HISTORY

FROM A

MERLE BLANC

# I

How glorious, but how painful it is to be an exceptional blackbird in this world! I'm not a fabulous bird, and M. de Buffon described me. But, alas, I'm extremely rare and hard to find. Heaven forbid that I should be completely impossible!

My father and mother were two good people who had lived for many years in a secluded old garden in the Marais. It was an exemplary household. While my mother sat in a thicket, regularly laying eggs three times a year, and brooding with patriarchal religion, my father was still very clean and petulant, despite his advanced age,

He would peck around her all day long, bringing her beautiful insects which he would delicately grasp by the tip of his tail so as not to disgust his wife, and when night came, when the weather was fine, he would never fail to regale her with a song that delighted the whole neighborhood. Never a quarrel, never the slightest cloud had troubled this sweet union.

No sooner had I come into the world than, for the first time in his life, my father began to show a bad temper. Although I was still only a dubious shade of gray, he didn't recognize in me either the color or the look of his numerous posterity.

* That's a dirty kid," he'd sometimes say, looking at me sideways. "That kid must be going to get into every mud hole he comes across, to be so ugly and dirty all the time.
* Eh, mon Dieu! mon ami," replied my mother, still curled up in an old bowl she'd made her nest in, "don't you see that's his age? And weren't you yourself a charming rascal in your younger days? Let our merlichon grow up, and you'll see how beautiful he'll be; he's one of the best I've ever laid.

While defending me in this way, my mother was not mistaken; she saw my fatal plumage growing, which seemed to her a monstrosity; but she did as all mothers do, who often become attached to their children by that very fact.

even if they are mistreated by nature, as if the fault were theirs, or as if they rejected in advance the injustice of the fate that must befall them.

When it came time for my first molt, my father became quite pensive and considered me carefully. As long as my feathers were falling, he still treated me fairly kindly and even fed me, seeing me shivering almost naked in a corner; but as soon as my poor, sweaty fins began to cover themselves with down, with every white feather he saw, he flew into such a rage that I feared he'd pluck me for the rest of my life! Alas, I had no mirror; I didn't know what this fury was about, and I wondered why the best of fathers was being so barbaric to me.

One day, when a ray of sunshine and my newborn fur had, in spite of myself, put my heart in joy, as I was flitting down an alley, I began, to my misfortune, to sing. At the first note he heard, my father leapt into the air like a rocket.

* What's that I hear?" he exclaimed, "is that the way a blackbird whistles? is that the way I whistle? is that whistling?

And, falling down beside my mother with the most terrible composure :

* Wretched woman!" he said, "who laid the eggs in your nest?

At these words, my indignant mother leapt from her bowl, not without hurting her leg; she wanted to speak, but her sobs suffocated her, and she fell to the ground half-swooned. I saw her close to expiring; frightened and trembling with fear, I threw myself at my father's knees.

* O my father!" I said, "if I whistle the wrong way and wear the wrong clothes, may my mother not be punished! Is it her fault that nature has denied me a voice like yours? Is it her fault if I don't have your beautiful yellow beak and black French suit, which make you look like a churchwarden swallowing an omelette? If Heaven has made me a monster, and if someone has to bear the brunt of it, let me at least be the only one unfortunate!
* It's not about that," says my father, "what's the meaning of the absurd way you've just allowed yourself to whistle? Who taught you to whistle like that against all customs and rules?
* Alas, sir," I replied humbly, "I whistled as best I could, feeling cheerful because the weather was fine, and having perhaps eaten too many flies.
* We don't whistle like that in my family," said my father outraged. We've been whistling from father to son for centuries, and when I make my voice heard at night, you'll learn that there's an old gentleman on the second floor, and a young grisette in the attic, who open their windows to hear me. Isn't it enough that I have before my eyes the ugly color of your silly feathers that make you look floured like a strawman at the fair? If I weren't the

the most peaceful of blackbirds, I'd have stripped you bare a hundred times over, no more and no less than a barnyard chicken ready to be skewered.

* Well," I exclaimed, outraged by my father's injustice, "if that's the way it is, sir, then so be it! I'll flee from your presence, I'll free your eyes from this unfortunate white tail, by which you pull me all day long. I'll go away, sir, I'll flee; enough other children will console your old age, since my mother lays three times a year; I'll go far from you to hide my misery, and perhaps," I added, sobbing, "perhaps I'll find, in the neighbor's vegetable garden or on the gutters, a few earthworms or a few spiders to support my sad existence.
* As you wish," replied my father, far from being moved by this speech, "don't let me see you again! You're not my son; you're not a blackbird.
* And what am I, sir, if you please?
* I don't know, but you're not a blackbird.

After these striking words, my father walked slowly away. My mother got up sadly and limped to her bowl to finish crying. As for me, confused and desolate, I took my flight as best I could, and went, as I had announced, to perch on the eaves of a nearby house.

# II

My father had the inhumanity to leave me in this mortifying situation for several days. In spite of his violence, he was kind-hearted, and by the sidelong glances he gave me, I could see that he would have liked to forgive me and call me back; my mother, above all, constantly raised her eyes to me, full of tenderness, and sometimes even dared to call me with a plaintive little cry; but my horrible white plumage inspired in them, in spite of themselves, a repugnance and a fright to which I could see there was no remedy.

* I'm not a blackbird!" I kept telling myself, and indeed, as I peeled myself in the morning and bathed in the gutter water, I could see only too clearly how little I resembled my family. - O heaven!" I kept repeating, "teach me what I am!

One night, when it was pouring with rain, I was about to fall asleep, exhausted with hunger and grief, when I saw a bird land beside me, wetter, paler and skinnier than I thought possible. He was about my color, as far as I could tell from the rain that was pouring down on us; he barely had enough feathers on his body to dress a sparrow, and he was bigger than I was. He seemed to me, at first sight, a quite poor and needy bird; but he kept, in spite of the storm that abused his almost shorn forehead, an air of pride that made me feel very proud.

charmed. I modestly bowed to him, to which he responded with a peck that nearly threw me down the gutter. Seeing that I scratched my ear and withdrew with compunction without trying to answer him in his own language:

* Who are you?" he asked, his voice as hoarse as his bald head.
* Alas, my lord," I replied (fearing a second blow), "I don't know. I thought I was a blackbird, but I've been convinced that I'm not.

The singularity of my answer and my air of sincerity interested him. He approached me and asked me to tell him my story, which I did with all the sadness and humility befitting my position and the dreadful weather.

* If you were a wood pigeon like me," he said after listening to me, "you wouldn't have to worry for a moment about all the nonsense you're complaining about. We travel, that's our life, and we have our loves, but I don't know who my father is. To split the air, to cross space, to see mountains and plains at our feet, to breathe the very azure of the heavens, not the exhalations of the earth, to run like an arrow to a marked goal that never escapes us, that is our pleasure and our existence. I cover more ground in a day than a man can in ten.
* On my word, sir," I said, a little emboldened, "you're a bohemian bird.
* That's another thing I don't care much about," he continues. I have no country; I know only three things: travel, my wife and my children. Where my wife is, there is my homeland.
* What's that you've got hanging around your neck? It's like a crumpled old papillotte.
* I'm off to Brussels right now, and I'm bringing the famous banker \*\*\* news that will lower the annuity by one franc seventy-eight centimes.
* My goodness!" I exclaimed, "it's a beautiful life you lead, and Brussels, I'm sure, must be a very curious city to see. Couldn't you take me with you? Since I'm not a blackbird, maybe I'm a wood pigeon.
* If you were one," he replied, "you'd have given me back the peck I gave you earlier.
* Well, sir, I'll give it back to you; let's not quarrel over so little. It's morning and the storm is dying down. Please, let me follow you! I'm lost, I've got nothing left in the world - if you refuse me, I'll drown in this gutter.
* Well, let's go! Follow me if you can.

I took one last look at the garden where my mother was sleeping. A tear fell from my eyes; the wind and rain carried it away. I opened my wings and flew away.

# III

My wings, as I said, were not yet very strong. While my driver was going like the wind, I was running out of steam at his side; I held on for a while, but soon I felt such a violent glare that I almost fainted.

* Will it take much longer?" I asked in a weak voice.
* No," he replied, "we're at Le Bourget; we've only got sixty leagues to go.

I tried to regain my courage, not wanting to look like a chicken, and flew for another quarter of an hour, but by then I'd given up.

* Sir," I stammered again, "couldn't we stop for a moment? I have a horrible thirst that torments me, and as we perch on a tree...
* Go to hell! You're just a blackbird!" said the angry woodpecker.

And, without deigning to turn his head, he continued his enraged journey. As for me, stunned and blind, I fell into a field of wheat.

I don't know how long I blacked out. When I regained consciousness, the first thing I remembered was the woodpecker's last words: "You're just a blackbird," he had said. - Oh my dear parents!" I thought, "you've made a mistake! I'm going back to you; you'll recognize me as your true and legitimate child, and you'll give me back my place in that good little pile of leaves under my mother's bowl.

I made an effort to get up, but the fatigue of the journey and the pain of my fall paralyzed all my limbs. As soon as I was up on my feet, I fainted again and fell back on my side.

The dreadful thought of death was already presenting itself to my mind, when, through the bluets and poppies, I saw two charming people tiptoeing towards me. One was a small, well-flecked and extremely coquettish magpie, and the other a rose-colored turtle-dove. The turtle-dove stopped a few steps away, with a great air of modesty and compassion for my misfortune; but the magpie approached, hopping along in the most agreeable manner.

* What are you doing here, you poor child?" she asked me in a playful, silvery voice.
* Alas, madame la marquise," I replied (for it must have been one, to say the least), "I'm a poor devil of a traveler whose postilion has left me on the road, and I'm dying of hunger.
* Blessed Virgin! What are you telling me?" she replied.

And immediately she began to flit here and there on the bushes that surrounded us, coming and going from side to side, bringing me lots of berries and fruit, which she made a little pile near me, while continuing her questions.

* But who are you? Where do you come from? Your adventure is incredible! And where are you going? Travelling alone, so young, just out of your first moult! Where are they from? How can they let you go off like that? But it's enough to make your feathers stand on end!

While she was talking, I lifted myself a little to one side, and ate with great appetite. The turtle-dove remained motionless, still looking at me with a pitying eye. However, she noticed that I was turning my head languidly, and realized that I was thirsty. A drop of the night's rain remained on a sprig of chickweed; she shyly gathered it in her beak, and brought it to me fresh. Certainly, if I hadn't been so ill, such a reserved person would never have allowed herself such a step.

I didn't yet know what love was, but my heart was beating wildly. Divided between two different emotions, I was penetrated by an inexplicable charm. My panetière was so cheerful, my cupbearer so expansive and gentle, that I would have liked to have lunch like this for all eternity. Unfortunately, everything comes to an end, even a convalescent's appetite. When the meal was over and my strength had returned, I

I satisfied the little magpie's curiosity, and told her of my misfortunes as sincerely as I had told the pigeon the day before. The magpie listened more attentively than seemed appropriate, and the turtle-dove gave me charming proof of her deep sensitivity. But when I got to the crux of the matter, which was causing me so much grief, i.e. my ignorance of myself :

* Are you joking?" cried the magpie; "you, a blackbird! you, a pigeon! Fi donc! You're a magpie, my dear child, a magpie if ever there was one, and a very nice one at that," she added, giving me a little flick of the wing, as if it were a fan.
* But, Madame la Marquise," I replied, "it seems to me that, for a magpie, I'm of a color, don't get me wrong...
* A Russian magpie, my dear, you're a Russian magpie! Don't you know they're white? Poor boy, what innocence[[1]](#_bookmark2) !
* But, madame," I resumed, "how could I be a Russian magpie, having been born at the bottom of the Marais, in an old broken bowl?
* Ah! the good child! You're part of the invasion, my dear; do you think you're the only one? Trust me, and let me take care of you; I want to take you away later and show you the most beautiful things in the world.
* Where to, ma'am, please?
* In my green palace, my sweet; you'll see what life is like there. You won't have been a magpie for a quarter of an hour before you won't want to hear about anything else. There are about a hundred of us here, not the fat village magpies who beg for alms on the highways, but all noble and good company, slender, nimble and no bigger than our fists. Not one of us has more or less than seven black marks and five white marks; it's an invariable thing, and we despise the rest of the world. You lack the black marks, it's true, but being Russian is enough to get you admitted. Our life consists of two things: cackling and dressing up. From morning to noon, we cackle, and from noon to night, we cackle. Each of us perches on a tree, the tallest and oldest we can find. In the middle of the forest stands a huge oak, uninhabited, alas! It was the home of the late King Pius X, to which we go on pilgrimage with a heavy sigh; but apart from this slight sorrow, we pass the time wonderfully. Our wives are no more stubborn than our husbands are jealous, but our pleasures are pure and honest, because our hearts are as noble as our language is free and joyful. Our pride knows no bounds, and if a jay or any other scoundrel happens to wander into our home, we pluck them mercilessly. But we're still the best people in the world, and the passerines, chickadees and goldfinches that live in our coppices always find us ready to help, feed and defend them. Nowhere is there

more cackling than at home, and nowhere less backbiting. We have no shortage of devout old magpies who say their patenôtres all day long, but the most stale of our young gossips can pass by the sternest dowager without fear of a peck on the cheek. In a word, we live for pleasure, honor, gossip, glory and rags.

* That's very nice, Madame," I replied, "and I would certainly be ill-educated not to obey the orders of someone like you. But before I have the honor of following you, please allow me to say a word to this good lady who is here. - Mademoiselle," I continued, addressing the turtledove, "I beg you to speak frankly to me. Do you really think I'm a Russian magpie?

At this question, the turtledove lowered its head, turning as pale red as Lolotte's ribbons.

* But, sir," she said, "I don't know if I can...
* In heaven's name, speak up, mademoiselle! My intention has nothing to offend you, quite the contrary. You both seem so charming to me, that I hereby vow to offer my heart and my paw to whichever of you would like it, as soon as I know whether I'm a magpie or something else; for, looking at you," I added, speaking a little more quietly to the young lady, "I feel something like a turtledove that torments me singularly.
* But, indeed," said the dove, blushing even more, "I don't know if it's the reflection of the sun falling on you through these poppies, but your plumage seems to me to have a slight tinge...

She dared say no more.

* How can I give my heart to one of you, when it is so cruelly torn? O Socrates! what an admirable precept, but difficult to follow, you gave us, when you said, "Know thyself!"

Since the day an unfortunate song had so upset my father, I hadn't used my voice. At that moment, it occurred to me to use it as a means of discerning the truth. By Jove," I thought, "since my father kicked me out after the first verse, the second must have some effect on the ladies. So, having begun by bowing politely, as if to beg indulgence for the rain I had received, I began first to whistle, then to chirp, then to roll, and finally to sing at the top of my voice, like a Spanish mule driver in full wind.

As I sang, the little magpie moved away from me with an air of surprise that soon turned to amazement, then to a feeling of dread accompanied by profound boredom. She circled around me, like a cat around a piece of bacon that's too hot and has just burnt it, but which it would still like to taste.

again. Seeing the effect of my test, and wanting to push it to the limit, the more impatient the poor marquise became, the more I sang. For twenty-five minutes she resisted my melodious efforts; finally, unable to stand it any longer, she flew off with a bang and returned to her green palace. As for the turtle-dove, it had been fast asleep almost from the start.

* Admirable effect of harmony! I thought. O Marais! O mother's bowl! More than ever I come back to you!

Just as I was about to leave, the dove reopened her eyes.

* Farewell," she said, "you kind and boring stranger! My name is Guruli; remember me!
* Beautiful Gourouli," I replied, "you're good, sweet and charming; I'd like to live and die for you. But you're the color of roses; so much happiness is not for me!

# IV

I was saddened by the sad effect of my singing. - Alas for music, alas for poetry!

I repeated as we drove back to Paris, that there are few hearts that understand you!

As I was thinking these thoughts, I bumped my head against that of a bird flying in the opposite direction to me. The impact was so hard and unexpected that we both fell on the top of a tree which, fortunately, happened to be there. After we had shaken ourselves a little, I looked at the newcomer, expecting a quarrel. I was surprised to see that he was white. To tell the truth, his head was a little bigger than mine, and he had a sort of plume on his forehead that gave him a heroic-comical air. What's more, he carried his tail high in the air, with great magnanimity. We approached each other in a very civil manner, apologized to each other and got down to business. I took the liberty of asking him his name and what country he was from.

* I'm surprised," he says, "that you don't know me. Aren't you one of us?
* In truth, sir," I replied, "I don't know who I am. Everyone asks me and tells me the same thing; it must be a bet they've made.
* You've got to be kidding me," he replied. "Your plumage suits you too well for me to ignore a colleague. You unerringly belong to that illustrious and venerable race known in Latin as *cacuata*, in learned language as *kakatoès*, and in vulgar jargon as catacois.
* Well, sir, it's possible, and it would be a great honor for me. But don't let me pretend I'm not, and please teach me to whom I have the glory of speaking.
* I am," replied the stranger, "the great poet Kacatogan. I've made mighty journeys, sir, arid crossings and cruel peregrinations. I've been rhyming for a long time, and my muse has had misfortunes. I hummed under Louis XVI, sir, I bellowed for the Republic, I nobly sang of the Empire, I discreetly praised the Restoration, I even made an effort in recent times, and I submitted, not without difficulty, to the demands of this tasteless century. I have launched into the world piquant couplets, sublime hymns, graceful dithyrambs, pious elegies, hairy dramas, frizzy novels, powdered vaudevilles and bald tragedies. In a word, I can pride myself on having added to the temple of the Muses a few gallant festoons, a few dark battlements and a few ingenious arabesques. What can I say? I'm getting old. But I still rhyme veraciously, sir, and, as you see me, I was dreaming of a poem in one song, no less than six hundred pages long, when you gave me a bump on the forehead. Besides, if I can be of any use to you, I'm entirely at your service.
* Really, sir, you can," I replied, "because you see me at this moment in a great poetic quandary. I don't dare say I'm a poet, nor do I dare say I'm a poet.

as great a poet as you are," I added in greeting, "but nature gave me a gullet that itches when I'm feeling good or sad. To tell you the truth, I'm completely ignorant of the rules.

* I've forgotten them," says Kacatogan, "so don't worry about it.
* But there's one unfortunate thing about me," I continued, "and that's that my voice has about the same effect on those who hear it as that of a certain Jean de Nivelle had on... You know what I mean?
* I know," says Kacatogan, "I've seen this strange effect for myself. The cause is not known to me, but the effect is incontestable.
* Well, sir, you seem to me to be the Nestor of poetry, would you please know how to remedy this painful inconvenience?
* No," says Kacatogan, "for my part, I've never been able to find one. I used to worry a lot about it when I was young, because they were always whistling at me, but now I don't think about it anymore. I think this reluctance stems from the fact that the public reads others than us: it distracts them.
* I think so too, but I think you'll agree, sir, that it's hard for a well-meaning creature to put people to flight as soon as he makes a good move. Would you do me the favor of listening to me, and giving me your honest opinion?
* I'd love to," says Kacatogan, "I'm all ears.

I began to sing at once, and had the satisfaction of seeing that Kacatogan neither fled nor fell asleep. He stared at me, and from time to time inclined his head approvingly, with a sort of flattering murmur. But I soon realized he wasn't listening to me, and was daydreaming about his poem. Taking advantage of a moment when I was catching my breath, he suddenly interrupted me.

* It's the seventy-seven hundred and fourteenth one to come out of that brain of his! And they dare say I'm getting old! I'll read it to my good friends, I'll read it to them, and we'll see what they say!

Talking like this, he took off and disappeared, seeming not to remember meeting me.

# V

Left alone and disappointed, I had nothing better to do than enjoy the rest of the day and fly off to Paris. Unfortunately, I didn't know my way around. My trip with the pigeon had been too unpleasant to leave me with an exact memory; so, instead of going straight ahead, I turned left at Le Bourget, and, surprised by the night, was obliged to seek lodgings in the woods of Mortefontaine.

Everyone was going to bed when I arrived. Magpies and jays, which, as we all know, are the worst sleepers on earth, were squabbling all over the place. Sparrows were chirping in the bushes, trampling on each other. At the water's edge two herons walked gravely, perched on their long stilts in the attitude of meditation, Georges Dandins of the place, patiently waiting for their wives. Huge crows, half-asleep, alighted heavily on the tips of the highest trees, and nasalized their evening prayers. Further down, amorous titmice still chased each other through the coppices, while a ruffled woodpecker pushed his household from behind into the hollow of a tree. Phalanxes of fritillaries came in from the fields, dancing in the air like puffs of smoke, and rushed onto a shrub which they covered completely; finches, warblers, robins, clustered lightly on cut branches, like crystals on a girandole. Voices resounded from all sides, distinctly saying: - Come on, my wife! - Come on, my daughter! - Come on, my beautiful! - This way, my love! - Here I am, my dear! - Good evening, my mistress! - Farewell, my friends! - Sleep well, my children!

What a position for a bachelor to find himself in! I was tempted to join a few birds of my own size, and ask them for hospitality. - At night, I thought, all the birds are

and, besides, is it wrong to sleep politely next to people?

I first headed for a ditch where starlings were congregating. They were doing their nightly grooming with particular care, and I noticed that most of them had golden wings and varnished legs: they were the dandies of the forest. They were good-natured enough, and didn't pay me any attention. But their talk was so hollow, their tales of woe and good fortune so fatuously told, and they rubbed each other so heavily, that it was impossible for me to keep up.

I then went to perch on a branch where half a dozen birds of different species were lined up. I modestly took the last place, at the end of the branch, hoping that people would bear with me. Unfortunately, my neighbor was an old dove, as dry as a rusty weather vane. As I approached her, the few feathers that covered her bones were the object of her solicitude; she pretended to peel them, but she would have been too afraid to pluck one: she was just going over them to see if she had enough. As soon as I touched her with the tip of my wing, she straightened up majestically.

* What are you doing, sir?" she said, pinching her beak with British modesty.

And, elbowing me, she threw me down with a vigor that would have done credit to a portmanteau.

I stumbled into a heather where a large gelinotte was sleeping. My mother herself, in her bowl, had no such air of bliss. She was so bouncy, so full, so well-situated on her triple belly, that you'd have thought she was a pie whose crust had been eaten. I crept up beside her.

* She won't wake up, I said to myself, and in any case, such a good fat mom can't be very bad. And indeed, she wasn't. She half-opened her eyes, and said to me with a slight sigh:
* You're getting in my way, kid, get out of here.

At the same moment, I heard myself being called: it was a thrush beckoning to me from a rowan tree. - These are good souls at last, I thought. They made room for me, laughing like mad, and I shoved myself as lightly into their feathered group as a sweet bill into a muff. But it wasn't long before I realized that the ladies had eaten more grapes than was reasonable; they could barely support themselves on the branches, and their bad company jokes, laughter and saucy songs forced me to move away.

I was beginning to despair, and was about to fall asleep in a lonely corner, when a nightingale began to sing. Everyone immediately fell silent. Alas, how pure the voice! How sweet the melancholy! Far from disturbing the sleep of others, its chords seemed to lull them to sleep. No one thought of silencing him, no one found it difficult to listen.

His father didn't beat him, his friends didn't run away.

* Only I," I cried, "am forbidden to be happy! Let's go, let's flee this cruel world! Better to seek my way in the darkness, at the risk of being swallowed by some owl, than to let myself be torn apart by the spectacle of other people's happiness!

With that in mind, I set off again, wandering for a long time at random. With the first light of day, I caught sight of the towers of Notre-Dame. In the blink of an eye I was there, and I didn't look around long before I recognized our garden. I flew there faster than lightning... Alas! it was empty... I called my parents in vain: no one answered me. The tree where my father stood, my mother's bush, my beloved bowl - all had disappeared. The axe had destroyed everything; instead of the green alley where I had been born, all that remained was a hundred bundles.

# VI

At first, I looked for my parents in all the surrounding gardens, but to no avail; they'd probably taken refuge in some distant neighborhood, and I never heard from them again.

Filled with a dreadful sadness, I went to perch on the gutter where my father's anger had first exiled me. There I spent the days and nights lamenting my sad existence. I no longer slept, I barely ate: I was close to dying of pain.

One day I was lamenting as usual:

* So, I said to myself out loud, I'm neither a blackbird, since my father used to pluck me; nor a pigeon, since I fell on the road when I wanted to go to Belgium; nor a Russian magpie, since the little marquise plugged her ears as soon as I opened my beak; nor a turtle-dove, since Gourouli, the good Gourouli herself, snored like a monk when I sang; nor a parrot, since Kacatogan didn't deign to listen to me; nor any bird whatsoever, since, at Mortefontaine, I was left to sleep on my own. And yet I have feathers on my body; here are legs and here are wings. I'm not a monster, witness Gourouli, and the little marquise herself, who found me quite to their liking. What inexplicable mystery is it that these feathers, wings and legs can't form a whole that can be given a name? Wouldn't I by any chance be...?

I was about to continue with my complaints, when I was interrupted by two porters arguing in the street.

* Ah, by Jove!" said one of them to the other, "if you ever get to the bottom of this, I'll give you a white robin as a present!
* Just God!" I cried, "that's my business. O Providence! I'm the son of a blackbird, and I'm white: I'm a white blackbird!

This discovery, it has to be said, changed my mind a great deal. Instead of continuing to complain, I began to take pride in myself and walk proudly along the gutter, looking out into space with a victorious air.

* It's quite something, I said to myself, to be a white blackbird: you can't find it in a donkey's step. It was good of me to be distressed at not meeting my fellow man: it's the fate of genius, it's mine! I wanted to escape the world, now I want to astonish it! Since I am the peerless bird whose existence is denied by the vulgar, I must and will behave like one, no more and no less than the phoenix, and despise the rest of the fowl. I must buy Alfieri's Memoirs and Lord Byron's poems; this substantial nourishment will inspire me with a noble pride, not to mention that which God has given me. Yes, I want to add, if I can, to the prestige of my birth. Nature made me rare, I'll make myself mysterious. It will be a favor, a glory to see me. - And, by the way," I added more quietly, "what if I just show up for money?
* What an unworthy thought! I want to make a poem like Kacatogan, not in one song, but in twenty-four, like all great men; that's not enough, there will be forty-eight, with notes and an appendix! The universe has to know that I exist. I will not fail, in my verses, to deplore my isolation;

but it will be in such a way that the happiest will envy me. Since heaven has denied me a female, I'll speak horribly of others'. I'll prove that everything is too green, except the grapes I eat. I'll prove, as two and two make four, that their laments hurt the heart, and that their merchandise is worthless. I've got to find Charpentier. First of all, I want to create a powerful literary position for myself. I intend to have around me a court composed not just of journalists, but of real authors and even women of letters. I'll write a role for Mademoiselle Rachel, and if she refuses to play it, I'll publicize the fact that her talent is far inferior to that of an old provincial actress. I'll go to Venice, and rent, on the banks of the Grand Canal, in the middle of this fairy-tale city, the beautiful Mocenigo palace, which costs four pounds ten cents a day; there, I'll be inspired by all the memories that the author of *Lara* must have left there. From the depths of my solitude, I'll flood the world with a deluge of cross-rhymes, modelled on Spencer's stanza, in which I'll soothe my great soul; I'll make all the titmice sigh, all the turtle-doves coo, all the woodcock melt into tears, and all the old owls screech. But when it comes to myself, I'll prove inexorable and inaccessible to love. In vain will they press me, beg me to have pity on the unfortunates seduced by my sublime songs; to all that, I'll reply: Foin! O excess of glory! my manuscripts will be sold at the weight of gold, my books will be sold at the weight of gold.

Fame and fortune will follow me everywhere; alone, I'll seem indifferent to the murmurs of the crowd around me. In a word, I'll be a perfect white blackbird, a true eccentric writer, feted, pampered, admired, envied, but utterly grumpy and insufferable.

# VII

It took me no more than six weeks to complete my first work. It was, as I had promised myself, a poem in forty-eight songs. There were a few oversights, due to the prodigious fecundity with which I had written it; but I thought that today's public, accustomed to the fine literature printed at the bottom of newspapers, would not hold it against me.

My success was worthy of me, in other words, unparalleled. The subject of my work was none other than myself: in this, I conformed to the great fashion of our time. I recounted my past sufferings with a charming fatuity; I filled the reader in on a thousand domestic details of the most piquant interest; the description of my mother's bowl filled no less than fourteen songs: I had counted its grooves, holes and dents,

the splinters, the splinters, the nails, the stains, the various hues, the reflections; I showed the inside, the outside, the edges, the bottom, the sides, the inclined planes, the straight planes; moving on to the contents, I studied the blades of grass, the straws, the dry leaves, the small pieces of wood, the gravel, the drops of water, the fly debris, the broken legs of beetles that were found there: it was a delightful description. But don't think I would have printed it straight away; there are impertinent readers who would have skipped it. I had skilfully cut it into pieces, and interwoven it with the story, so that nothing was lost; so that at the most interesting and dramatic moment, fifteen pages of the story suddenly appeared. This, I believe, is one of the great secrets of art, and since I'm not greedy, I'll take advantage of it.

The whole of Europe was moved by the appearance of my book; it devoured the intimate revelations I deigned to communicate to it. How could it have been otherwise? Not only did I enumerate all the facts about myself, but I also gave the public a complete picture of all the daydreams that had been running through my head since I was two months old; I had even inserted in the most beautiful place an ode composed in my egg. Of course, I didn't neglect to deal in passing with the great subject that now preoccupies so many people: the future of mankind. I found the problem interesting and, in a moment of intense emotion

A solution that was generally considered satisfactory.

Every day I received compliments in verse, letters of congratulation and anonymous declarations of love. As for visitors, I strictly followed the plan I had drawn up for myself; my door was closed to everyone. However, I couldn't resist receiving two strangers who had announced themselves as my relatives. One was a Senegal blackbird, the other a Chinese blackbird.

* Ah, sir," they said, embracing me to the point of suffocation, "what a great blackbird you are! How well you have painted, in your immortal poem, the profound suffering of the misunderstood genius! If we weren't already as misunderstood as we could be, we'd become so after reading you. How much we sympathize with your pain, with your sublime contempt for the vulgar! We too, sir, know for ourselves the secret sorrows you have sung of! Here are two sonnets we have written, one bearing the other, which we ask you to accept.
* In addition," added the Chinaman, "here's some music my wife has composed based on a passage in your preface. It wonderfully conveys the author's intention.
* Gentlemen," I told them, "as far as I can judge, you seem to me to be gifted with a great heart and an enlightened mind. But forgive me for asking you a question. Where does your melancholy come from?
* Sir," replied the Senegalese, "look at the way I'm built. My plumage, it's true, is pleasing to the eye, and I'm clothed in that lovely green color you see shining on ducks; but my beak is too short and my foot too big; and look at the tail I'm sporting! The length of my body isn't even two-thirds of it. Isn't that enough to give yourself to the devil?
* And me, sir," says the Chinaman, "my misfortune is even worse. My colleague's tail is sweeping the streets; but the rascals are pointing at me, because I don't have any.[[2]](#_bookmark3).
* Gentlemen," I continued, "I pity you with all my soul; it's always unfortunate to have too much or too little of anything. But let me tell you that there are several people in the Jardin des Plantes who resemble you, and who have been living there for a long time, very peacefully stuffed. Just as it's not enough for a woman of letters to be wanton in order to write a good book, it's also not enough for a blackbird to be discontented in order to have genius. I'm the only one of my kind, and I'm sad about it; I may be wrong, but it's my right. I'm white, gentlemen; become white, and we'll see what you can say.

# VIII

In spite of the resolution I had taken and the calm I was displaying, I was not happy. My isolation, though glorious, seemed no less painful, and I couldn't think without dreading the necessity of spending my whole life in celibacy. The return of spring, in particular, was causing me mortal discomfort, and I was beginning to fall again into sadness, when an unforeseen circumstance decided my whole life.

Needless to say, my writings had crossed the Channel, and the English were snapping them up. The English snatch up everything except what they understand. One day, from London, I received a letter signed by a young merlette:

I read your poem," she said, "and the admiration I felt made me resolve to offer you my hand and my person. God created us for each other! I'm just like you, I'm a white merlette!..."

You can imagine my surprise and delight. - A white mullet!" I said to myself, "is it possible? I'm no longer alone on earth! I hastened to answer the beautiful stranger, and I did so in a way that showed how much I liked her proposal. I urged her to come to Paris or allow me to fly with her. She replied that she preferred to come, because her parents were bothering her, that she was putting her affairs in order and that I would see her soon.

She came, indeed, a few days later. She was the prettiest blackbird in the world, and even whiter than me.

* Ah, mademoiselle," I exclaimed, "or rather madame, for I now consider you my lawful wife, can you believe that such a charming creature could be found on earth without fame informing me of her existence? Bless my misfortunes and my father's pecking blows, for heaven had so unexpected a consolation in store for me! Until today, I thought I was condemned to eternal solitude, and, to be honest, it was a hard burden to bear; but I feel, looking at you, all the qualities of a family man. Accept my hand in marriage without delay; let's get married the English way, without ceremony, and leave together for Switzerland.
* I don't want it to be like that," replied the young blackbird. "I want our wedding to be magnificent, and I want all the well-born blackbirds in France to be solemnly assembled. People like us owe it to our own glory not to marry like alley cats. I've brought a supply of *bank notes*. Make your invitations, go to your merchants, and don't skimp on refreshments.

I blindly followed the orders of the white merlette. Our wedding was overwhelmingly luxurious, with ten thousand flies eaten. We received the nuptial blessing from a reverend father Cormoran, who was archbishop *in*

*partibus*. A superb ball rounded off the day; in short, nothing was missing from my happiness.

The more I delved into the character of my charming wife, the more my love for her grew. She combined, in her small person, all the pleasures of soul and body. She was only a little stubborn, but I attributed this to the influence of the English fog in which she had lived until then, and I had no doubt that the climate of France would soon dissipate this slight cloud.

One thing that worried me more seriously was a kind of mystery she sometimes surrounded herself with with singular rigor, locking herself in with her chambermaids, and spending hours grooming herself, or so she claimed. Husbands don't much like such fantasies in their households. Twenty times I knocked at my wife's apartment, but I couldn't get anyone to open the door. This made me cruelly impatient. One day, among others, I insisted in such a bad mood that she was obliged to give in and open the door a little hastily, but not without complaining loudly about my importunity. As I entered, I noticed a large bottle full of a kind of glue made from flour and Spanish white. I asked my wife what she did with it, and she replied that it was an opiate for some chilblains she had.

This opiat seemed a little suspicious to me; but what mistrust could I have had in such a gentle and wise person, who had given herself to me so enthusiastically and

such perfect sincerity? At first, I didn't know that my beloved was a woman of letters; after a while, she admitted it to me, and even showed me the manuscript of a novel in which she had imitated both Walter Scott and Scarron. I can only imagine the pleasure such a pleasant surprise caused me. Not only did I see myself in possession of an incomparable beauty, but I was also certain that my companion's intelligence was worthy in every way of my genius. From that moment on, we worked together. While I composed my poems, she daubed reams of paper. I recited my verses aloud to her, and she didn't mind writing in the meantime. She wrote her novels with a facility almost equal to mine, always choosing the most dramatic subjects, parricides, kidnappings, murders, even skulduggery, always taking care, in passing, to attack the government and preach the emancipation of the merlettes. In a word, no effort cost his mind, no feat of strength his modesty; he never crossed out a line, nor made a plan before setting to work. She was the type of literate merlette.

One day, when she was working with unaccustomed zeal, I noticed that she was sweating profusely, and I was astonished to see that she had a large black spot on her back.

* I said to him, "What's the matter? Are you ill?

At first she seemed a little frightened and even sheepish; but her great habit of the world soon helped her to regain the admirable empire she always kept over herself. She told me it was an ink blot, and that she was prone to it in her moments of inspiration.

* Is my wife rubbing off? I said to myself softly. This thought kept me awake. The bottle of glue came back to mind. - O heaven!" I exclaimed, "what a suspicion! Could this heavenly creature be just a painting, a light whitewash? Could she have been varnished to take advantage of me?... When I thought I was pressing the sister of my soul to my heart, the privileged being created for me alone, had I married nothing but flour?

Pursued by this horrible doubt, I set out to free myself from it. I bought a barometer, and waited eagerly for a rainy day. I wanted to take my wife to the country, pick a doubtful Sunday, and try my hand at laundry. But it was the middle of July, and the weather was frightfully fine.

The appearance of happiness and the habit of writing had greatly excited my sensitivity. Naïve as I was, I would sometimes, while working, let my feelings get the better of my ideas, and weep as I waited for the rhyme. My wife loved these rare occasions: every male weakness delights female pride. One night, while I was filing down a line, in accordance with Boileau's precept, my heart opened up.

* O you! I say to my dear merlette, you, the only one and the most loved! you, without whom my life is a dream! you, whose glance, whose smile, transform for me the universe, the life of my heart, do you know how much I love you? To put into verse a banal idea already used by other poets, a little study and attention make it easy for me to find words; but where will I ever find words to express to you what your beauty inspires in me? Could the very memory of my past sorrows provide me with a word to tell you of my present happiness? Before you came to me, my isolation was that of an exiled orphan; today, it's that of a king. In this weak body, of which I have the simulacrum until death makes a wreck of it, in this small fevered brain, where a useless thought ferments, do you know, my angel, do you understand, my beautiful one, that nothing can be that is not yours? Listen to what my brain can say, and feel how much greater my love is! Oh, that my genius were a pearl, and that you were Cleopatra!

As I rambled on, I cried over my wife, and she visibly rubbed off. With each tear that fell from my eyes, a feather appeared, not even black, but the oldest red (I think it had already rubbed off somewhere else). After a few minutes of tenderness, I found myself standing opposite a detached, de-feathered bird, identically similar to the flattest, most ordinary blackbirds.

What to do? What to say? What to do? Reproach was useless. In truth, I might well have considered the case

But how could I dare publish my shame? Wasn't that enough of my misfortune? I took my courage in both hands, resolved to leave the world, to abandon the career of letters, to flee to a desert, if possible, to avoid for ever the aspect of a living creature, and to seek, like Alceste,

...... A remote location,

Where to be a white blackbird one had freedom!

# IX

I flew away, still crying, and the wind, which is the chance of birds, brought me back on a branch of Mortefontaine. For once, we were in bed. - What a wedding! I said to myself, what an adventure! I'm sure the poor girl wore white with good intentions, but I'm no less to be pitied, nor is she any less of a redhead.

The nightingale was still singing. Alone, in the depths of the night, he enjoyed to the full God's blessing that makes him so superior to poets, and gave his thoughts freely to the silence that surrounded him. I couldn't resist the temptation to go and talk to him.

* Not only do you sing as much as you like, and very well, and everyone listens; but you have a wife and children, your own nest, your friends, a good moss pillow, a full moon and no newspapers. Rubini and Rossini are nothing compared to you: you're worth one, and you guess the other. I've sung too, sir, and it's pitiful. I've lined up words in battle like Prussian soldiers, and I've coordinated nonsense while you've been in the woods. Can your secret be learned?
* Yes," replied the nightingale, "but it's not what you think. My wife bores me, I don't love her; I'm in love with the rose: Sadi, the Persian, talked about it. I cry all night for her, but she sleeps and doesn't hear me. Her chalice is closed by now: she's cradling an old beetle, - and tomorrow morning, when I return to my bed, exhausted with pain and fatigue, it's then that she'll blossom, for a bee to eat her heart!

THE END OF A WHITE ROBIN'S STORY