



Mrs. C. L. Anderson.

JOSEPH BALSAMO



"YOU OFFER ME WHAT IS NOT YOURS TO GIVE"

Dumas, Vol. Six

THE WORKS OF
ALEXANDRE DUMAS

IN THIRTY VOLUMES



JOSEPH BALSAMO



ILLUSTRATED WITH DRAWINGS ON WOOD BY
EMINENT FRENCH AND AMERICAN ARTISTS



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INTRODUCTORY.

NEAR the source of the Seltz, on the left bank of the Rhine, some leagues from the imperial city of Worms, there begins a range of mountains, the scattered and rugged summits of which disappear northward like a herd of wild buffaloes vanishing in a mist.

These mountains, which from their lofty summits overlook an almost desert region, and seem but to form an attendant train to one which is their chief, have each a peculiar figure, and each bears a name indicating some tradition connected with it. One is the King's Chair—another the Wild-rose Stone; this the Falcon's Rock—that the Serpent's Crest.

The highest of all, which raises to the clouds its granite top, girt with a crown of ruins, is Mont Tonnerre.

When evening deepens the shadows of the lofty oaks—when the last rays of the sun die away on the peaks of this family of giants, we might imagine that silence descended from these sublime heights to the plain—that an invisible hand unfolded from their declivities the dark-blue veil through which we see the stars, to wrap it over the world wearied with the toil and the noise of the day. Waking gives place to sleep, and all the tenants of earth and air repose.

Even then is not heard the stream of the Seltz, pursuing its mysterious course by the fir-trees on its banks, stopping not by day or night, for it must hurry on to the Rhine, which to it is eternity. The sands of its current are so smooth, its reeds so flexible, its rocks so richly clothed with moss, that not one of its waves murmurs, from Morsheim, where it rises, to Freewenheim, where it finishes its course.

A little above its source, between Albisheim and Kirchheim-Poland, a road, winding deep between two rugged walls of rock, leads to Danenfels. Beyond Danenfels the road becomes a path; it narrows, is lost, and the eye seeks in vain anything on which to rest, except the slopes of Mont Tonnerre, whose lightning-blasted summit is hidden by a belt of trees impenetrable to the eye.

In fact, once under those trees, leafy as the oaks of Dodona of old, the traveler may, in open day, continue his way unseen by any one on the plain below. Were his horse hung with more bells than any mule in Spain, not a sound would be heard; were his trappings of gold and jewels like those of an emperor, not a ray from them would pierce through the foliage, so powerful is the density of the forest in extinguishing sound, and its darkness in dimming the brightest colors.

Even at the present day, when our highest mountains have become mere observatories for every-day tourists, on whose lips the most fearful of the legends of poetry call up a smile of doubt—even now this solitude has its terrors. A few miserable-looking houses, outposts of neighboring villages, appear here and there, but at a distance from the magic belt, to show that man is to be found in that region. Their inhabitants are millers, who carry their flour to Rockenhausen or Alzey, or shepherds, who herd their flocks around the mountain, they and their dogs trembling often to hear some enormous fir-tree fall with age, crashing in the unknown depths of the forest.

All the fireside tales of the country are gloomy, and that path which is lost beyond Danenfels, among the heath and furze of the mountains, has not always, they say, led good Christians to a safe shelter. Perhaps there yet may live one of those country people who has heard his father or his grandfather tell what we are now about to relate.

On the 6th of May, 1770, at that hour when the waters of the great river are tinged with a pale-rose color, that is to say, when the inhabitants of the Rhingau see the setting sun sink behind the spire of Strasburg Cathedral, which divides it into two hemispheres of fire—a man, who came from

Mayence, having passed through Alzey and Kirchheim-Poland, appeared beyond the village of Danenfels. He followed the path so long as the path was visible, then, when all trace of it vanished, dismounting from his horse, he fastened its bridle to the first fir-tree of the pathless forest.

The animal neighed uneasily, and the woods seemed to start at a sound so unusual.

"Gently, gently, Djerid!—twelve leagues are enough for you : here you must wait my return."

The traveler tried to peer into the recesses of the forest, but in vain ; he could only see masses of dark shadows relieved upon shadows yet darker. Turning then to his horse, whose Arab name declared his race and swiftness, he took his head between his hands, approached his lips to the smoking nostrils of the animal, and said :

"Farewell, my good horse!—farewell, if it be fated that we meet not again."

As he said these words he looked quickly around as if he feared they might have been overheard, or as if he desired it. The horse shook his silky mane, pawed and neighed, as he would in the desert on the approach of the lion. The traveler stroked down his head with a smile which seemed to say, "Thou art not wrong, Djerid ; there is danger here."

Then, having decided beforehand, no doubt, not to oppose force against this danger, the unknown adventurer drew from his saddle-bow two richly mounted pistols, took out their balls, and sprinkled the powder on the ground. This done, he put them back in their place. Then he unbuckled a sword with a steel handle, wrapped the belt of it round it, and put all together under the saddle, so that the pommel of the sword was towards the horse's shoulder. After these formalities, the traveler shook off the dust from his boots, took off his gloves, felt in his pockets, and having found a pair of small scissors and a penknife with a tortoise-shell handle, he threw first the one and then the other over his shoulder, without looking where they fell. That done, he again stroked Djerid, breathed deeply, as if to expand his chest, feeling that his strength was about to be taxed,

and sought a pathway among the trees. He found none, and at last entered the forest at a venture.

It is time that we should give our readers some idea of the traveler's appearance, as he is destined to play an important part in our history.

He was a man apparently of thirty or two-and-thirty years of age, of middle height, but admirably made, and his every movement exhibited a fine combination of strength and flexibility of limb. He was dressed in a traveling-coat of black velvet, with gold buttons, under which appeared an embroidered waistcoat; tight-fitting breeches of leather, and polished boots, on limbs which might have served as a model for a sculptor, completed his costume. As to his face, whose rapid change of expression bespoke him of a southern race, there were in it both tact and power of character. His eye, which could express every feeling, seemed to read the soul of any one on whom it rested. His complexion, naturally dark, had been rendered darker by exposure to a warmer sun than ours. His mouth, large, but well formed, showed a fine set of teeth, the whiteness of which was heightened by contrast with the darkness of his skin. His foot was long, but finely formed, and his hand small, but sinewy.

Scarcely had he advanced two steps among the dark fir-trees when he heard the quick tramp of hoofs in the direction where he had left his horse. His first movement was to turn back, but he stopped himself; however, he could not resist the wish to know the fate of Djerid—he raised himself on tiptoe and glanced through an opening. Djerid had disappeared, guided by an invisible hand which had untied his bridle. A slight frown contracted the brow of the unknown, yet something like a smile curled his chiseled lips.

Then he went on his way toward the center of the forest.

For a few steps further the twilight aided him, then it left him, and in darkness so thick, that seeing no longer where to place his foot, he stopped.

"I got on very well to Danenfels, for from Mayence to Danenfels there is a road," said he, aloud, "and from Danenfels to the Dark Heath, because there is a path, and from

the Dark Heath hither, though there is neither road nor path, because I could see where I was going—but now I must stop—I see nothing.”

Scarcely had he pronounced these words, in a dialect half French, half Sicilian, when a light appeared about fifty paces from the traveler.

“Thanks,” said he, “now as the light moves I shall follow.”

The light moved steadily on, with a gliding motion, as we sometimes see a light move over the stage of a theater.

The traveler might have gone about a hundred steps further, when he thought he felt a breathing at his ear. He started.

“Turn not,” said a voice on the right, “or thou art dead.”

“Good !” replied the immovable traveler.

“Speak not,” said a voice on the left, “or thou art dead.”

The traveler bowed without speaking.

“But if thou art afraid,” said a third voice which, like that of Hamlet’s father, seemed to come from the bowels of the earth, “turn back ; that will declare that thou abandonest thy scheme, and thou shalt be permitted to go.”

The traveler made a gesture of dissent with his hand, and went on.

The night was so dark and the forest so thick that he could not advance without occasionally stumbling, and his progress was slow. For nearly an hour the flame moved on, and he followed without hearing a murmur, and without showing a symptom of fear. All at once it disappeared.

The traveler was out of the forest. He raised his eyes, and in the dark-blue sky saw some twinkling stars.

He continued to advance in the direction of the place where the light had disappeared, and soon saw arise before him a ruin, the specter, as it were, of some ancient castle.

Next, his foot struck against some of its fragments. Then something cold passed his temples and sealed up his eyes, and he saw not even the shadows of outward objects.

A bandage of wet linen bound his head. This was only what he expected, no doubt, as he made no effort to remove it. He only silently stretched out his hand like a blind man imploring a guide. His gesture was understood. A cold, dry, bony hand grasped the fingers of the traveler.

He knew that it was the hand of a skeleton, but if that hand had been endowed with sensation it would have felt that his did not tremble.

Then the traveler felt himself rapidly drawn on for about a hundred paces. Suddenly the hand released its grasp, the bandage fell from his eyes, he stopped—he was on the summit of Mont Tonnerre.

II.

HE WHO IS.

IN the midst of a glade formed by larches, bare with age, rose one of those feudal castles which the Crusaders, on their return from the Holy Land, scattered over Europe. The gateways and arches had been finely sculptured, and in their niches were statues; but these lay broken at the foot of the walls, and creeping plants and wild-flowers now filled their places.

The traveler, on opening his eyes, found himself before the damp and mossy steps of the principal entrance; on the first of these steps stood the phantom by whose bony hand he had been led thither. A long shroud wrapped it from head to foot, and the eyeless sockets darted flame. Its fleshless hand pointed to the interior of the ruins, as the termination of the traveler's journey. This interior was a hall, the lower part of which was but half seen, but from its vaults, heaped with ruins, flickered a dim and mysterious light.

The traveler bowed in assent. The phantom mounted slowly step by step to the hall, and plunged into the ruins. The unknown followed calmly and slowly up the eleven steps which this specter had trodden, and entered also.

With the noise of a clashing wall of brass the great gate of the portal closed behind him.

At the entrance of a circular hall, lighted by three lamps, which cast a greenish light, the phantom stopped. The traveler, ten steps farther back, stopped in his turn.

"Open thine eyes!" said the phantom.

"I see!" replied the unknown.

The phantom then drew, with a proud gesture, a two-edged sword from beneath his shroud, and struck it against a column of bronze. A hollow, metallic groan responded to his blow.

Then all around the hall arose stone seats, and numerous phantoms, like the first, appeared. Each was armed with a two-edged sword, and each took his place on a seat, and seen by the pale-green light of the three lamps, they might have been taken, so cold and motionless were they, for statues on their pedestals. And these human statues came out in strange relief on the black tapestry of the walls.

Some seats were placed in advance of the others, on which sat six specters who seemed like chiefs—one seat was vacant.

He who sat on the middle seat arose.

"Brethren, how many are present?" he asked, turning to the assembly.

"Three hundred," replied the phantoms, with one voice. It thundered through the hall, and died away among the funereal hangings on the walls.

"Three hundred," replied the president, "and each speaks for ten thousand companions. Three hundred swords, which are equal to three million of poniards!"

Then he turned to the traveler.

"What dost thou wish?" he asked.

"To see the light," replied the other.

"The paths which lead to the mountain of fire are rugged and difficult. Fearest thou not?"

"I fear nothing."

"One step forward, and you cannot return. Reflect."

"I stop not till I reach the goal."

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