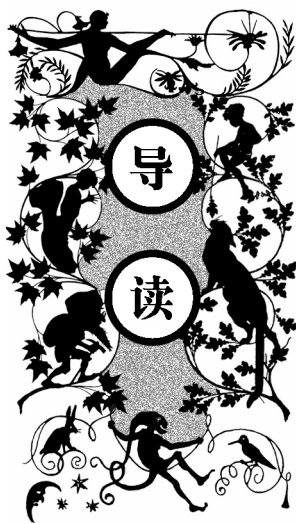


第三章 被打断的灵感

Chapter 3 Interrupted Effusions



瑟尔瓦德克上尉住在一间茅草屋里，本祖夫和两匹马住在旁边的一间石头房子里。他们俩对吃和住都不挑剔，上尉趁勤务兵吃东西时到山崖上去散步。

太阳已经落山，一种淡色的光从北边出现，把云层照得很亮，这种景象恐怕天文学家也解释不了。

八点钟，上尉回到茅屋，本祖夫在石屋准备第二天的午餐，上尉坐在桌前推敲他的十三行诗。本祖夫在墙角打着盹，他听不清上尉在嘀咕什么，不由得叹了口气，上尉的灵感被打断，大声叫了一声“本祖夫”，他答了一声“到”并站起来敬礼。上尉的灵感来了，让他不要动。随后便开始吟诗，突然大地发生了强烈的震动，把他们摔在地上。

Composed of mud and loose stones, and covered with a thatch of turf and straw, known to the natives by the name of “driss,” the gourbi, though a grade better than the tents of the nomad Arabs, was yet far inferior to any habitation built of brick or stone. It adjoined an old stone hostelry, previously occupied by a detachment of engineers, and which now afforded shelter for Ben Zoof and the two horses. It still contained a considerable number of tools, such as mattocks, shovels, and pick-axes.

Uncomfortable as was their temporary abode, Servadac and his attendant made no complaints; neither of them was dainty in the matter either of board or lodging. After dinner, leaving his orderly to stow away the remains of the repast in what he was pleased to term the “cupboard of his stomach.” Captain Servadac turned out into the open air to smoke his pipe upon the edge of the cliff. The shades of night were drawing on. An hour previously, veiled in heavy clouds, the sun had sunk below the horizon that bounded the plain beyond the Shelif.

The sky presented a most singular appearance. Towards the north, although the darkness rendered it impossible to see beyond a quarter of a mile, the upper strata of the atmosphere were suffused with a rosy glare. No well-defined fringe of light, nor arch of luminous rays, betokened a display of aurora borealis, even had such a phenomenon been possible in these latitudes; and the most experienced meteorologist would have been puzzled to explain the cause of this striking illumination on this 31st of December, the last evening of the passing year.

But Captain Servadac was no meteorologist, and it is to be doubted whether, since leaving school, he had ever opened his “Course of Cosmography.” Besides, he had other thoughts to occupy his mind. The prospects of the morrow offered serious matter for consideration. The captain was actuated by no personal animosity against the count; though rivals, the two men regarded each other with sincere respect; they had simply reached a crisis in which one of them was *de trop*; which of them, fate must decide.

At eight o’clock, Captain Servadac re-entered the gourbi, the single apartment of which contained his bed, a small writing-table, and some trunks that served instead of cupboards. The orderly performed his culinary operations in the adjoining building, which he also used as a bed-room, and where, extended on what he called his “good oak mattress,” he would sleep soundly as a dormouse for twelve hours at a stretch. Ben Zoof had not yet received his orders to retire, and ensconcing himself in a corner of the gourbi, he endeavored to doze—a task which the unusual agitation of his master rendered

somewhat difficult. Captain Servadac was evidently in no hurry to betake himself to rest, but seating himself at his table, with a pair of compasses and a sheet of tracing-paper, he began to draw, with red and blue crayons, a variety of colored lines, which could hardly be supposed to have much connection with a topographical survey. In truth, his character of staff-officer was now entirely absorbed in that of Gascon poet. Whether he imagined that the compasses would bestow upon his verses the measure of a mathematical accuracy, or whether he fancied that the parti-colored lines would lend variety to his rhythm, it is impossible to determine; be that as it may, he was devoting all his energies to the compilation of his rondo, and supremely difficult he found the task.

“Hang it!” he ejaculated, “whatever induced me to choose this meter? It is as hard to find rhymes as to rally fugitive in a battle. But, by all the powers! it shan’t be said that a French officer cannot cope with a piece of poetry. One battalion has fought—now for the rest!”

Perseverance had its reward. Presently two lines, one red, the other blue, appeared upon the paper, and the captain murmured:

*“Words, mere words, cannot avail,
Telling true heart’s tender tale.”*

“What on earth ails my master?” muttered Ben Zoof; “for the last hour he has been as fidgety as a bird returning after its winter migration.”

Servadac suddenly started from his seat, and as he paced the room with all the frenzy of poetic inspiration, read out:

*“Empty words cannot convey
All a lover’s heart would say.”*

“Well, to be sure, he is at his everlasting verses again!” said Ben Zoof to himself, as he roused himself in his corner. “Impossible to sleep in such a noise;” and he gave vent to a loud groan.

“How now, Ben Zoof?” said the captain sharply. “What ails you?”

“Nothing, sir, only the nightmare.”

“Curse the fellow, he has quite interrupted me!” ejaculated the captain. “Ben Zoof!” he called aloud.

“Here, sir!” was the prompt reply; and in an instant the orderly was upon his feet, standing in a military attitude, one hand to his forehead, the other closely pressed to his trouser-seam.

“Stay where you are! don’t move an inch!” shouted Servadac; “I have just thought of the end of my rondo.” And in a voice of inspiration, accompanying his words with dramatic gestures, Servadac began to declaim:

*“Listen, lady, to my vows—
O, consent to be my spouse;
Constant ever I will be,
Constant....”*

No closing lines were uttered. All at once, with unutterable violence, the captain and his orderly were dashed, face downwards, to the ground.