

GÉRARD DE NERVAL

SYLVIE: SOUVENIRS DU
VALOIS

Gérard de Nerval

Sylvie: souvenirs du Valois

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Gérard de Nerval

Sylvie: souvenirs du Valois

GÉRARD DE NERVAL

*Of all that were thy prisons-ah, untamed,
Ah, light and sacred soul! – none holds thee now;
No wall, no bar, no body of flesh, but thou
Art free and happy in the lands unnamed,
Within whose gates, on weary wings and maimed,
Thou still would'st bear that mystic golden bough
The Sybil doth to singing men allow,
Yet thy report folk heeded not, but blamed.*

*And they would smile and wonder, seeing where
Thou stood'st, to watch light leaves, or clouds, or wind,
Dreamily murmuring a ballad air,
Caught from the Valois peasants, dost thou find
A new life gladder than the old times were,
A love more fair than Sylvie, and as kind?*

ANDREW LANG.

SYLVIE ET AURÉLIE

IN MEMORY OF GÉRARD DE Nerval

*Two loves there were, and one was born
Between the sunset and the rain;
Her singing voice went through the corn,
Her dance was woven 'neath the thorn,
On grass the fallen blossoms stain;
And suns may set and moons may wane,
But this love comes no more again.*

*There were two loves, and one made white
Thy singing lips and golden hair;
Born of the city's mire and light,
The shame and splendour of the night,
She trapped and fled thee unaware;
Not through the lamplight and the rain
Shalt thou behold this love again.*

*Go forth and seek, by wood and bill,
Thine ancient love of dawn and dew;
There comes no voice from mere or rill,
Her dance is over, fallen still
The ballad burdens that she knew:
And thou must wait for her in vain,
Till years bring back thy youth again.*

*That other love, afield, afar
Fled the light love, with lighter feet.
Nay, though thou seek where gravesteads are,
And flit in dreams from star to star,
That dead love thou shalt never meet,
Till through bleak dawn and blowing rain
Thy soul shall find her soul again.*

ANDREW LANG.

GÉRARD DE NERVAL

Il a toujours cherché dans le monde ce que le monde ne pouvait plus lui donner.

LUDOVIC HALÉVY.

He has been a sick man all his life. He was always a seeker after something in the world that is there in no satisfying measure, or not at all.

WALTER PATER.

I

Of Gérard de Nerval, whose true name was Gérard Labrunie, it has been finely said: "His was the most beautiful of all the lost souls of the French Romance."¹ Born in 1808, he came to his death by suicide one dark winter night towards the end of January.

The story of this life and its tragic finale was well known at the time to all men of letters, – Théophile Gautier, Paul de Saint-Victor, Arsène Houssaye, – friends who never forgot the young poet even after he went the way that madness lies. For it was insanity, – a nostalgia of the soul always imminent – that led him into the squalid *Rue de la Vieille-Lanterne*, in which long forgotten corner of old Paris his dead body was found one bleak belated dawn. And this was forty years ago.

In later days Maxime du Camp and Ludovic Halévy have retold with great feeling the history of Gérard, his early triumphs, his love for Jenny Colon, – the Aurélie of these *Souvenirs du Valois*, – and how at last life's scurrile play was ended.

¹ See *A Century of French Verse*, translated and edited by William John Robertson (4to, London, 1895).

II

One of Mr. Andrew Lang's most genuine appreciations occurs in an epistle addressed to Miss Girton, Cambridge; where, for the benefit of that mythical young person, he translates a few passages out of *Sylvie*, and favours us with a specimen of Gérard's verse.

"I translated these fragments," he tells her, "long ago in one of the first things I ever tried to write. The passages are as touching and fresh, the originals, I mean, as when first I read them, and one hears the voice of Sylvie singing:

'A Dammartin, l'y a trois belles filles,
L'y en a z'une plus belle que le jour.'

So Sylvie married a confectioner, and, like Marion in the 'Ballad of Forty Years,' 'Adrienne's dead' in a convent. That is all the story, all the idyl."

And just before this he has said of Gérard: "What he will live by, is his story of Sylvie; it is one of the little masterpieces of the world. It has a Greek perfection. One reads it, and however old one is, youth comes back, and April, and a thousand pleasant sounds of birds in hedges, of wind in the boughs, of brooks trotting merrily under the rustic bridges. And this fresh nature is peopled by girls eternally young, natural, gay, or pensive, standing with eager feet on the threshold of their life, innocent, expectant, with the old ballads of old France upon their lips. For the story is full of these artless, lisping numbers of the popular French muse, the ancient ballads that Gérard collected and put into the mouth of Sylvie, the pretty peasant-girl."

One more quotation from Mr. Lang, and we are done. Sylvie and Gérard have met, and they go on a visit to her aunt, who, while she prepares dinner, sends Gérard for her niece, who had "gone to ransack the peasant treasures in the garret." "Two portraits were hanging there – one, that of a young man of the good old times, smiling with red lips and brown eyes, a pastel in an oval frame. Another medallion held the portrait of his wife, gay, *piquante*, in a bodice with ribbons fluttering, and with a bird perched on her finger. It was the old aunt in her youth, and further search discovered her ancient festal-gown, of stiff brocade, Sylvie arrayed herself in this splendour; patches were found in a box of tarnished gold, a fan, a necklace of amber."

This is the charming moment chosen by M. Andhré des Gachons as the subject of his *aquarelle*, reproduced in colour as frontispiece to the present edition.

III

In thus bringing out a fresh version of *Sylvie*, not to include the all too few illusive lyrics "done into English" by Mr. Lang, his exquisite sonnet on Gérard, and the lovely lines upon "Sylvie et Aurélie," were a deplorable omission. The sonnet exists in an earlier form; preferably, the later version is here given.

Of De Nerval's prose little has yet found its way to us. His poetry is fully as inaccessible. Things of such iridescent hue are possibly beyond the art of translation. They are written in an unknown tongue; say, rather, in the language of Dreamland, "vaporous, unaccountable"; – a world of crepuscular dawns, as of light irradiated from submerged sea caverns, – "the mermaid's haunt" beheld of him alone.

IV

With what *adieux* shall we now take leave of our little pearl of a story? And of him who gave us this exquisite creation of heart and brain what words remain to say?

Thou, Sylvie, art an unfading flower of virginal, soft Spring, and faint, elusive skies. For *thee* Earth's old sweet nights have shed their tenderest dews, and in thy lovely Valois land thou canst not fade or die.

Thy lover, child, fared forth beneath an alien star. For *him* there was no true country, here; – no return to thy happy-hearted love: the desert sands long since effaced the valley track. Only the far distant lying, – the abyss that calls and is never dumb, urged his onward steps. And these things, and this divine homesickness led him, pale nympholept, beyond Earth's human shores. Thither to thee, rapt Soul, shall all bright dreams of day, all lonely visions of the night, converge at last.

SYLVIE:

(SOUVENIRS DU VALOIS.)

AN OLD TUNE

GÉRARD DE NERVAL

*There is an air for which I would disown
Mozart's, Rossini's, Weber's melodies, —
A sweet, sad air that languishes and sighs,
And keeps its secret charm for me alone.*

*Whene'er I hear that music vague and old,
Two hundred years are mist that rolls away;
The thirteenth Louis reigns, and I behold
A green land golden in the dying day.*

*An old red castle, strong with stony towers,
The windows gay with many coloured glass;
Wide plains, and rivers flowing among flowers,
That bathe the castle basement as they pass.*

*In antique weed, with dark eyes and gold hair,
A lady looks forth from her window high;
It may be that I knew and found her fair,
In some forgotten life, long time gone by.*

(ANDREW LANG.)

I. A WASTED NIGHT

I passed out of a theatre where I was wont to appear nightly, in the proscenium boxes, in the attitude of suitor. Sometimes it was full, sometimes nearly empty; it mattered little to me, whether a handful of listless spectators occupied the pit, while antiquated costumes formed a doubtful setting for the boxes, or whether I made one of an audience swayed by emotion, crowned at every tier with flower-decked robes, flashing gems and radiant faces. The spectacle of the house left me indifferent, that of the stage could not fix my attention until at the second or third scene of a dull masterpiece of the period, a familiar vision illumined the vacancy, and by a word and a breath, gave life to the shadowy forms around me.

I felt that my life was linked with hers; her smile filled me with immeasurable bliss; the tones of her voice, so sweet and sonorous, thrilled me with love and joy. My ardent fancy endowed her with every perfection until she seemed to respond to all my raptures – beautiful as day in the blaze of the footlights, pale as night when their glare was lowered and rays from the chandelier above revealed her, lighting up the gloom with the radiance of her beauty, like those divine Hours with starry brows, which stand out against the dark background of the frescoes of Herculaneum.

For a whole year I had not sought to know what she might be, in the world outside, fearing to dim the magic mirror which reflected to me her image. Some idle gossip, it is true, touching the woman, rather than the actress, had reached my ears, but I heeded it less than any floating rumours concerning the Princess of Elis or the Queen of Trebizonde, for I was on my guard. An uncle of mine whose manner of life during the period preceding the close of the eighteenth century, had given him occasion to know them well, had warned me that actresses were not women, since nature had forgotten to give them hearts. He referred, no doubt, to those of his own day, but he related so many stories of his illusions and disappointments, and displayed so many portraits upon ivory, charming medallions which he afterwards used to adorn his snuff-boxes, so many yellow love-letters and faded tokens, each with its peculiar history, that I had come to think ill of them as a class, without considering the march of time.

We were living then in a strange period, such as often follows a revolution, or the decline of a great reign. The heroic gallantry of the Fronde, the drawing-room vice of the Regency, the scepticism and mad orgies of the Directory, were no more. It was a time of mingled activity, indecision and idleness, bright utopian dreams, philosophic or religious aspirations, vague ardour, dim instincts of rebirth, weariness of past discords, uncertain hopes, – an age somewhat like that of Peregrinus and Apuleius. The material man yearned for the roses which should regenerate him, from the hands of the fair Isis; the goddess appeared to us by night, in her eternal youth and purity, inspiring in us remorse for the hours wasted by day; and yet, ambition suited not our years, while the greedy strife, the mad chase in pursuit of honour and position, held us aloof from every possible sphere of activity. Our only refuge was the ivory tower of the poets whither we climbed higher and higher to escape the crowd. Upon the heights to which our masters guided us, we breathed at last the pure air of solitude, we quaffed oblivion in the golden cup of fable, we were drunk with poetry and love. Love, alas! of airy forms, of rose and azure tints, of metaphysical phantoms. Seen nearer, the real woman repelled our ingenuous youth which required her to appear as a queen or a goddess, and above all, inaccessible.

Some of our number held these platonic paradoxes in light esteem, and athwart our mystic reveries brandished at times the torch of the deities of the underworld, that names through the darkness for an instant with its train of sparks. Thus it chanced that on quitting the theatre with the sense of bitter sadness left by a vanished dream, I turned with pleasure to a club where a party of us used to sup, and where all depression yielded to the inexhaustible vivacity of a few brilliant wits, whose stormy gaiety at times rose to sublimity. Periods of renewal or decadence always produce such

natures, and our discussions often became so animated that timid ones in the company would glance from the window to see if the Huns, the Turkomans or the Cossacks were not coming to put an end to these disputations of sophists and rhetoricians. "Let us drink, let us love, this is wisdom!" was the code of the younger members. One of them said to me: "I have noticed for some time that I always meet you in the same theatre. For which one do you go?" Which! why, it seemed impossible to go there for another! However, I confessed the name. "Well," said my friend kindly, "yonder is the happy man who has just accompanied her home, and who, in accordance with the rules of our club, will not perhaps seek her again till night is over."

With slight emotion I turned toward the person designated, and perceived a young man, well dressed, with a pale, restless face, good manners, and eyes full of gentle melancholy. He flung a gold piece on the card-table and lost it with indifference. "What is it to me?" said I, "he or another?" There must be someone, and he seemed worthy of her choice. "And you?" "I? I chase a phantom, that is all."

On my way out, I passed through the reading-room and glanced carelessly at a newspaper, to learn, I believe, the state of the stock market. In the wreck of my fortunes, there chanced to be a large investment in foreign securities, and it was reported that, although long disowned, they were about to be acknowledged; – and, indeed, this had just happened in consequence of a change in the ministry. The bonds were quoted high, so I was rich again.

A single thought was occasioned by this sudden change of fortune, that the woman whom I had loved so long, was mine, if I wished. My ideal was within my grasp, or was it only one more disappointment, a mocking misprint? No, for the other papers gave the same figures, while the sum which I had gained rose before me like the golden statue of Moloch.

"What," thought I, "would that young man say, if I were to take his place by the woman whom he has left alone?"

I shrunk from the thought, and my pride revolted. Not thus, not at my age, dare I slay love with gold! I will not play the tempter! Besides, such an idea belongs to the past. Who can tell me that this woman may be bought? My eyes glanced idly over the journal in my hand, and I noticed two lines: "*Provincial Bouquet Festival*. To-morrow the archers of Senlis will present the bouquet to the archers of Loisy." These simple words aroused in me an entirely new train of thought, stirring long-forgotten memories of provincial days, faint echoes of the artless joys of youth.

The horn and the drum were resounding afar in hamlet and forest; the young maidens were twining garlands as they sang, and binding nosegays with ribbon. A heavy wagon, drawn by oxen, received their offerings as it passed, and we, the children of that region, formed the escort with our bows and arrows, assuming the proud title of knights, – we did not know that we were only preserving, from age to age, an ancient feast of the Druids that had survived later religions and monarchies.

II. ADRIENNE

I sought my bed, but not to sleep, and, lost in a half-conscious reverie, all my youth passed before me. How often, in the border-land of dreams, while yet the mind repels their encroaching fancies, we are enabled to review in a few moments, the important events of a lifetime!

I saw a castle of the time of Henry IV., with its slate-covered turrets, its reddish front, jutting corners of yellow stone, and a stretch of green bordered by elms and lime-trees, through whose foliage, the setting sun shot its last fiery rays. Young girls were dancing in a ring on the lawn, singing quaint old tunes caught from their mothers, in a French whose native purity bespoke the old country of Valois, where for more than a thousand years had throbbled the heart of France. I was the only boy in the circle where I had led my young companion, Sylvie, a little maid from the neighboring hamlet, so fresh and animated, with her black eyes, regular features and slightly sun-burned skin. I loved but her, I had eyes but for her – till then! I had scarcely noticed in our round, a tall, beautiful blonde, called Adrienne, when suddenly, in following the figures of the dance, she was left alone with me, in the centre of the ring; we were of the same height, and they bade me kiss her, while the dance and song went whirling on, more merrily than before. When I kissed her, I could not forbear pressing her hand; her golden curls touched my cheek, and from that moment, a new feeling possessed me.

The fair girl must sing a song to reclaim her place in the dance, and we seated ourselves about her. In a sweet, penetrating voice, somewhat husky, as is common in that country of mists and fogs, she sang one of those old ballads full of love and sorrow, which always carry the story of an imprisoned princess, shut in a tower by her father, as a punishment for loving. At the end of every stanza, the melody died away in those quavering trills which enable young voices to simulate so well the tremulous notes of old women.

While she sang, the shadows of the great trees lengthened and the light of the young moon fell full upon her, as she stood apart from the rapt circle. The lawn was covered with rising clouds of mist that trailed its white wreaths over every blade of grass. We thought ourselves in Paradise. The song ended and no one dared break the stillness – at last I rose and ran to the gardens where some laurels were growing in large porcelain vases painted in monochrome. I plucked two branches which were twined into a crown, bound with ribbon, and I placed it upon Adrienne's brow, where its glossy leaves gleamed above her fair locks in the pale moonlight. She looked liked Dante's Beatrice, smiling at the poet as he strayed on the confines of the Blest Abodes.

Adrienne rose and, drawing up her slender figure, bowed to us gracefully and ran back to the castle; they said she was the child of a race allied to the ancient kings of France, that the blood of the Valois princes flowed in her veins. Upon this festal day, she had been permitted to join in our sports, but we were not to see her again, for on the morrow she would return to the convent of which she was an inmate.

When I rejoined Sylvie, I found her weeping because of the crown I had given to the fair singer. I offered to make another for her, but she would not consent, saying she did not merit it. I vainly tried to vindicate myself, but she refused to speak as we went the homeward way.

Paris soon recalled me to resume my studies, and I bore with me the two-fold memory of a tender friendship sadly broken, and of a love uncertain and impossible, the source of painful musings which my college philosophy was powerless to dispel.

Adrienne's face alone haunted me, a vision of glory and beauty, sweetening and sharing the hours of arduous study.

In the vacation of the following year, I learned that this lovely girl, who had but flitted past me, was destined by her family to a religious life.

III. RESOLVE

These memories, recalled in my dreamy revery, explained everything. This hopeless passion for an actress, which took possession of me nightly from the hour when the curtain rose until I fell asleep, was born of my remembrance of Adrienne, the pale moon-flower, as she glided over the green, a rose-tinted vision enveloped in a cloud of misty whiteness. The likeness of a face long years forgotten was now distinctly outlined; it was a pencil-sketch, which time had blurred, developed into a painting, like the first drafts of the old masters which delight us in a gallery, the completed masterpiece being found elsewhere.

To fall in love with a nun in the guise of an actress!.. suppose they were one and the same! – it is enough to drive one mad, a fatal mystery, drawing me on like a will o' the wisp flitting over the rushes of a stagnant pool. Let us keep a firm foothold on reality.

Sylvie, too, whom I loved so dearly, why had I forgotten her for three long years? She was a charming girl, the prettiest maiden in Loisy; surely she still lives, pure and good. I can see her window, with the creeper twining around the rose-bush, and the cage of linnets hanging on the left; I can hear the click of her bobbins and her favourite song:

La belle était assise
Près du ruisseau coulant...

(The maiden was sitting
Beside the swift stream.)

She is still waiting for me. Who would wed her, so poor? The men of her native village are sturdy peasants with rough hands and gaunt, tanned faces. I, the "little Parisian," had won her heart in my frequent visits near Loisy, to my poor uncle, now dead. For the past three years I have been squandering like a lord the modest inheritance left by him, which might have sufficed for a lifetime, and Sylvie, I know, would have helped me save it. Chance returns me a portion, it is not too late.

What is she doing now? She must be asleep... No, she is not asleep; to-day is the Feast of the Bow, the only one in the year when the dance goes on all night... She is there. What time is it? I had no watch.

Amongst a profusion of ornaments, which it was then the fashion to collect, in order to restore the local colour of an old-time interior, there gleamed with freshly polished lustre, one of those tortoise-shell clocks of the Renaissance, whose gilded dome, surmounted by a figure of Time, was supported by caryatides in the style of the Medici, resting in their turn upon rearing steeds. The historic Diana, leaning upon her stag, was in bas-relief under the face, where, upon an inlaid background, enameled figures marked the hours. The works, no doubt excellent, had not been put in motion for two centuries. It was not to tell the hour that I bought this time-piece in Touraine.

I went down to the porter's lodge to find that his clock marked one in the morning. "In four hours I can be at Loisy," thought I.

Five or six cabs were still standing on the Place du Palais Royal, awaiting the gamblers and clubmen. "To Loisy," I said to the nearest driver. "Where is it?" "Near Senlis, eight leagues distant." "I will take you to the posting station," said the cabman, more alert than I.

How dreary the Flanders road is by night! It gains beauty only as it approaches the belt of the forest. Two monotonous rows of trees, taking on the semblance of distorted figures, rise ever before the eye; in the distance, patches of verdure and cultivated land, bounded on the left by the blue hills

of Montmorency, Ecouen and Luzarches. Here is Gonesse, an ordinary little town, full of memories of the League and the Fronde.

Beyond Louvres is a road lined with apple-trees, whose white blossoms I have often seen unfolding in the night, like stars of the earth – it is the shortest way to the village. While the carriage climbs the slope, let me recall old memories of the days when I came here so often.

IV. A VOYAGE TO CYTHERA

Several years had passed, and only a childish memory was left me of that meeting with Adrienne in front of the castle. I was again at Loisy on the annual feast, and again I mingled with the knights of the bow, taking my place in the same company as of old. The festival had been arranged by young people belonging to the old families, who still own the solitary castles, despoiled rather by time than revolution, hidden here and there in the forest. From Chantilly, Compiègne and Senlis, joyous companies hastened to join the rustic train of archers. After the long parade through hamlet and village, after mass in the church, contests of skill and awarding of prizes, the victors were invited to a feast prepared upon an island in the centre of one of the tiny lakes, fed by the Nonette and the Thève. Boats, gay with flags, conveyed us to this island, chosen on account of an old temple with pillars, destined to serve as a banquet hall. Here, as in Hermenonville, the country side is sown with these frail structures, designed by philosophical millionaires, in accordance with the prevailing taste of the close of the eighteenth century. Probably this temple was originally dedicated to Urania. Three pillars had fallen, bearing with them a portion of the architrave, but the space within had been cleared, and garlands hung between the columns, quite rejuvenated this modern ruin, belonging rather to the paganism of Boufflers and Chaulieu than of Horace. The sail on the lake was perhaps designed to recall Watteau's "Voyage to Cythera," the illusion being marred only by our modern dress. The immense bouquet was borne from its wagon and placed in a boat, accompanied by the usual escort of young girls dressed in white, and this graceful pageant, the survival of an ancient custom, was mirrored in the still waters that flowed around the island, gleaming in the red sunlight with its hawthorn thickets and colonnades.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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