

# **Prosper Mérimée's**

## **Short Stories**

# **Table of Contents**

Introduction Prosper Mérimée

Carmen

The Taking of the Redoubt

Mateo Falcone

The Venus of Ille

FOOTNOTES:

# LITTLE FRENCH MASTERPIECES



PROSPER MÉRIMÉE  
From an etching

# Introduction

## Prosper Mérimée

(1803-1870)

The stories here presented are a selection from that brilliant series which shine like a constellation in French literature of the last century, blazoning Mérimée's name across it. Each one has been tested and judged by successive generations of readers and critics. The authoritative appraisers of literary values, French and English, have been pronouncing upon them from the time of their publication until now, when they are still pronouncing upon them, as upon new productions. Their interest, nevertheless, is still fresh, their charm as attractive as ever, and inexplicable, as charm must be. The prediction that was made in their day having been fulfilled so far, it does not seem hazardous to renew it, at our own risk, that they may be placed alongside of those classics of fiction that meet so natural a soil in the human mind that we can no more foresee their ceasing to give pleasure to readers in course of time than we can foresee the flowers in the gardens ceasing to give pleasure to lovers of flowers.

*Carmen*, with which the book begins, was the last one written of the series. It might, however, be said to antedate them all, for the first impulsive, perhaps instinctive, love of Mérimée's imagination was for the passionate drama of Spain, and his first production, *The Plays of Clara Gazul*, was so vivid an imitation of it that it mystified the critics of the time, who had

yet to learn the extreme susceptibility of Mérimée's mind to exotic influences; a susceptibility that the author indulged, if he did not foster, throughout life.

It was not until 1830 (after the publication of *Mateo Falcone* and *The Taking of the Redoubt*) that Mérimée saw Spain with the eyes of his body, and became naturalised in that part of it, that, as he describes it, "was bounded on the north by a *gitana* and on the south by a carbine," whose patois he spoke fluently, in whose *ventas* he was at home, where he confesses to have committed a thousand follies. In his letters addressed from Madrid and Valencia, during this first voyage to Spain, those who are curious about such questions can read the account of Mérimée's introduction to Carmen,—that is, to José Maria, the contrabandist and bandit, and to the toreador. As for Carmen herself, "that servant of the devil," as José Maria describes her only too well, although she does not figure in the letters, we may infer that she did in some of the "thousand follies." The story was not, however, written until fifteen years later than this, after many subsequent visits to its birthplace. A postscriptum, dated 1842, is attached to the letters, giving an account of the death of the toreador and of José Maria.

Mérimée had so long before this story proved himself the most exquisite master, in his day, of the art of simplicity and naturalness in writing, that he would seem to have left no farther room to himself for advance in perfection, no margin for additional praise for this his last story; and yet it has a quality of its own that distinguishes it from every preceding one.

“Señor,” said José Maria, “one becomes a rascal without thinking of it; a pretty girl steals your wits, you fight for her, an accident happens, you have to live in the mountains, and from a smuggler you become a robber before you know it.”

This is the simplicity and naturalness, not of Mérimée, but of José Maria himself; and the story that follows shows absolutely no other author than the condemned bandit. There is no consciousness in reading it of the perfection that mars the very perfection of *Colomba*, nor suspicion of premeditated pathos as in the supremely pathetic *Arsène Guillot*. Form and pathos are no more thought of by the author than by José Maria himself. And, therefore, as Taine says, “dissertations on primitive and savage instinct, learned essays like Schopenhauer’s on love and death, are not worth its hundred pages.”

As if he himself recognised the finality of his art in this identity of it with nature, Mérimée laid aside his pen after writing it, and wrote no more stories for twenty years; in truth, wrote no more, for as his biographer Filon expresses it, when he took up his pen again, he found it irremediably rusted.

*The Taking of the Redoubt* resembles *Carmen* in this, that the author so completely effaces his personality from the teller of the story, that one finds it easier to suppose than not that the incident was related to him, as he says in the prefatory note, by the officer to whom it happened, and that he merely wrote it down from memory. The concession, however, concedes nothing, as long as the word “memory” is retained in the explanation. For what it stands for here is an imagination that could make the carelessly dropped incident its own, and turn upon it a marvellous sight (lens-eye and light, all in one), until

what we read was as clear to Mérimée as it is to us now. Then he wrote it down in the pages that are without a match in the thousands of descriptions of battles that have been written. As one does not go to another for words to describe what one sees oneself, so we need no interpreter of our sensations when we read *The Taking of the Redoubt*. It is for us alone, as Mérimée seems to tell us, to read it or not to read it, to see what took place or not see it.

In the list of Mérimée's stories *Mateo Falcone* stands immediately before *The Taking of the Redoubt*. Both were published in the same year, in 1829, which was the twenty-sixth of the author's age. It is so seldom mentioned now in English without Walter Pater's judgment upon it, "perhaps the cruellest story in the world," that that might well be added to the name as a sub-title. It would be so, perhaps, if Mérimée had not related it. He himself, despite the cold impassivity that he had schooled himself into maintaining as an author,—he himself shows here and there a trace of the emotion that he arouses in us. The temptation, fall, and punishment of the little child touch indeed the most sensitive nerve in the human heart; the one that can give the keenest pain; that cuts through the heart like a knife. The story would be well-nigh unbearable in another hand than Mérimée's, or had he told it in a clean, clear thrust of reality, as in *The Taking of the Redoubt*. But he retards the action in the beginning with details and diverts the attention with local colour; not, however, be it remarked, such local colour as he saw with his own eyes, in Spain, but the kind that he learned how to make so easily in the days of *Clara Gazul* and *La Guzla*, that he lost, as he confesses, all respect for it. Mateo, Gianetto, Gamba, and Giuseppa belong also to the

domain of the not seen, not known. But the child, the unfortunate Fortunato, stands out against the artificial background of place, time, and circumstance, with a vividness of reality that, as in *The Taking of the Redoubt*, would make the reality seem vague and indistinct beside it. A few pages of this story might be cited as the highest point that Mérimée attained as an artist.

He himself considered *The Venus of Ille* the best story he ever wrote. The preference is characteristic of him. It contains all the elements of the mysterious and horrible for which he had an inherent passion; and he relates it as he loved to relate the extraordinary, in the tone of skeptical raillery that is the surest as well as the subtlest way of sowing in a reader distrust in the integrity of his common sense. This tone, also, was an inherent quality of Mérimée's; it represented the attitude of his mind towards the illusions of his imagination, which he explains in one of his *Lettres Inédites*: "You cannot imagine, madame, the difference there is between the things which it pleases me to suppose and those which I admit to be true. I please myself in imagining goblins and fairies. I make my own hair stand on end by relating ghost stories to myself. But, notwithstanding the physical effect I experience, I am not prevented from not believing in ghosts; on this point my incredulity is so great that even if I were to see a ghost, I would not believe in it any the more."

The old mediæval legend was exhumed by Mérimée, as he unearthed the bronze statue of the maleficent Venus, in the little village under the shadow of the Canigou,—in all its beauty and terror, in all its ferocity, one might say, of pagan Christian.



He altered nothing of it, and added only what as a visiting archæologist, his rôle in the story, he could not omit: the details of his rather curious experience; the impression made upon him by the statue, as a woman of seductive wickedness and cruel, imperious passions, a type of woman that, as his biographer comments, "none in the Paris of his day (the home of such divinities) understood so well as he."

The ascent to the dramatic catastrophe of the story is so natural, easy, and pleasant (the preparations for a wedding and its celebration are of all pleasant things in the world what a reader loves most to dally with); the means employed by the writer are so natural—for there is not the faintest suggestion of or appeal to the morbid—that we arrive at the crisis well prepared to lose none of its weird and terrible intensity, and the thrill and the shudder that arise in us then are as real as Mérimée's own physical tribute to the power of his imagination.

Such stories have an intrinsic value that renders them independent of an author's name and reputation, even of his time and country. They are as easily detached from him, and with as little loss to themselves, as precious stones are from the name and place of the mine that once held them. This supreme distinction of a story is, nevertheless, what commends it to the assiduous seekers after the secret of literary perfection; the philosopher's stone of the world of letters. Mérimée, on the whole, has stood the biographical and critical tests applied to him well, both as man and artist, and, although the secret of his art in truth went to the grave with him, this much at least has been found out, that he was worthy to be the author of his stories.

Grace King

# Carmen

Πᾶσα γυνὴ χόλος ἐστίν· ἔχει δ' ἀγαθὰς δύο ὥρας  
Τὴν μίαν ἐν θαλάμῳ, τὴν μίαν ἐν θανάτῳ.

PALLADAS.

## I

I had always suspected the geographers of not knowing what they were talking about when they placed the battle-field of Munda in the country of the Bastuli-Pœni, near the modern Monda, some two leagues north of Marbella. According to my own conjectures concerning the text of the anonymous author of the *Bellum Hispaniense*, and in view of certain information collected in the Duke of Ossuna's excellent library, I believed that we should seek in the vicinity of Montilla the memorable spot where for the last time Cæsar played double or quits against the champions of the republic. Happening to be in Andalusia in the early autumn of 1830, I made quite a long excursion for the purpose of setting at rest such doubts as I still entertained. A memoir which I propose to publish ere long will, I trust, leave no further uncertainty in the minds of all honest archæologists. Pending the time when my deliverance shall solve at last the geographical problem which is now holding all the learning of Europe in suspense, I propose to tell you a little story; it has no bearing on the question of the actual location of Munda.

I had hired a guide and two horses at Cordova, and had taken the field with no other impedimenta than Cæsar's *Commentaries* and a shirt or two. On a certain day, as I wandered over the more elevated portion of the plain of Cachena, worn out with fatigue, dying with thirst, and scorched by a sun of molten lead, I was wishing with all my heart that Cæsar and Pompey's sons were in the devil's grip, when I spied, at a considerable distance from the path I was following, a tiny greensward, studded with reeds and rushes, which indicated the proximity of a spring. In fact, as I drew nearer, I found that what had seemed to be a greensward was a marshy tract through which a stream meandered, issuing apparently from a narrow ravine between two high buttresses of the Sierra de Cabra. I concluded that by ascending the stream I should find cooler water, fewer leeches and frogs, and perhaps a bit of shade among the cliffs. As we rode into the gorge my horse whinnied, and another horse, which I could not see, instantly answered. I had ridden barely a hundred yards when the gorge, widening abruptly, disclosed a sort of natural amphitheatre, entirely shaded by the high cliffs which surrounded it. It was impossible to find a spot which promised the traveller a more attractive sojourn. At the foot of perpendicular cliffs, the spring came bubbling forth and fell into a tiny basin carpeted with sand as white as snow. Five or six fine live-oaks, always sheltered from the wind and watered by the spring, grew upon its brink and covered it with their dense shade; and all about the basin, a fine, sheeny grass promised a softer bed than one could find at any inn within a radius of ten leagues.

The honour of discovering so attractive a spot did not belong to me. A man was already reposing there, and was asleep in all

probability when I rode in. Roused by the neighing of the horses, he had risen, and had walked towards his horse, which had taken advantage of his master's slumber to make a hearty meal on the grass in the immediate neighbourhood. He was a young fellow, of medium height, but of robust aspect, and with a proud and distrustful expression. His complexion, which might once have been fine, had become darker than his hair through the action of the sun. He held his horse's halter in one hand and in the other a blunderbuss with a copper barrel. I will admit that at first blush the blunderbuss and the forbidding air of its bearer took me a little by surprise; but I had ceased to believe in robbers, because I had heard so much said about them and had never met one. Moreover, I had seen so many honest farmers going to market armed to the teeth that the sight of a firearm did not justify me in suspecting the stranger's moral character.—“And then, too,” I said to myself, “what would he do with my shirts and my Elzevir Cæsar?” So I saluted the man with the blunderbuss with a familiar nod, and asked him smilingly if I had disturbed his sleep.

He eyed me from head to foot without replying; then, as if satisfied by his examination, he scrutinised no less closely my guide, who rode up at that moment. I saw that the latter turned pale and stopped in evident alarm. “An unfortunate meeting!” I said to myself. But prudence instantly counselled me to betray no uneasiness. I dismounted, told the guide to remove the horses' bridles, and, kneeling by the spring, I plunged my face and hands in the water; then I took a long draught and lay flat on my stomach, like the wicked soldiers of Gideon.

But I kept my eyes on my guide and the stranger. The former drew near, sorely against his will; the other seemed to have no evil designs upon us, for he had set his horse at liberty once more, and his blunderbuss, which he had held at first in a horizontal position, was now pointed towards the ground.

As it seemed to me inexpedient to take umbrage at the small amount of respect shown to my person, I stretched myself out on the grass, and asked the man with the blunderbuss, in a careless tone, if he happened to have a flint and steel about him. At the same time I produced my cigar-case. The stranger, still without a word, felt in his pocket, took out his flint and steel and courteously struck a light for me. Evidently he was becoming tamer, for he sat down opposite me, but did not lay aside his weapon. When my cigar was lighted, I selected the best of those that remained and asked him if he smoked.

“Yes, señor,” he replied.

Those were the first words that he had uttered, and I noticed that he did not pronounce the s after the Andalusian fashion,<sup>[1]</sup> whence I concluded that he was a traveller like myself, minus the archæologist.

“You will find this rather good,” I said, offering him a genuine Havana regalia.

He bent his head slightly, lighted his cigar by mine, thanked me with another nod, then began to smoke with every appearance of very great enjoyment.

“Ah!” he exclaimed, as he discharged the first puff slowly through his mouth and his nostrils, “how long it is since I have had a smoke!”

In Spain, a cigar offered and accepted establishes hospitable relations, just as the sharing of bread and salt does in the East. My man became more talkative than I had hoped. But, although he claimed to live in the *partido* of Montilla, he seemed to be but ill-acquainted with the country. He did not know the name of the lovely valley where we were; he could not mention any village in the neighbourhood; and, lastly, when I asked him whether he had seen any ruined walls thereabouts, or any tiles with raised edges, or any carved stones, he admitted that he had never paid any attention to such things. By way of compensation he exhibited much expert knowledge of horses. He criticised mine, which was not very difficult; then he gave me the genealogy of his, which came from the famous stud of Cordova; a noble animal in very truth, and so proof against fatigue, according to his master, that he had once travelled thirty leagues in a day, at a gallop or a fast trot. In the middle of his harangue the stranger paused abruptly, as if he were surprised and angry with himself for having said too much.

“You see, I was in a hurry to get to Cordova,” he added, with some embarrassment. “I had to present a petition to the judges in the matter of a lawsuit.”

As he spoke, he glanced at my guide, Antonio, who lowered his eyes.

The cool shade and the spring were so delightful to me that I remembered some slices of excellent ham which my friends at

Montilla had put in my guide's wallet. I bade him produce them, and I invited the stranger to join me in my impromptu collation. If he had not smoked for a long while, it seemed probable to me that he had not eaten for at least forty-eight hours. He devoured the food like a starved wolf. It occurred to me that our meeting was a providential affair for the poor fellow. My guide meanwhile ate little, drank still less, and did not talk at all, although from the very beginning of our journey he had revealed himself to me in the guise of an unparalleled chatterbox. Our guest's presence seemed to embarrass him, and a certain distrust kept them at arm's length from each other, but I was unable to divine its cause.

The last crumbs of the bread and ham had vanished; each of us had smoked a second cigar; I ordered the guide to put the bridles on our horses, and I was about to take leave of my new friend, when he asked me where I intended to pass the night.

I replied, before I had noticed a signal from my guide, that I was going on to the Venta del Cuervo.

"A wretched place for a man like you, señor. I am going there, and if you will allow me to accompany you, we will ride together."

"With great pleasure," I replied, mounting my horse.

My guide, who was holding my stirrup, made another signal with his eyes. I answered it with a shrug of my shoulders, as if to assure him that I was perfectly unconcerned, and we set forth.



Antonio's mysterious signs, his evident uneasiness, a few words that had escaped from the stranger, and, above all, his gallop of thirty leagues, and the far from plausible explanation of it which he had offered, had already formed my opinion concerning our travelling companion. I had no doubt that I had fallen in with a smuggler, perhaps a highwayman; but what did it matter to me? I was sufficiently acquainted with the Spanish character to be very sure that I had nothing to fear from a man who had broken bread and smoked with me. His very presence was a certain protection against any unpleasant meetings. Furthermore, I was very glad to know what manner of man a brigand is. One does not see them every day, and there is a certain charm in finding oneself in the company of a dangerous individual, especially when one finds him to be gentle and tame.

I hoped to lead the stranger by degrees to the point of making me his confidant, and despite my guide's meaning winks, I turned the conversation to the subject of highway robbers. He understood that I spoke of them with great respect. There was in Andalusia at that time a celebrated brigand named José Maria, whose exploits were on every tongue.

"Suppose I were riding beside José Maria!" I said to myself.

I told such stories as I knew concerning that hero—all to his credit, by the way,—and I expressed in warm terms my admiration for his gallantry and his generosity.

"José Maria is a villain pure and simple," observed the stranger, coldly.

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