl struggling,

hanged from the branch of an oak-tree — and myself, disheveled, bound by the executioner to the spokes of the wheel.

Dom Augustin, the dead prior, dressed in Franciscan garb, will receive the ardent honours of the chapel; Marguerite, slain by her lover, will be buried in the white dress of innocence, four wax candles about her.

But as for myself, the executioner's iron-bar broke like glass, at the first blow; the black-clad penitents' torches were quenched by a torrent of rain, and the crowd flowed away with its swift overflowing streams — while I chased other dreams towards my waking.

Night and its Enchantments – VIII: My Great-Grandfather

All in that room was still in the same state,
except that the tapestries were in shreds,
and spiders wove their webs in the dust.

Walter Scott

The venerable characters on the Gothic tapestry, stirred by the wind, saluted each other, and my great-grandfather entered the room — my great-grandfather who died nigh-on eighty years ago!

There — before the prie-dieu — he knelt, my great-grandfather the counsellor, his beard kissing that yellowed missal spread open at the place marked by a ribbon.

All night, he muttered prayers, without uncrossing his arms from his purple silk mantle for a moment, or casting a single glance towards me, his posterity, who lay on his bed, his dusty four-poster bed!

And I noticed with horror that his eyes were empty, though he seemed to be reading — that his lips were motionless, though I heard him praying — that his fingers were fleshless, though they glittered with precious gems!

And I wondered if I was awake or sleeping — if the pallid light was that of the moon or Lucifer — if it was midnight or dawn!

Night and its Enchantments – IX: Ondine

‘.....I thought I heard,
Enchanting sleep, some vague harmony,

As like murmurings rose, all about me,
Songs, weaving many a sad tender word.'

Charles Brugnot – Les deux Génies

— 'Listen! — 'Listen! — It is I, Ondine, who brushes with drops of water your window's sonorous panes lit by the dim rays of the moon; and there, in her silk moiré dress, is the lady of the manor, who contemplates from her balcony, the beauty of the starry night, and of the slumbering lake.

Every wave's an Ondine swimming the current, each current a path that winds towards my palace, and my palace is built of water, on the floor of the lake, in a triangle of fire, earth and air.

Listen! — Listen! — My father beats the frog-loud surface with a branch of green alder, and my sisters caress with arms of foam fresh islands of reeds, irises, water lilies, or laugh at the bearded weeping-willow fishing the stream.'

Murmuring her song, she begged me to set her ring on my finger, to wed an Ondine and visit her palace, there to be king of the lake.

But when I replied that I loved a mortal, sulking and disappointed, she wept a few tears, gave a burst of laughter, and vanished in showers of water, streaming white down my stained-glass windows tinted with blue.

Night and its Enchantments – X: The Salamander

He threw some sacred holly-leaves
Into the fire, that crackled and burned.

Charles Nodier – Trilby

— 'Grillon, my friend, are you dead; deaf to the sound of my whistling, blind to the light of the fire?'

But the cricket, however affectionate the salamander's words, failed to respond, either sleeping a magical sleep or else choosing to sulk.

'Oh, sing me your evening song in your angle of ashes and soot, behind the iron plate, emblazoned with three heraldic fleurs-des-lys!'

But the cricket still failed to reply, and the salamander, weeping, sometimes listened as if to something other than his voice, sometimes hummed with a varied flame, in pink, blue, red, yellow, violet, and white.

‘He’s dead, he’s dead, the cricket, my friend!’ And I listened to sighs and sobs, as the flame, now livid, grew less in the saddened hearth.

‘He’s dead! And since he’s dead, I wish to die!’ All the branches of vine were consumed, and the flame dragged itself across the embers, bidding farewell to the hearth, as the salamander died of inanition.

Night and its Enchantments – XI: The Sabbath Hour

‘Who passes through the vale so late?’

Henri de Latouche – The King of the Alders

It’s here! And already, in the depths of the thickets barely lit by the phosphoric eye of the wild cat lurking below the branches;

On the flanks of the rocks soaking their brushwood hair in precipitous night, streaming with dew and glow-worms;

On the banks of the torrent spraying white foam on the fronts of the pines, drizzling grey vapour on the fronts of the chateaux;

There gathers an innumerable crowd, which the old woodcutter, lingering on his way, a load of wood on his back, hears but cannot see.

And from oak to oak, from mound to mound, a thousand confused, lugubrious, frightening cries echo: ‘Hum! Hum!’ — ‘Schup! Schup!’ — ‘Cuckoo! Cuckoo!’

Here’s the gallows-tree! — And there in the mist a Jew appears, searching for something in the damp grass, by the golden glow of a hand of glory.

Gaspard de la Nuit: Book Four

Here begins the fourth
Book of the Fantasies
Of Gaspard
De la
Nuit

The Chronicles – I: Master Ogier (1407)

The said king, Charles VI by name,
Was most debonair, and much loved,
The people hating with great hatred
The Dukes of Orléans and Burgundy,
Who imposed excessive taxes
Throughout the whole kingdom.

*The Annals and Chronicles of France
From the Trojan War to Louis XI
By Master Nicolle Gilles*

— ‘Sire,’ Master Ogier asked the king, who was looking through the small window of his oratory at old Paris brightened by a ray of sunshine, ‘do you hear those greedy sparrows frolicking in the courtyard of your Louvre in that branched and leafy vine?’

— ‘Yes, indeed!’ answered the king, ‘it’s a most diverting sound.’

— ‘The vine is in your garden; yet you’ll not gain from the harvest,’ replied Master Ogier, with a benign smile. ‘Sparrows are bold thieves, and so pleased by their pecking they’ll peck away forever. They’ll harvest your vineyard for you.’

— ‘Oh, no, my friend! I’ll chase them off!’ cried the king!

He set the ivory whistle to his lips, the whistle that hung from a ring of his gold chain, and drew from it sounds so shrill and piercing that the passerines flew to the eaves of the palace.

— ‘Sire,’ said Master Ogier, ‘allow me to deduce a moral from this. The sparrows are your nobles, the vine is the people. The former feast at the expense of the latter. Sire, who cheats the servant, cheats the master. Enough of their depredations! Blow your whistle, and harvest your grapes yourself.’

Maître Ogier rolled the crown of his cap between his fingers with an embarrassed air. Charles VI shook his head sadly, extending his hand to the burgher of Paris: — ‘You’re a wise man!’ he sighed.

The Chronicles – II: The Postern Door to the Louvre

This elvish Dwarf.....
He was waspish, arch, and litherlie,
But well Lord Cranstoun served he.

Walter Scott – The Lay of the Last Minstrel

The little light had crossed the frozen Seine, beneath the Nesle tower, and now was only a hundred yards away, dancing amidst the fog, oh infernal prodigy, with a tinkling sound like mocking laughter.

— ‘Who goes there?’ cried the Swiss guard at the window of the Louvre’s postern.

The little light hastened to approach, in no hurry to respond. But soon the figure of a dwarf appeared, dressed in a tunic with spangles of gold, wearing a cap with a silver bell, a feeble red light shining through the glazed diamond panes of the lantern he swung in his hand.

‘Who goes there?’ the Swiss guard repeated in a trembling voice, raising his arquebus.

The dwarf quenched the light of his lantern, and the guard made out his gaunt and wrinkled features, the eyes shining with mischief, the beard white with frost.

‘Oho! Oho! My friend, take care not to fire your weapon. Come, come! God’s blood! You breathe ever death and carnage!’ cried the dwarf in a voice no less concerned than that of the guard.

— ‘Friend, yourself! Ouf! Who are you then?’ asked the Swiss, somewhat reassured. And he placed the fuse of his arquebus back in his iron helm.

— ‘My father is King Nacbuc and my mother Queen Nacbuca. Ioup! Ioup! Iou!’ replied the dwarf, sticking out his tongue and pirouetting twice on one foot.

At this, the soldier’s teeth chattered. Happily, he recalled he’d a rosary hanging from his ox-hide belt.

— ‘If your father is King Nacbuc, *paternoster*, and your mother Queen Nacbuca, *qui es in coelis*, are you the devil then, *sanctificetur nomen tuum*?’ he stammered, half dead with fright.

— ‘Oh no!’ cried the lantern holder, ‘I’m the dwarf of Monseigneur the king, come this night from Compiègne, who hurries ahead

to open the postern door of the Louvre. The password is: Lady Anne of Brittany and Saint Aubin of Cormier.’

The Chronicles – III: The Flemings

The Flemings, a people mutinous and stubborn.

The Memoirs of Olivier de la Marche

The battle had lasted nine months, when the army of Bruges yielded, turning their backs on the fight. There ensued, on the one hand, such deep disarray, and, on the other, such fierce pursuit, that in crossing the bridge a good number of rebels collapsed, pell-mell, men, standards, and carts, into the river.

Next day the Count entered Bruges with a wondrous throng of knights. His heralds preceded him, sounding their trumpets loudly. The plunderers, dagger in hand, ran here and there, while before them fled the frightened swine.

The neighing cavalcade was headed towards the town hall. There the mayor and aldermen knelt, calling for mercy, hooded capes in the dust. But the count had sworn, two fingers on the Bible, to slay the red boar in its wallow.

— ‘My lord!’

— ‘Let the city be burned!’

— ‘My lord!’

— ‘Let the burghers hang!’

One city district alone was set on fire, the militia captains alone were hung from the gallows, and the red boar erased from the banners. Bruges had bought its safety for a hundred thousand gold crowns.

The Chronicles – IV: The Hunt (1412)

‘Let us go chase the deer a while,’ said he.

Unpublished Poems

And the hunt was away, away, the day being bright, by hill and dale, through wood and field; the varlets running, the horns blaring, the dogs

barking, the hawks flying, and the two cousins riding side by side, piercing deer and wild boars with their spears midst the undergrowth, and, with their crossbows, herons and storks in the air.

— ‘Cousin,’ said Hubert to Regnault, ‘it seems to me, though we sealed our peace this morning, you are not yet in good spirits?’

— ‘Yes, indeed!’ he replied.

Regnault possessed the red eyes of the mad or the damned; Hubert was anxious; as the hunt went forever away, away, the day being bright, by hill and dale, through wood and field.

But, all of a sudden, a troop of foot-soldiers, concealed in a faerie glade, rushed, lances lowered, upon the joyous hunt. Regnault unsheathed his sword, but only — cry horror! — to pierce, with several blows, the body of his cousin who fell from his horse.

— ‘Kill, kill!’ shouted that Ganelon.

Our Lady, have pity! — And the hunt coursed away by hill and dale, through wood and field, no more, though the day was bright.

With God may the soul of Hubert rest, the Sire de Maugiron, pitifully slain, on the third of July, in the year fourteen hundred and twelve; and the Devil take the soul of Regnault Sire de l’Aubépine, his murderer, and cousin! Amen.

The Chronicles – V: The Retreat-Seekers

Now, one day Hilarion was tempted by a female demon
Who presented him with a cup full of wine and flowers.

The Lives of the Desert Fathers

Three females, dressed in black, skirts hitched like gypsies, pretended, by way of a ruse, to be seeking spiritual retreat at the monastery-door at midnight.

— ‘Hello, there! Hello!’

One of the three, stood upright in the stirrups.

— ‘Hello! Give us shelter from the storm! Are you wary? Open the door! Are we, the charming trio these cruppers bear, with these little wine-sacks that hang from our shoulder-straps, other than girls of fifteen with wine to drink?’

— The monastery seemed asleep.

— ‘Hello, there! Hello!’ cried one of them, shivering with cold.

— ‘Hello! A lodging, in the name of our Saviour’s blessed Mother! We’re pilgrims astray. The glass of our reliquaries here, the rims of our hoods, the folds of our cloaks are streaming with rain, and our horses, stumbling from weariness, have lost their shoes on the road.’

A light shone from a crack in the midst of the door.

— ‘Be gone, you demons of night!’ cried the prior and his monks, there in procession, armed with their candles.

— ‘Be gone, daughters of lies! If you’re flesh and blood, and not ghosts, God forbids us from harboring pagans, or schismatics at least, among us!’

— ‘Be gone! Be gone!’ — cried the shadowy riders — ‘Be gone! Be gone!’ And the sound of their horses’ hooves was swept far off by a whirlwind of air, midst river and woods.

— ‘To deny fifteen-year-old sinners so, whom we might have induced to confess!’ grumbled a young fair-headed monk with the cheeks of a cherub.

— ‘Brother!’ the abbot murmured in his ear, ‘You forget that Madame Eleanor and her niece are waiting above to perform that very thing.’

The Chronicles – VI: The Big Battalions

Urbem ingredientur, in muro
Current, domos conscendent
Per fenestras intrabunt quasi fur.

They shall run to and fro in the city;
they shall run upon the wall,
they shall climb upon the houses;
they shall enter in at the windows like a thief.

The Prophet Joel – Chapter II, 9 (The Vulgate, and the King James Bible)

I

A band of mercenaries, camped in the woods, were warming themselves at a fire, around which the shadows of a ghostly grove thickened.

‘Hear my news!’ cried a crossbowman. ‘King Charles the Fifth sends Sir Bertrand du Guesclin with an offer to us to enlist; but you don’t catch the devil, like a blackbird, with lime.’

They all laughed aloud, and their wild gaiety redoubled when a bagpipe losing air wailed like a squirrel nipped by a dog.

‘What?’, an archer cried at last, ‘Aren’t you weary of idleness? Have you looted your fill of castles, and monasteries? As for me I’m neither drunk nor sated. Fie on Jacques d’Arquiel, our captain! — Our wolf’s no more than a greyhound — And long live Messire Bertrand du Guesclin, if he bribes me as I’d wish and drags me to war!’

At this the flames of the embers glowed red and blue, and the faces of the men glowed blue and red. A rooster crowed in some farmyard.

‘The rooster crowed, and Saint Peter denied Our Lord!’ murmured the crossbowman, as he crossed himself.

II

‘Noël! Noël! By my blade, it rains pieces of gold!

— You’ll have a bushelful each.’

— ‘No word of a lie?’

— ‘On my honour!’

— ‘And who’ll drown us in gold?’

— ‘The war’

— ‘Where?’

— ‘In Spain. The unbelievers there dig gold in shovel-loads, and shoe their nags with the same. Why not? We’ll ransom the Moors for gain, those Philistines!’

— ‘Spain’s far off, messire!’

— ‘You’ve soles to your shoes.’

— ‘That won’t do.’

— ‘The king’s paymaster’s hundred thousand florins will put hot fire in your belly.’

— ‘A deal! To your banner’s fleur-de-lys we’ll add our Burgundy’s thorny branches. What says the ballad?’

Oh! Fine and well-paid

Is the mercenary trade!’

— ‘Well! Have you downed the tents? Are your carts loaded? Strike camp! — Yes you, swords for hire, plant an acorn as you go, you’ll find an oak tree here if you return!’

And loud was the bark of Jacques d’Arquiel’s hounds, as they chased the deer halfway over the hill.

III

The mercenaries were on the march, moving off in troops, arquebuses on their shoulders. An archer in the rear was haggling with a Jew.

The archer raised three fingers.

The Jew raised two.

The archer spat in his face.

The Jew wiped his beard.

The archer raised three fingers.

The Jew raised two.

The archer slapped his face.

The Jew raised three.

‘Two pieces of gold for this doublet, you thief?’ cried the archer.

— ‘Mercy!’ cried the Jew, ‘here are three.’

Magnificent it was, that velvet doublet, a silver hunting-party embroidered on the sleeves. But pierced through and through, and stained with blood.

For Monsieur Pierre-Jean David d’Angers, sculptor

The Chronicles – VII: The Lepers

‘You that pass, keep clear,
The lepers’ kennel’s here.’

The Lepers’ Song

Each morning, as soon as the branches were wet with dew, the door of the Leprosarium swung open on its hinges, and the lepers, like ancient

anchorites, vanished for the day into a wilderness of Adamite valleys, primitive Edens whose distant perspectives, quiet, green and wooded, were populated only by deer grazing the flowering grasses, and herons fishing the clear marshes.

Some weeded the gardens: a rose more fragrant to them, a fig tastier, if cultivated with their own hands. Others wove wicker traps, or shaped boxwood cups, in rocky caverns silted by flowing springs bordered with wild-bindweed. This is how they sought to pass the time, which passes so swiftly for the joyful, so slowly for the sufferer!

But some dared no longer show themselves, even at the Leprosarium door. Those, exhausted, languid, woeful, who had been marked by the art of appearances with a cross, followed or pursued their shadows behind the four walls of a white and lofty cloister, their eyes on the sundial whose needle hastened the flight of their lives, and their approach to eternity.

And when, they leant against the heavy pillars, lost in thought, nothing broke the silence of that place, except the cries of a triangular flight of storks ploughing the clouds, the clicking of some monk's rosary as he moved away down one of the porticoes, and the sound of the watchman's rattle who, at eve, led those gloomy recluses from the cloister to their cells.

The Chronicles – VIII: For a Bibliophile

'My dears, knights in armour
Only exist in books.'

A grandmother to her grand-children

Why rehearse the dusty worm-eaten tales of the Middle Ages, when chivalry is gone forever, along with the music of their minstrels, their faery enchantments, and the glory of their heroes?

What do wondrous legends matter to this incredulous century: Saint George breaking a lance jousting with Charles VII at the Luzon tournament, the Paraclete descending in full view of the assembled Council of Trent, or the wandering Jew approaching the Bishop of Gotzelin, near the city of Langres, to recount to him the Passion of Our Lord?

The knight's trio of sciences are despised today. No one is curious, now, to learn how old the gyrfalcon is on one's arm, or with what emblems

the bastard scion quarters his shield, or the hour of night at which Mars enters conjunction with Venus.

Every tradition of love and war is forgotten, and my fables will not even meet the fate of Geneviève de Brabant's lament, of which the peddler of prints no longer knows the beginning, and has never heard the end.

Gaspard de la Nuit: Book Five

Here begins the fifth
Book of the Fantasies
Of Gaspard
De la
Nuit

Spain and Italy – I: The Cell

Spain, that classical land of imbroglios,
stylus-strokes, serenades, and auto-da-fés.

Extract from a Literary Review

. And hear them close no more,
Those bolts on the eternal captive's door.

Alfred de Vigny – The Prison

The cowed monks walk there, silent and meditative, rosaries in hand, and slowly measure from pillar to pillar, from tomb to tomb, the cloister pavement, with its faint echo.

This is your leisure time, young recluse, who, alone in your cell, amuse yourself by tracing diabolical figures on the white pages of your prayer book, or painting the bony cheeks of that skull?

The young recluse has not forgotten that his mother's a gypsy, his father a captain of thieves; and would still rather hear, at dawn, the trumpet calling him to mount the saddle than the bell ringing matins to hurry him to church!

He's not forgotten how he and a brunette, with silver earrings and ivory castanets, danced the bolero below the cliffs of the Sierra de

Granada; and would rather make love in the gypsy camp than pray to God in the cloister.

A ladder was secretly woven from the straw of his pallet; two bars were sawn through soundlessly with a noiseless file; and the distance from the cloister to the Sierra de Granada, is less than that from hell to paradise.

As soon as night has closed all eyes, and put to rest all suspicion, the young recluse will relight his lamp and escape from his cell with furtive steps, a weapon under his robe.

Spain and Italy – II: The Muleteers



Muleteers beside an Italian Ruin
Jan Asselijn, c. 1650 - Rijksmuseum

The latter only interrupted his long ballad
to urge on his mulesMont

calling them *beautiful* and *valorous*
or by way of scolding them
calling them *lazy* and *obstinate*.

Chateaubriand – The Last of the Abencerrages

They say the rosary or braid their hair, those dark-haired Andalusian women, nonchalantly rocking to the pacing of their mules; some, at the rear, chant the chant of the pilgrims of Saint James repeated by the hundred caverns of the sierra, others fire their weapons at the sun.

— ‘Here’s the place,’ said one of the guides, ‘where last week we buried José Matéos, struck by a bullet in the back of the head, in a bandit attack. The grave had been desecrated; the corpse had vanished.

— ‘The body’s not far away,’ said a mule-driver, ‘I see it floating there in the depths of the ravine, swollen with water like a wineskin.’

— ‘Our Lady of Atocha, save us!’ exclaimed the dark-haired Andalusian women, nonchalantly rocking to the pacing of their mules.

— ‘What’s that shack at the top of the cliff?’ asked a nobleman through the window of his carriage. ‘Is it the cabin of the foresters who toppled those gigantic tree trunks into the torrent’s foaming abyss, or that of the shepherds who graze their aged goats on these barren slopes?’

— ‘That,’ replied a mule driver, ‘is the cell of an old hermit who was found dead in the autumn on his bed of leaves; a rope tight about his neck, and his tongue hanging from his mouth.’

— ‘Our Lady of Atocha, save us!’ exclaimed the dark-haired Andalusian women, nonchalantly rocking to the pacing of their mules.

— ‘Those three horsemen veiled in their cloaks, who observed us so well in passing, are not of our party. Who are they?’ asked a monk with a dusty beard and robe.

— ‘If they’re not officers of the law from the village of Cienfuegos, making their rounds,’ replied a muleteer, ‘they’re brigands sent out as scouts by the infernal Gil Pueblo, their captain.’

— ‘Our Lady of Atocha, save us!’ exclaimed the dark-haired Andalusian women, nonchalantly rocking to the pacing of their mules.

— ‘Did you hear that shot from a carbine up there in the undergrowth?’ asked a seller of ink, so poor that he walked barefoot. See! The smoke is rising in the air!’

— ‘It’s our folk,’ answered a muleteer, ‘beating the bushes all around, and setting a fire to bait the brigands. Señors and señorinas, courage, and spur your mounts.’

— ‘Our Lady of Atocha, save us!’ exclaimed the dark-haired Andalusian women, nonchalantly rocking to the pacing of their mules.

And all the travellers spurred away at a gallop, amid a cloud of dust lit by the sun; the mules passed in turn between enormous blocks of granite, the torrent boiled in roaring channels, the forest swayed with immense creaking sounds; and roused by the wind from solitary depths came vaguely menacing voices, which sometimes seemed to approach, sometimes to recede, as if a troop of brigands were prowling nearby.

Spain and Italy – III: The Marquis of Aroca

Become a highwayman
And you’ll make a living.

Calderon

Who doesn’t love, on dog-days in the woods when the screaming jays compete for a branch in the shade, a bed of moss, and a canopy of oak-leaves?

The two thieves yawned, and asked the time of the gypsy who nudged them like pigs, with his feet.

— ‘Up!’ Up!’ he replied, ‘It’s time to strike camp. The Marquis of Aroca with six officers of the law is on our trail.’

— ‘What? The Marquis of Aroca, whose watch I stole, during the procession of the reverend Dominican fathers of Santillana!’ cried one.

— ‘The Marquis of Aroca, whose mule I straddled at the Salamanca fair!’ cried the other.

— ‘Himself,’ replied the gypsy; let’s head for the Trappist monastery, and dress ourselves in habits for a novena!’

— ‘Halt there, for a moment! First return my watch and mule!’

It was the Marquis of Aroca, at the head of his six law-officers, brushing aside the pale foliage of the hazel bushes with one hand, and with the other making the sign of the cross over the brigands' foreheads with the point of his sword.

Spain and Italy – IV: Henriquez

'I see my fate must be
To hang or be married.'

Lope de Vega

'It's a year since I announced,' the captain said, 'that another should succeed me. I marry a wealthy widow from Cordoba, and exchange the brigand's stiletto for the magistrate's wand.'

He opened a chest, full of treasure to be shared, a mix of sacred vases, jewels, gold coins, showers of pearls, and rivers of diamonds.

'To you, Henriquez, fall the earrings of the Marquis of Aroca, and his signet ring; to you who slew him in his post-chaise, with a bullet from your carbine!'

Henriquez slipped the blood-stained topaz onto his finger, and hung from his ears the amethysts cut in the shape of drops of blood.

Such was the fate of those earrings with which the Duchess of Medina-Coeli had adorned herself, and which, a month later, Henriquez gave to the daughter of the prison jailer in exchange for a kiss!

Such was the fate of the ring some nobleman had bought from an emir for the price of a white mare, and with which Henriquez paid for a glass of brandy, moments before he was hanged!

Spain and Italy – V: The Alarm

No more to be parted from his carbine
than Doña Ines from her lover's ring.

Spanish song

The windows of the hostelry, a peacock on its roof, were alight with the distant blaze of the setting sun, and the path up the mountain bright with its light.

— ‘Shh! What do you hear, you fellows?’ asked one of the guerrillas, putting his ear to a crack in the shutters.

— ‘My mule,’ replied a muleteer, ‘farting in the stable.’

— ‘Gabacho!’ cried the bandit, ‘Have I armed my carbine for a farting mule? The alarm! The alarm! A trumpet! It’s the yellow dragoons.’

And, suddenly, the clashing of pots, the wail of the guitar, the servants’ laughter, the noise of the throng, was replaced by a silence in which the buzzing flight of a fly might have been heard.

But the trumpeting was only that of a cowherd’s horn. The muleteers, before bridling their mules to head out, emptied their half-full wineskins; and the bandits, groping in vain the slovenly wenches of the darkened inn, climbed to the attics, while yawning with boredom and weariness, to sleep.

Spain and Italy – VI: Father Pugnaccio

Rome is a city where there are
More policemen than citizens,
And more monks than police.

Travels in Italy

He laughs best who laughs last.

Popular proverb

Padre Pugnaccio, his hood thrown back, was climbing the stairs of the dome of Saint Peter’s, between two devotees wrapped in mantillas, as the bells and the angels could be heard quarreling in the night.

One of the devotees — the aunt — recited an *ave* for every bead of her rosary; while the other — the niece — eyed from her eye-corner a handsome officer of the Pope’s guards.

The monk murmured to the old woman: ‘Endow my monastery,’ as the officer slipped the young girl a charming scented note.

The aged sinner wiped a few tears away; the ingénue blushed with pleasure; the monk calculated the sum of twelve percent interest on a thousand piastres, while the officer preened his moustache in a pocket-mirror.

And the devil, lurking in Father Pugnaccio's wide sleeve, sneered like Pulcinella!

Spain and Italy – VII: The Song of the Mask

Venice, her face masked.

Byron

Not in a monk's habit, grasping a rosary, but with a tambourine, in folly's garb, I undertake this pilgrimage towards death!

Our noisy troop races to St. Mark's Square, from Signor Arlecchino's hostelry, he having invited us all to a feast of macaroons in oil, and polenta with garlic.

Let us join hands, you, the ephemeral monarch, bearing your crown of golden paper, and you, his grotesque subjects, who form a procession for him with your mantles of a thousand hues, your beards of hemp, and your wooden swords.

Let us join hands to sing and dance a round, ignored by the Inquisitor, dedicated to the magical splendor of the candles rendering night as bright as day.

Let us sing and dance, we joyful folk, while those melancholics float down the canal on the gondolier's benches, and weep as they view the weeping stars.

Let us dance and sing, we who have nothing to lose, as, behind the curtain on which the ennui displayed by their bowed foreheads is silhouetted, our aristocrats stake palaces, mistresses, on a cut of the cards!

Gaspard de la Nuit: Book Six

Here begins the sixth
Book of the Fantasies
Of Gaspard
De la
Nuit

Sylvan Pieces – I: My Cottage

In autumn, thrushes would come to rest there,
Drawn to the bright red berries of the rowan.

Baron R. Monthermé

Then raising her eyes, the good old woman
saw how the wind was tormenting the trees,
and erasing all the tracks of the crows
hopping about, in the snow, round the barn.

Johann Voss – Idyll XIII

My cottage, in summer, owned the leaves of the woods for a parasol, and,
in autumn, as a garden, moss at the window's edge, which caught the pearls
of rain, and wallflowers smelling of almonds.

But in winter, what fun, when morning had scattered its bouquets
of frost on my icy windows, to see far off, at the edge of the forest, a
traveller growing smaller, he and his horse, as he vanished into the snow
and the mist!

What a pleasure, in the evening, by the hearth, ablaze and
perfumed by juniper branches, to leaf through the heroes and monks of the
chronicles, so wondrously portrayed that they seemed, the former jousting,
the latter praying, as ever!

And what pleasure, at night, at the pale and doubtful hour
preceding dawn, to hear my rooster crow in the henhouse, and the farmyard
rooster, a sentinel perched at the outposts of the sleeping village, sounding
his faint reply!

Oh, if the king read this in his Louvre palace — oh my muse exposed to life's storms — that sovereign lord of so many fiefs that he knows not the count of his castles, would he not bargain with us for our cottage!

Sylvan Pieces – II: Jean des Tilles

It's the old willow trunk
with its weeping branches.

Henri de Latouche – The King of the Alders

'My ring, my ring!' The washerwoman's cry frightened a rat on the stump of a willow, going about his business.

Another trick of Jean des Tilles, that malicious and mischievous water-sprite who foams, and mutters, and laughs away, beneath the beater's redoubled blows!

As if it were not enough for him to pick, from the dense thickets on the bank, the ripe medlars he drowns in the current.

'John the thief! John who catches fish, and will be caught! Little John, the fry, I'll bury in a white shroud of flour, in the frying pan's burning oil!'

Then the crows, swaying on the green spires of the poplars, cawed in the damp, rainy sky.

And the washerwomen, skirts gathered up as if come from fishing for common bleak, crossed the ford full of stones and foam, grass and irises.

For Monsieur le Baron R.

Sylvan Pieces – III: October

'Adieu! Last lovely days!'

Alphonse de Lamartine – Autumn

The little Savoyard pedlars are back, and already the neighborhood's sonorous echoes answer their cries; as swallows precede the spring, they precede winter.

October, the herald of that season, knocks at our doors. Rain, intermittently, beats at the streaming windows, and the wind litters the lonely porch with the plane-tree's dead leaves.

Those delightful family evenings arrive, when all outside is snow, ice, and fog, but hyacinths bloom on the hearth in the living room's warm atmosphere.

St. Martin's Day approaches with its burning brands, Christmas with its candles, New Year's Day with its toys, The Three Kings with its lucky bean, and the Carnival with its Fool's bauble.

And Easter at last, Easter, with its joyous morning hymns, Easter when young girls receive white wafers, and eggs painted red!

Then a little ash will smooth from our brows the boredom of six months of winter, and the little Savoyards will greet again, from on high, their native hills and hamlets.

Sylvan Pieces – IV: Chèvre-Morte

And I too have been torn by the thorns of this desert,
and leave there, every day, some trace of my passing.

Chateaubriand – Les Martyrs, Book X

Here there's no breath of the mossy oaks and the poplar buds, here no murmur of love between breeze and water.

No balm, in the morn after rain, or in the evening at dewfall; and nothing to charm the ear but the cry of some little bird in search of a blade of grass.

Desert that knows no longer the voice of John the Baptist! Desert that now neither hermits nor doves inhabit!

Thus, is my soul a solitude where, at the edge of the abyss, one hand clinging to life and the other outstretched to death, I utter a sigh of desolation.

The poet is like the wallflower that clings, fragrant but frail, to the granite, needing earth less than the sunlight.

But sadly, it's sunlight I lack, since the charming eyes that sparked
my genius closed!

June 22, 1832

Sylvan Pieces – V: Another Spring

All thoughts, all passions, all delights,
Whatever stirs this mortal frame,
All are but ministers of Love,
And feed his sacred flame.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge – Love

Another Spring — another bitter drop of dew that will tremble for a
moment in the calyx, then escape like a tear.

O Youth! Your delights have been frozen by the kiss of time, but
your pain has survived to be stifled in my breast.

And you, the women who've spun the silk of my life! If some
deception was there in my tale of love, it's not I that was deceived nor you!

O spring! Little bird of passage, our guest for a season, who sings
with such melancholy, in the heart of the poet and the boughs of the oak!

Another Spring — another ray of May's sunlight, on the brow of
the young poet in the crowd, on the brow of the old oak amidst the wood!

Paris, May 11, 1836

For Monsieur Antoine de Latour

Sylvan Pieces – VI: Mankind For A Second Time

'Et nunc, Domine, tolle quaeso, animam meam a me,
quia melior est mihi mors quam vita.'

'And now, O Lord, I beseech thee take my life from me:
for it is better for me to die than to live.'

Jonah – Chapter IV, 9 (The Vulgate, and the King James Bible)

By death, I swear, in a world such as this one,
No, I'd not be younger now by a single sun.

Alphonse de Lamartine – Meditations

Hell! — Hell, and Heaven! — Cries of despair! Cries of joy! —
Blasphemies from the reprobates! Harmonies of the elect! — Souls of the
dead like oaks torn from the mountains by demons! Souls of the dead like
flowers of the valley culled by angels.

Sun, Firmament, Earth, Mankind, all was begun, all was ended. A
voice shook the void — ‘Sun?’ cried that voice, from the threshold of the
radiant Jerusalem — ‘Sun?’ replied the inconsolable echoes from the Vale
of Jehoshaphat’ — And the Sun opened its golden eyelids on the chaos of
worlds.

But the firmament hung like a strand from a banner —
‘Firmament?’ cried that voice, from the threshold of the radiant Jerusalem
— Firmament?’ replied the inconsolable echoes from the Vale of
Jehoshaphat’ — And the Firmament unfurled its folds of purple and azure
to the wind.

But Earth wandered adrift, like a foundering ship, bearing nothing
but ashes and bones in its hold — ‘Earth?’ cried that voice, from the
threshold of the radiant Jerusalem — ‘Earth?’ replied the inconsolable
echoes from the Vale of Jehoshaphat. — And, Earth casting anchor, Nature
sat, crowned with flowers, beneath the porch of the mountains with its
hundred thousand columns.

But Mankind was lacking to creation, and Earth and Nature were
sad, one at the absence of its king, the other at the absence of its spouse —
‘Mankind?’ cried that voice, from the threshold of the radiant Jerusalem —
‘Mankind?’ replied the inconsolable echoes from the Vale of Jehoshaphat.
But no hymn of deliverance or grace broke the seal with which death had
sealed the lips of Mankind, sleeping for eternity on a sepulchral bed.

‘So be it!’ cried that voice, and the threshold of the radiant
Jerusalem was veiled by two dark wings — ‘So be it!’ replied the echoes,
and the inconsolable Vale of Jehoshaphat began again to weep. And the
Archangel’s trumpet sounded from void to void, while all collapsed, with a

crash, to immense ruin: Firmament, Earth, and Sun, for want of Mankind,
the cornerstone of creation!

Afterword – To Monsieur Saint-Beuve

‘I beg the readers of these my labours
To take in good part all I have written.’

Sire de Joinville – Memoirs

Man is a minter of coinage, who hammers out coins in his corner. The gold quadruple bears the face of the emperor, the medallion, that of the pope, the mere token, that of the fool.

Mine adorns my token in the game of life, where we lose, time after time, and where the Devil, to put an end to it, does away with the players, the dice and the green baize.

The emperor dictates his orders to his generals, the pope addresses bulls to Christendom, and the madman writes a book.

Here is my book, such as I’ve made it, and such as it may be read, before the critics obscure it with their explications, though these hard-won pages, the result of humble labour such as is ignored by the present day, can scarcely add lustre to the famous verse of former days.

The minstrel’s sweet-briar will wither, but the wallflower still bloom, every spring, in the Gothic window-arches of monastery and chateau.

Paris, September 20, 1836

Pieces Extracted from the Author’s Portfolio

Le Bel Alcade: The Handsome Judge

The Bel Alcade, he said to me:
‘As long as the willow that you see
Hangs, weeping, over the weir,
You’ll be the virgin who consoles,
My bright star, my guider of souls.’
It weeps; onward the water rolls,

Yet he loves me no more, I fear.

Spanish Romance

‘To follow you, O Bel Alcade, I exiled myself from the land of perfumes, where my companions moan in the meadow, my doves in the leaves of the palms.

My mother, O Bel Alcade, stretched out her hand, from her bed of pain, towards me; that hand drooped ice-cold, nor did I halt on the threshold to cry for the mother who was no more.

I cried not, O Bel Alcade, when, at eve, alone with you, in our boat wandering far from shore, the embalmed breezes of my land crossed the waves in search of me.

I was, you said, in your rapture, then, O Bel Alcade, more charming than the Moon, the Sultana of the seraglio with its thousand silver lamps.

You loved me, O Bel Alcade, and I was proud and happy: but since you rejected me, I am no more than a humble sinner confessing in tears the sin committed.

When, O Bel Alcade, will my bitter source of tears run dry? When the water of King Alfonso’s fountain no longer spews from the lions’ mouths.’

The Angel and the Faery

A faery is hidden in all you see.

Victor Hugo

At night a faery perfumes my sleep, which is full of fantasies, with the freshest, most tender breaths of July air — the same good fairy who guides the blind old man who has lost his way, and dries the tears, heals the pain, of the little girl whose bare foot was pricked by a thorn while gleaning.

This is she, rocking me in my sleep, like an heir to the sword or harp, and, with a peacock feather, driving away from my bed the sprites, who stole my soul seeking to drown it in a ray of moonlight or a drop of dew.

This is she, telling me one of her tales of the mountains and vales; of the melancholy loves of the cemetery flowers, or the joyful pilgrimages of birds to Notre-Dame-des-Cornouillers.

But as she watched over my sleep, an angel, descending on quivering wings from the starry sky, placed one foot on the ledge of the Gothic balcony, and pressed his silvery palm against the stained-glass panes of the tall window.

A Seraphim, and a faery, who'd recently fallen in love with each other at the bedside of a young dying woman; one whom the faery endowed at birth with all the virgin graces, and whom, when dead, the angel bore to the joys of Paradise!

The hand that cradled my dreams withdrew with the dreams themselves. I opened my eyes. My room, as profoundly quiet as it was deserted, was silently lit by the veiled moon; in the morning, all I have left of the good faery's attentions is this spindle and thread: still uncertain as to whether they were my grandmother's own.

The Rain

Poor bird, by the heavens blessed!
She listens to the wind's flowing,
Looks at the drops of water glowing,
As she sings; like pearls on her nest!

Victor Hugo

And as the rain trickles down, the little Black Forest charcoal-burners, from their bed of fragrant fern, hear the wind howling outside like a wolf.

They pity the fugitive doe buffeted by the blows of the storm, and pity the squirrel lurking in the hollow of an old oak-tree, as fearful of the lightning as of the deer-stalker's lamp.

They pity the plight of birds, of the wagtail with only her wing to shelter her brood, and the robin whose great love, the briar-rose, is culled by the wind.

They pity even the glowworm that a drop of rain flings into the water from some mossy branch.

They pity the pilgrim, journeying late, who meets King Pialus and Queen Wilberta, for it's the hour when the king takes his palfrey of mist to drink by the Rhine.

But they pity, above all, the children who enter perhaps on a narrow path made by a band of thieves, or stumble towards the ogress' distant light.

And next day, at dawn, the little charcoal-burners will find their hut made of branches, from which they hunt thrushes, flat on the grass, and find their basket of lime drowned in the spring.

The Two Angels

Those two beings, at night,
a sacred mystery...

Victor Hugo

'Let us hover,' I said to her, 'over woodlands scented with roses; let us play midst the light and azure of the sky, like birds in flight, and accompany the errant Spring.'

Death snatched her, dishevelled, from me, and delivered her, fainting, to sleep, while, falling back into life, I stretched out my arms in vain to the vanishing angel.

Oh, if death had only tolled a funereal wedding over our bed, that angelic sister would have drawn me with her to heaven, or I would have dragged her with me down to hell!

Delirious the joy of departure, ineffable the happiness of two souls who, blithe and oblivious to all if only they are together, think no more of return.

Mysterious the journey of two angels, to be seen, at dawn, traversing the sky, and receiving the fresh morning dew on their pale wings!

And in the valley saddened by our absence, in the month of flowers, our couch would remain empty, a nest abandoned among the leaves.

Evening on the Water

The shores where Venice
is queen of the sea.

André Chénier

The black gondola glided between the marble palaces, like an adventurer hastening to some midnight tryst a stiletto and a lantern beneath his cape.

A gentleman and a lady, within, spoke of love: 'The orange trees so fragrant, and you so indifferent! Ah! Signora, you are a marble statue in a garden!

— Is mine a statue's kiss, my Georgio? Why are you sulking?' — 'So, you love me?' — 'There's not a star in the sky that fails to know it; yet you know it not?'

— 'What noise is that?' — 'Nothing, likely the sound of the water rising and falling, on a step of the stairs of the Giudecca.'

— 'Aid me! Aid me!' — 'Oh, Mother of God, someone's drowning!' — Steer away; he is now absolved,' cried a monk who appeared on the terrace.

And the black gondola, with driven oars, glided between the marble palaces like an adventurer returning from some midnight tryst a stiletto and a lantern under his cape.

Madame de Montbazon



*Portrait of Marie de Rohan, duchess of Chevreuse (1600-1679) as Diana the Huntress
Attributed to Claude Deruet (c.1588–1660) - Wikimedia Commons*

Madame de Montbazon was a most beautiful creature who, in the last century, literally died of the love she bore for the Chevalier de la Rüe who loved her not at all.

Saint-Simon – The Memoirs

The lady's-maid arranged, on the table, the vase of flowers, and the wax candles whose reflections shone red and yellow on the blue silk curtains at the head of the sick woman's bed.

'Do you think, he'll come, Mariette?' — 'Oh! Sleep, sleep a little, Madame!' — 'Yes, soon I'll sleep and dream of him for all eternity.'

Footsteps were heard on the stairs. 'Oh! If only it were him!' murmured the dying woman, grimacing; the deathly flutter already about her lips.

It was only a little page bringing Madame la Duchess, from the Queen, biscuits, jam, and elixirs on a silver plate.

'Oh! 'He'll not come!' she said in a faltering voice, 'He'll not come! Mariette, pass me one of those flowers so I can breathe its scent and kiss it for love of him!'

Then Madame de Montbazon, closed her eyes, remaining motionless. She had died of love, rendering up her soul midst the fragrance of hyacinth.

The Night After the Battle

And the crows prepared to begin.

Victor Hugo

I

A sentry, musket in hand, walks, wrapped in his coat, along the rampart. He leans over the black battlements now and then, to observe the enemy camp with attentive eye.

II

He lights fires at the edge of ditches full of water; the sky is black; the forest is full of noises; the wind chases the smoke towards the river, and murmurs, complainingly, in the banners' folds.

III

No trumpet call raises an echo; no song of war is repeated round the hearth; lamps are lit in the tents beside the camp- beds of captains who died here sword in hand.

IV

But now the rain streams from the pavilions; the wind that freezes the numbed sentinel, the howls of wolves commandeering the field of battle, all announce strange happenings on earth and in the heavens.

V

You who rest peacefully, abed in your tent, remember always that, today, no more than an inch of steel might have sufficed to pierce your heart.

VI

Your comrades-in-arms who fell so bravely, in the front ranks, have purchased with their lives the glory and salvation of those who will have forgotten them in no great while.

VII

A bloody battle was fought; lost or won, all lies sleeping now; yet how many brave men will no longer wake, or will only wake in heaven tomorrow morn!

The Citadel of Wolgast

‘Who goes there? Who art thou?’
‘I bear a letter for the General’

Walter Scott

How calm and majestic the white citadel on the Peenestrom, as from every embrasure the cannons bark, aimed at the town and the camp, and the culverins dart, whistling their tongues over the copper-colored waters.

The troops of the King of Prussia are masters of Wolgast, its suburbs, and both banks of the strait; but the two-headed eagle of the German Emperor still cradles its wings in the folds of the citadel's flag.

Suddenly, with the fall of night, the citadels sixty cannons cease to fire. Torches light the casements, flicker above the bastions, illumine the towers and the water, and a trumpet wails in the battlements like that of the Day of Judgment.

Meanwhile the iron postern-gate opens wide, a soldier leaps into a boat, and rows towards the camp; he lands: 'Captain Beaudoin,' he says, 'has been slain; we ask to be allowed to send his corpse to his wife, who lives in Oderberg on the border; when the body has sailed the river for three days, we'll sign the surrender.'

Next day, at midday, a boat, the length of the coffin, emerged from the triple enclosure of stakes bristling about the citadel, a coffin which the city and the citadel saluted with seven shots from a cannon.

The town bells rang, people flocked to this sad spectacle from all the neighboring villages, and the wings of the windmills remained motionless on the hills that border the Peenestrom.

The Dead Horse

The Gravedigger: — 'I'll sell you bones to make your buttons.'

The Flayer of Dead Horses: — 'I'll sell you bones for your dagger-handles.'

The Armourer's Shop

The cross-roads! On the left, beneath a lawn of alfalfa and clover, the graves in a cemetery; on the right, a hangman's gibbet asks passers-by for alms like a one-armed beggar.

From this one's throat, hanged yesterday, the wolves have torn the flesh into such long strips one might say he seems, with his bunch of red ribbons, still adorned for the cavalcade.

At night, once the moon lights the sky, his carcass flies off, a witch astride, one who spurs it on with her sharp heel-bones, the wind in the organ-pipes of its cavernous sides.

And if there was, at this taciturn hour, a sleepless eye, open wide, in some ditch of the field of rest, it would suddenly close, for fear of seeing a spectre against the stars.

Already the moon herself, winking one eye, only opens the other to illumine, a floating candle, a dog, a skinny vagabond, who laps water from a pond.

The Gibbet

‘What do I see moving about the gibbet?’

Goethe

Ah! Could it be that I hear the cry of the nocturnal breeze, or the hanged man's sigh from the sinister gallows-tree?

Could it be some lurking cricket that chirps in the sterile ivy and moss with which its wood is mercifully veiled?

Could it be some buzzing fly sounding its note round those deaf ears in a fanfare of halloos?

Could it be some beetle that plucks a blood-wet hair from his naked head, in its uneven flight?

Or some spider embroidering half-an-ell of muslin as a cravat for his broken neck?

It's the bell that rings on the city wall, below the horizon, and below the carcass of the hanged man lit by the setting sun.

Scarbo

He looked under the bed, in the sideboard,
in the hearth — no one there. He failed
to see how he had entered or escaped.

Oh! How often I've heard and seen Scarbo, when at midnight the moon shines in the sky like a silver shield on an azure banner strewn with golden bees!

How often I've heard his murmur of laughter in the shadows of my alcove, and his nails squeak on the silk of the curtains round my bed!

How often I've seen him descend from the cornice, pirouette on one foot, and roll through the room like a spindle loosed from a witch's distaff.

If I thought he'd grown faint, now the dwarf loomed between myself and the moon, like the bell-tower of a Gothic cathedral, the golden bell on his pointed cap ringing!

But soon his body turned blue, as diaphanous as the wax of a taper, his face turned pale as the wax of a candle – and he was suddenly extinguished.

To Monsieur David d'Angers, sculptor

Talent creeps about and dies
If it lacks golden wings.

Nicolas-Joseph-Florent Gilbert

No, God, the lightning that blazes in symbolic triad, is not the number traced on the lips of human wisdom!

No, love, the chaste and naive feeling, veiled in modesty and pride in the sanctuary of the heart, is not that cavalier show of tenderness which sheds coquettish tears from the eyes of a mask of innocence!

No, glory, the mark of nobility, whose coat-of-arms was never bartered, is not the commoner's 'bar of soap', that ennobling parcel of land, bought, for the going rate, in some journalist's shop!

I prayed, and loved, and sang; a poor and suffering poet! And my heart overflows, in vain, with faith, love and genius!

Because I was an eaglet born aborted! The egg of my destiny, hatched not beneath the warm wing of prosperity, is as hollow, as empty, as the golden nut of the Egyptian.

Oh! Mankind, tell me, if you know; is not Man a frail toy,
dangling, suspended by threads of passion, a puppet exhausted by life, and
broken by death?

The End of ‘Gaspard de la Nuit’