

DUMAS
ALEXANDRE

MARTIN
GUERRE

Александр Дюма

Martin Guerre

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Дюма А.

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Alexandre Dumas

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We are sometimes astonished at the striking resemblance existing between two persons who are absolute strangers to each other, but in fact it is the opposite which ought to surprise us. Indeed, why should we not rather admire a Creative Power so infinite in its variety that it never ceases to produce entirely different combinations with precisely the same elements? The more one considers this prodigious versatility of form, the more overwhelming it appears.

To begin with, each nation has its own distinct and characteristic type, separating it from other races of men. Thus there are the English, Spanish, German, or Slavonic types; again, in each nation we find families distinguished from each other by less general but still well-pronounced features; and lastly, the individuals of each family, differing again in more or less marked gradations. What a multitude of physiognomies! What variety of impression from the innumerable stamps of the human countenance! What millions of models and no copies! Considering this ever changing spectacle, which ought to inspire us with most astonishment – the perpetual difference of faces or the accidental resemblance of a few individuals? Is it impossible that in the whole wide world there should be found by chance two people whose features are cast in one and the same mould? Certainly not; therefore that which ought to surprise us is not that these duplicates exist here and there upon the earth, but that they are to be met with in the same place, and appear together before our eyes, little accustomed to see such resemblances. From Amphitryon down to our own days, many fables have owed their origin to this fact, and history also has provided a few examples, such as the false Demetrius in Russia, the English Perkin Warbeck, and several other celebrated impostors, whilst the story we now present to our readers is no less curious and strange.

On the 10th of, August 1557, an inauspicious day in the history of France, the roar of cannon was still heard at six in the evening in the plains of St. Quentin; where the French army had just been destroyed by the united troops of England and Spain, commanded by the famous Captain Emanuel Philibert, Duke of Savoy. An utterly beaten infantry, the Constable Montmorency and several generals taken prisoner, the Duke d'Enghien mortally wounded, the flower of the nobility cut down like grass, – such were the terrible results of a battle which plunged France into mourning, and which would have been a blot on the reign of Henry II, had not the Duke of Guise obtained a brilliant revenge the following year.

In a little village less than a mile from the field of battle were to be heard the groans of the wounded and dying, who had been carried thither from the field of battle. The inhabitants had given up their houses to be used as hospitals, and two or three barber surgeons went hither and thither, hastily ordering operations which they left to their assistants, and driving out fugitives who had contrived to accompany the wounded under pretence of assisting friends or near relations. They had already expelled a good number of these poor fellows, when, opening the door of a small room, they found a soldier soaked in blood lying on a rough mat, and another soldier apparently attending on him with the utmost care.

“Who are you?” said one of the surgeons to the sufferer. “I don't think you belong to our French troops.”

“Help!” cried the soldier, “only help me! and may God bless you for it!”

“From the colour of that tunic,” remarked the other surgeon, “I should wager the rascal belongs to some Spanish gentleman. By what blunder was he brought here?”

“For pity's sake!” murmured the poor fellow, “I am in such pain.”

“Die, wretch!” responded the last speaker, pushing him with his foot. “Die, like the dog you are!”

But this brutality, answered as it was by an agonised groan, disgusted the other surgeon.

“After all, he is a man, and a wounded man who implores help. Leave him to me, Rene.”

Rene went out grumbling, and the one who remained proceeded to examine the wound. A terrible arquebus-shot had passed through the leg, shattering the bone: amputation was absolutely necessary.

Before proceeding to the operation, the surgeon turned to the other soldier, who had retired into the darkest corner of the room.

“And you, who may you be?” he asked.

The man replied by coming forward into the light: no other answer was needed. He resembled his companion so closely that no one could doubt they were brothers-twin brothers, probably. Both were above middle height; both had olive-brown complexions, black eyes, hooked noses, pointed chins, a slightly projecting lower lip; both were round-shouldered, though this defect did not amount to disfigurement: the whole personality suggested strength, and was not destitute of masculine beauty. So strong a likeness is hardly ever seen; even their ages appeared to agree, for one would not have supposed either to be more than thirty-two; and the only difference noticeable, besides the pale countenance of the wounded man, was that he was thin as compared with the moderate fleshiness of the other, also that he had a large scar over the right eyebrow.

“Look well after your brother’s soul,” said the surgeon to the soldier, who remained standing; “if it is in no better case than his body, it is much to be pitied.”

“Is there no hope?” inquired the Sosia of the wounded man.

“The wound is too large and too deep,” replied the man of science, “to be cauterised with boiling oil, according to the ancient method. ‘Delenda est causa mali,’ the source of evil must be destroyed, as says the learned Ambrose Pare; I ought therefore ‘secareferro,’ – that is to say, take off the leg. May God grant that he survive the operation!”

While seeking his instruments, he looked the supposed brother full in the face, and added —

“But how is it that you are carrying muskets in opposing armies, for I see that you belong to us, while this poor fellow wears Spanish uniform?”

“Oh, that would be a long story to tell,” replied the soldier, shaking his head. “As for me, I followed the career which was open to me, and took service of my own free will under the banner of our lord king, Henry II. This man, whom you rightly suppose to be my brother, was born in Biscay, and became attached to the household of the Cardinal of Burgos, and afterwards to the cardinal’s brother, whom he was obliged to follow to the war. I recognised him on the battle-field just as he fell; I dragged him out of a heap of dead, and brought him here.”

During his recital this individual’s features betrayed considerable agitation, but the surgeon did not heed it. Not finding some necessary instruments, “My colleague,” he exclaimed, “must have carried them off. He constantly does this, out of jealousy of my reputation; but I will be even with him yet! Such splendid instruments! They will almost work of themselves, and are capable of imparting some skill even to him, dunce as he is!.. I shall be back in an hour or two; he must rest, sleep, have nothing to excite him, nothing to inflame the wound; and when the operation is well over, we shall see! May the Lord be gracious to him!”

Then he went to the door, leaving the poor wretch to the care of his supposed brother.

“My God!” he added, shaking his head, “if he survive, it will be by the help of a miracle.”

Scarcely had he left the room, when the unwounded soldier carefully examined the features of the wounded one.

“Yes,” he murmured between his teeth, “they were right in saying that my exact double was to be found in the hostile army.. Truly one would not know us apart!.. I might be surveying myself in a mirror. I did well to look for him in the rear of the Spanish army, and, thanks to the fellow who rolled him over so conveniently with that arquebus-shot; I was able to escape the dangers of the melee by carrying him out of it.”

“But that’s not all,” he thought, still carefully studying the tortured face of the unhappy sufferer; “it is not enough to have got out of that. I have absolutely nothing in the world, no home, no resources. Beggar by birth, adventurer by fortune, I have enlisted, and have consumed my pay; I hoped for plunder, and here we are in full flight! What am I to do? Go and drown myself? No, certainly a cannon-ball would be as good as that. But can’t I profit by this chance, and obtain a decent position by turning to my own advantage this curious resemblance, and making some use of this man whom Fate has thrown in my way, and who has but a short time to live?”

Arguing thus, he bent over the prostrate man with a cynical laugh: one might have thought he was Satan watching the departure of a soul too utterly lost to escape him.

“Alas! alas!” cried the sufferer; “may God have mercy on me! I feel my end is near.”

“Bah! comrade, drive away these dismal thoughts. Your leg pains you – well they will cut it off! Think only of the other one, and trust in Providence!”

“Water, a drop of water, for Heaven’s sake!” The sufferer was in a high fever. The would-be nurse looked round and saw a jug of water, towards which the dying man extended a trembling hand. A truly infernal idea entered his mind. He poured some water into a gourd which hung from his belt, held it to the lips of the wounded man, and then withdrew it.

“Oh! I thirst-that water!.. For pity’s sake, give me some!”

“Yes, but on one condition you must tell me your whole history.”

“Yes.. but give me water!”

His tormentor allowed him to swallow a mouthful, then overwhelmed him with questions as to his family, his friends and fortune, and compelled him to answer by keeping before his eyes the water which alone could relieve the fever which devoured him. After this often interrupted interrogation, the sufferer sank back exhausted, and almost insensible. But, not yet satisfied, his companion conceived the idea of reviving him with a few drops of brandy, which quickly brought back the fever, and excited his brain sufficiently to enable him to answer fresh questions. The doses of spirit were doubled several times, at the risk of ending the unhappy man’s days then and there: Almost delirious, his head feeling as if on fire, his sufferings gave way to a feverish excitement, which took him back to other places and other times: he began to recall the days of his youth and the country where he lived. But his tongue was still fettered by a kind of reserve: his secret thoughts, the private details of his past life were not yet told, and it seemed as though he might die at any moment. Time was passing, night already coming on, and it occurred to the merciless questioner to profit by the gathering darkness. By a few solemn words he aroused the religious feelings of the sufferer, terrified him by speaking of the punishments of another life and the flames of hell, until to the delirious fancy of the sick man he took the form of a judge who could either deliver him to eternal damnation or open the gates of heaven to him. At length, overwhelmed by a voice which resounded in his ear like that of a minister of God, the dying man laid bare his inmost soul before his tormentor, and made his last confession to him.

Yet a few moments, and the executioner – he deserves no other name – hangs over his victim, opens his tunic, seizes some papers and a few coins, half draws his dagger, but thinks better of it; then, contemptuously spurning the victim, as the other surgeon had done —

“I might kill you,” he says, “but it would be a useless murder; it would only be hastening your last Sigh by an hour or two, and advancing my claims to your inheritance by the same space of time.”

And he adds mockingly: —

“Farewell, my brother!”

The wounded soldier utters a feeble groan; the adventurer leaves the room.

Four months later, a woman sat at the door of a house at one end of the village of Artigues, near Rieux, and played with a child about nine or ten years of age. Still young, she had the brown complexion of Southern women, and her beautiful black hair fell in curls about her face. Her flashing eyes occasionally betrayed hidden passions, concealed, however, beneath an apparent indifference

and lassitude, and her wasted form seemed to acknowledge the existence of some secret grief. An observer would have divined a shattered life, a withered happiness, a soul grievously wounded.

Her dress was that of a wealthy peasant; and she wore one of the long gowns with hanging sleeves which were in fashion in the sixteenth century. The house in front of which she sat belonged to her, so also the immense field which adjoined the garden. Her attention was divided between the play of her son and the orders she was giving to an old servant, when an exclamation from the child startled her.

“Mother!” he cried, “mother, there he is!”

She looked where the child pointed, and saw a young boy turning the corner of the street.

“Yes,” continued the child, “that is the lad who, when I was playing with the other boys yesterday, called me all sorts of bad names.”

“What sort of names, my child?”

“There was one I did not understand, but it must have been a very bad one, for the other boys all pointed at me, and left me alone. He called me – and he said it was only what his mother had told him – he called me a wicked bastard!”

His mother’s face became purple with indignation. “What!” she cried, “they dared!.. What an insult!”

“What does this bad word mean, mother?” asked the child, half frightened by her anger. “Is that what they call poor children who have no father?”

His mother folded him in her arms. “Oh!” she continued, “it is an infamous slander! These people never saw your father, they have only been here six years, and this is the eighth since he went away, but this is abominable! We were married in that church, we came at once to live in this house, which was my marriage portion, and my poor Martin has relations and friends here who will not allow his wife to be insulted – ”

“Say rather, his widow,” interrupted a solemn voice.

“Ah! uncle!” exclaimed the woman, turning towards an old man who had just emerged from the house.

“Yes, Bertrande,” continued the new-comer, “you must get reconciled to the idea that my nephew has ceased to exist. I am sure he was not such a fool as to have remained all this time without letting us hear from him. He was not the fellow to go off at a tangent, on account of a domestic quarrel which you have never vouchsafed to explain to me, and to retain his anger during all these eight years! Where did he go? What did he do? We none of us know, neither you nor I, nor anybody else. He is assuredly dead, and lies in some graveyard far enough from here. May God have mercy on his soul!”

Bertrande, weeping, made the sign of the cross, and bowed her head upon her hands.

“Good-bye, Sanxi,” said the uncle, tapping the child’s, cheek. Sanxi turned sulkily away.

There was certainly nothing specially attractive about the uncle: he belonged to a type which children instinctively dislike, false, crafty, with squinting eyes which continually appeared to contradict his honeyed tongue.

“Bertrande,” he said, “your boy is like his father before him, and only answers my kindness with rudeness.”

“Forgive him,” answered the mother; “he is very young, and does not understand the respect due to his father’s uncle. I will teach him better things; he will soon learn that he ought to be grateful for the care you have taken of his little property.”

“No doubt, no doubt,” said the uncle, trying hard to smile. “I will give you a good account of it, for I shall only have to reckon with you two in future. Come, my dear, believe me, your husband is really dead, and you have sorrowed quite enough for a good-for-nothing fellow. Think no more of him.”

So saying, he departed, leaving the poor young woman a prey to the saddest thoughts.

Bertrande de Rolls, naturally gifted with extreme sensibility, on which a careful education had imposed due restraint, had barely completed her twelfth year when she was married to Martin Guerre, a boy of about the same age, such precocious unions being then not uncommon, especially in the Southern provinces. They were generally settled by considerations of family interest, assisted by the extremely early development habitual to the climate. The young couple lived for a long time as brother and sister, and Bertrande, thus early familiar with the idea of domestic happiness, bestowed her whole affection on the youth whom she had been taught to regard as her life's companion. He was the Alpha and Omega of her existence; all her love, all her thoughts, were given to him, and when their marriage was at length completed, the birth of a son seemed only another link in the already long existing bond of union. But, as many wise men have remarked, a uniform happiness, which only attaches women more and more, has often upon men a precisely contrary effect, and so it was with Martin Guerre. Of a lively and excitable temperament, he wearied of a yoke which had been imposed so early, and, anxious to see the world and enjoy some freedom, he one day took advantage of a domestic difference, in which Bertrande owned herself to have been wrong, and left his house and family. He was sought and awaited in vain. Bertrande spent the first month in vainly expecting his return, then she betook herself to prayer; but Heaven appeared deaf to her supplications, the truant returned not. She wished to go in search of him, but the world is wide, and no single trace remained to guide her. What torture for a tender heart! What suffering for a soul thirsting for love! What sleepless nights! What restless vigils! Years passed thus; her son was growing up, yet not a word reached her from the man she loved so much. She spoke often of him to the uncomprehending child, she sought to discover his features in those of her boy, but though she endeavoured to concentrate her whole affection on her son, she realised that there is suffering which maternal love cannot console, and tears which it cannot dry. Consumed by the strength of the sorrow which ever dwelt in her heart, the poor woman was slowly wasting, worn out by the regrets of the past, the vain desires of the present, and the dreary prospect of the future. And now she had been openly insulted, her feelings as a mother wounded to the quirk; and her husband's uncle, instead of defending and consoling her, could give only cold counsel and unsympathetic words!

Pierre Guerre, indeed, was simply a thorough egotist. In his youth he had been charged with usury; no one knew by what means he had become rich, for the little drapery trade which he called his profession did not appear to be very profitable.

After his nephew's departure it seemed only natural that he should pose as the family guardian, and he applied himself to the task of increasing the little income, but without considering himself bound to give any account to Bertrande. So, once persuaded that Martin was no more, he was apparently not unwilling to prolong a situation so much to his own advantage.

Night was fast coming on; in the dim twilight distant objects became confused and indistinct. It was the end of autumn, that melancholy season which suggests so many gloomy thoughts and recalls so many blighted hopes. The child had gone into the house. Bertrande, still sitting at the door, resting her forehead on her hand, thought sadly of her uncle's words; recalling in imagination the past scenes which they suggested, the time of their childhood, when, married so young, they were as yet only playmates, prefacing the graver duties of life by innocent pleasures; then of the love which grew with their increasing age; then of how this love became altered, changing on her side into passion, on his into indifference. She tried to recollect him as he had been on the eve of his departure, young and handsome, carrying his head high, coming home from a fatiguing hunt and sitting by his son's cradle; and then also she remembered bitterly the jealous suspicions she had conceived, the anger with which she had allowed them to escape her, the consequent quarrel, followed by the disappearance of her offended husband, and the eight succeeding years of solitude and mourning. She wept over his desertion; over the desolation of her life, seeing around her only indifferent or selfish people, and caring only to live for her child's sake, who gave her at least a shadowy reflection of the husband she had lost. "Lost – yes, lost for ever!" she said to herself, sighing, and looking again at the fields

whence she had so often seen him coming at this same twilight hour, returning to his home for the evening meal. She cast a wandering eye on the distant hills, which showed a black outline against a yet fiery western sky, then let it fall on a little grove of olive trees planted on the farther side of the brook which skirted her dwelling. Everything was calm; approaching night brought silence along with darkness: it was exactly what she saw every evening, but to leave which required always an effort.

She rose to re-enter the house, when her attention was caught by a movement amongst the trees. For a moment she thought she was mistaken, but the branches again rustled, then parted asunder, and the form of a man appeared on the other side of the brook. Terrified, Bertrande tried to scream, but not a sound escaped her lips; her voice seemed paralyzed by terror, as in an evil dream. And she almost thought it was a dream, for notwithstanding the dark shadows cast around this indistinct semblance, she seemed to recognise features once dear to her. Had her bitter reveries ended by making her the victim of a hallucination? She thought her brain was giving way, and sank on her knees to pray for help. But the figure remained; it stood motionless, with folded arms, silently gazing at her! Then she thought of witchcraft, of evil demons, and superstitious as every one was in those days, she kissed a crucifix which hung from her neck, and fell fainting on the ground. With one spring the phantom crossed the brook and stood beside her.

“Bertrande!” it said in a voice of emotion. She raised her head, uttered a piercing cry, and was clasped in her husband’s arms.

The whole village became aware of this event that same evening. The neighbours crowded round Bertrande’s door, Martin’s friends and relations naturally wishing to see him after this miraculous reappearance, while those who had never known him desired no less to gratify their curiosity; so that the hero of the little drama, instead of remaining quietly at home with his wife, was obliged to exhibit himself publicly in a neighbouring barn. His four sisters burst through the crowd and fell on his neck weeping; his uncle examined him doubtfully at first, then extended his arms. Everybody recognised him, beginning with the old servant Margherite, who had been with the young couple ever since their wedding-day. People observed only that a riper age had strengthened his features, and given more character to his countenance and more development to his powerful figure; also that he had a scar over the right eyebrow, and that he limped slightly. These were the marks of wounds he had received, he said; which now no longer troubled him. He appeared anxious to return to his wife and child, but the crowd insisted on hearing the story of his adventures during his voluntary absence, and he was obliged to satisfy them. Eight years ago, he said, the desire to see more of the world had gained an irresistible mastery over him; he yielded to it, and departed secretly. A natural longing took him to his birthplace in Biscay, where he had seen his surviving relatives. There he met the Cardinal of Burgos, who took him into his service, promising him profit, hard knocks to give and take, and plenty of adventure. Some time after, he left the cardinal’s household for that of his brother, who, much against his will, compelled him to follow him to the war and bear arms against the French. Thus he found himself on the Spanish side on the day of St. Quentin, and received a terrible gun-shot wound in the leg. Being carried into a house in an adjoining village, he fell into the hands of a surgeon, who insisted that the leg must be amputated immediately, but who left him for a moment, and never returned. Then he encountered a good old woman, who dressed his wound and nursed him night and day. So that in a few weeks he recovered, and was able to set out for Artigues, too thankful to return to his house and land, still more to his wife and child, and fully resolved never to leave them again.

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