

The Englishman Of Etretat

by Guy de Maupassant

translated by Albert M.C. McMaster

A great English poet has just crossed over to France in order to greet Victor Hugo. All the newspapers are full of his name and he is the great topic of conversation in all drawing-rooms. Fifteen years ago I had occasion several times to meet Algernon Charles Swinburne. I will attempt to show him just as I saw him and to give an idea of the strange impression he made on me, which will remain with me throughout time.

I believe it was in 1867 or in 1868 that an unknown young Englishman came to Etretat and bought a little but hidden under great trees. It was said that he lived there, always alone, in a strange manner; and he aroused the inimical surprise of the natives, for the inhabitants were sullen and foolishly malicious, as they always are in little towns.

They declared that this whimsical Englishman ate nothing but boiled, roasted or stewed monkey; that he would see no one; that he talked to himself hours at a time and many other surprising things that made people think that he was different from other men. They were surprised that he should live alone with a monkey. Had it been a cat or a dog they would have said nothing. But a monkey! Was that not frightful? What savage tastes the man must have!

I knew this young man only from seeing him in the streets. He was short, plump, without being fat, mild-looking, and he wore a little blond mustache, which was almost invisible.

Chance brought us together. This savage had amiable and pleasing manners, but he was one of those strange Englishmen that one meets here and there throughout the world.

Endowed with remarkable intelligence, he seemed to live in a fantastic dream, as Edgar Poe must have lived. He had translated into English a volume of strange Icelandic legends, which I ardently desired to see translated into French. He loved the supernatural, the dismal and grewsome, but he spoke of the most marvellous things

with a calmness that was typically English, to which his gentle and quiet voice gave a semblance of reality that was maddening.

Full of a haughty disdain for the world, with its conventions, prejudices and code of morality, he had nailed to his house a name that was boldly impudent. The keeper of a lonely inn who should write on his door: "Travellers murdered here!" could not make a more sinister jest. I never had entered his dwelling, when one day I received an invitation to luncheon, following an accident that had occurred to one of his friends, who had been almost drowned and whom I had attempted to rescue.

Although I was unable to reach the man until he had already been rescued, I received the hearty thanks of the two Englishmen, and the following day I called upon them.

The friend was a man about thirty years old. He bore an enormous head on a child's body--a body without chest or shoulders. An immense forehead, which seemed to have engulfed the rest of the man, expanded like a dome above a thin face which ended in a little pointed beard. Two sharp eyes and a peculiar mouth gave one the impression of the head of a reptile, while the magnificent brow suggested a genius.

A nervous twitching shook this peculiar being, who walked, moved, acted by jerks like a broken spring.

This was Algernon Charles Swinburne, son of an English admiral and grandson, on the maternal side, of the Earl of Ashburnham.

His strange countenance was transfigured when he spoke. I have seldom seen a man more impressive, more eloquent, incisive or charming in conversation. His rapid, clear, piercing and fantastic imagination seemed to creep into his voice and to lend life to his words. His brusque gestures enlivened his speech, which penetrated one like a dagger, and he had bursts of thought, just as lighthouses throw out flashes of fire, great, genial lights that seemed to illuminate a whole world of ideas.

The home of the two friends was pretty and by no means commonplace. Everywhere were paintings, some superb, some

strange, representing different conceptions of insanity. Unless I am mistaken, there was a water-color which represented the head of a dead man floating in a rose-colored shell on a boundless ocean, under a moon with a human face.

Here and there I came across bones. I clearly remember a flayed hand on which was hanging some dried skin and black muscles, and on the snow-white bones could be seen the traces of dried blood.

The food was a riddle which I could not solve. Was it good? Was it bad? I could not say. Some roast monkey took away all desire to make a steady diet of this animal, and the great monkey who roamed about among us at large and playfully pushed his head into my glass when I wished to drink cured me of any desire I might have to take one of his brothers as a companion for the rest of my days.

As for the two men, they gave me the impression of two strange, original, remarkable minds, belonging to that peculiar race of talented madmen from among whom have arisen Poe, Hoffmann and many others.

If genius is, as is commonly believed, a sort of aberration of great minds, then Algernon Charles Swinburne is undoubtedly a genius.

Great minds that are healthy are never considered geniuses, while this sublime qualification is lavished on brains that are often inferior but are slightly touched by madness.

At any rate, this poet remains one of the first of his time, through his originality and polished form. He is an exalted lyrical singer who seldom bothers about the good and humble truth, which French poets are now seeking so persistently and patiently. He strives to set down dreams, subtle thoughts, sometimes great, sometimes visibly forced, but sometimes magnificent.

Two years later I found the house closed and its tenants gone. The furniture was being sold. In memory of them I bought the hideous flayed hand. On the grass an enormous square block of granite bore this simple word: "Nip." Above this a hollow stone offered water to the birds. It was the grave of the monkey, who had been hanged by a young, vindictive negro servant. It was said that this violent domestic

had been forced to flee at the point of his exasperated master's revolver. After wandering about without home or food for several days, he returned and began to peddle barley-sugar in the streets. He was expelled from the country after he had almost strangled a displeased customer.

The world would be gayer if one could often meet homes like that.

This story appeared in the "Gaulois," November 29, 1882. It was the original sketch for the introductory study of Swinburne, written by Maupassant for the French translation by Gabriel Mourey of "Poems and Ballads."