

The Deaf and Dumb Girl

by unknown author

Translation from French

Published: 1839
in »The Casket«



IN the autumn of 18__, I was making "the grand tour," and on my way from Paris to Marseilles, I met with an extraordinary adventure, which I will relate in all its strange and harrowing details. The hill at Autun, covered with its vineyards and their rich fruit, is picturesque and pleasing; but the gathering time was then past, and the scene was flat and dismal; my companions in the diligence were by no means persons of elegant manners, and to make bad worse, a drizzling rain kept falling, and the dampness of the atmosphere caused a depression in the spirits of myself and fellow-travellers.

We had not gone far beyond Autun, when the diligence stopped at the entrance of an avenue, which opened into the high road, and led to a splendid mansion, evidently the abode of a person of rank and distinction. A small party of elegantly-

dressed persons stood at the gate, and it appeared that one of them was about to proceed with us in the conveyance.

Two servants came forward, bringing travelling bags and trunks which were duly fastened upon the roof, and this done, a fine-looking young man, in a military cloak and travelling cap, separated himself from the party, which consisted besides himself of an elderly gentleman and two ladies, one of whom seemed to be the mamma of the other, and after kissing the ladies' hands, he advanced and took his seat, without taking the slightest notice of the other passengers, and then putting his head and part of his body out from the window, he maintained a conversation with the ladies until all was ready for starting; and then came the parting words, the words which always fall mournfully on the heart, but most mournfully upon young hearts that love.

Several voices exclaimed "A pleasant journey!" but one small timid voice added, "*Adieu, Jules!*" There was sweet music in that timid voice; it spoke audibly to the heart, though it scarcely reached the ear. And all who heard it, felt that by the speaker of those parting words, our fellow-traveller was *beloved*.

The young man also repeated the word "*Adieu!*" but it was in a much firmer and gayer tone, and he waved his hand and agitated his body, without seeming to care in the least for the other passengers, or to mind the personal inconvenience he put them to.

At length the diligence moved on, and the château and the party at the gate were left far behind. M. Jules now began to settle himself in his seat, and to cast inquiring glances at his fellow-travellers, by all of whom he was similarly regarded. He was a fine-looking young man, with symmetric figure and a dark expressive countenance; but his eye had an expression of gay recklessness in it, which did not raise him in my estimation; and there was a thoughtless light-hearted joyance in his manner which vexed me.

I had at first set him down as a perfect hero of romance. He was very communicative, and gave us to understand that he was a military officer, that the old gentleman, from whom he had just parted, was his uncle, one of the richest land proprietors in Burgundy, and that the younger of the two ladies was his daughter, Josephine, to whom our companion was on the point of being married; and, of course, we were favored with very glowing descriptions of her beauty and virtues.

He was journeying now to make preparations for the wedding; and intended to throw up his commission, abandon a military life, and reside with his wife six months in the country, and the rest of the year in Paris. Such were his arrangements, stated in the course of a lively and animated conversation, which was only interrupted by the sudden stoppage of the vehicle, and we found that our journey was arrested by a multitude of persons of all sexes and ages, singing, shouting, dancing, fiddling. We soon discovered that we were in the midst of a fair.

"Why," exclaimed a fellow-passenger, Madame Vernet, after taking an almanac from her reticule, and inspecting it rapidly, "this is St. Ursula's day."

"*Ursula!*" exclaimed M. Jules with an expression of surprise, with which alarm appeared to be associated.

"Yes!" rejoined Madame Vernet, handing the almanac to him; "you see, it is St Ursula's day."

M. Jules took the almanac in his hand, and appeared to look at it, then repeating the word "Ursula" in a low tone, he returned the book to its owner.

"Ah!" said Madame Vernet, "I suppose Ursula is the second name of your destined bride."

"No!" replied Jules, faintly, and then became silent, thoughtful and reserved.

EVENING had by this time drawn imperceptibly on, and upon the hills appeared the last faint reflection of the departed luminary of day; all nature appeared to be calm; the trees were still, the birds sung not among the leaves, the very air was mute, and silence led to rêverie—rêverie to sleep; the postilions had ceased to swear, and none of us knew how the time had passed when the coach hail stopped for supper at Chalons-sur-Saone.

After a hasty meal, again we set out upon our journey, none more anxious than M. Jules. "Are we out of Chalons?" he was constantly enquiring. So frequently was this question put, that at length one of the passengers said "Why do you ask."

"I have no particular reason for asking," he replied.

"Were you ever at Chalons before?" rejoined the passenger.

"Yes, I was quartered there with my regiment once."

"You have some friends here, then?"

"No," he rejoined quickly, and hastily; the conversation therefore dropped, and very soon afterward the whole of the passengers were in the arms of Morpheus.

We could not have slept long before a terrible shake awakened us all; the vehicle had stopped again. The night was extremely dark, and the wind howled mournfully through the trees that skirted the road, a small light upon which, as if from a lanthorn, indicated that we were about to receive an accession to our numbers. The diligence had stopped to take up their passenger.

"We are quite full already," was the general exclamation, when this discovery was made.

"There is still one vacant place," growled the conductor.

There was no disputing this point; but we grumbled, nevertheless, for we had been very comfortable hitherto, and the addition of another person was by no means welcome.

"It's only a young lady," said the conductor, in a tone of voice which indicated he was in a very bad temper. "It's only a young lady, who will not take up much room."

Presently a small figure in white appeared upon the steps; "She will not trouble you," added the conductor, "for she is deaf and dumb; I have carried her before now to Lyons—the devil take her! She has always occasioned me some misfortune."

The female had by this time got in, and taken her seat. "Wo-o! wo-o!" cried the conductor, addressing the postilion, "Mind the horses, they are rearing terribly." And then directing his conversation to a man in the garb of a priest, whom we could see by the light of a lanthorn, standing in the road. "Adieu, M. le Curé, you may be sure I'll take care of the young lady!"

Crack went the postilion's whip, and again we were proceeding on our journey.

WE were all very desirous of knowing something about our fellow passenger, but as she was deaf and dumb, it was of no use saying a word to her; the ladies, indeed, got up a conversation upon the double misfortune of the poor girl, but that soon ended, and then they moved and fidgeted, to attract attention, but she sat very quiet, and took no notice of any body.

An unpleasant chilliness now came over us; we pulled up the windows, drew our cloaks close around us, and the ladies put shawls over their bonnets. But we still felt uncomfortable, so much so, indeed, that M. Jules let down one of the windows, declaring that the external air was warmer than the atmosphere we breathed in the diligence. We found this to be the case, and all of us were puzzled to solve this philosophical mystery. We did not shiver now so much as we had done before, but nevertheless, all complained of a very uneasy sensation; and many jests were made upon the subject, and at length some one said that it was entirely attributable to the deaf and dumb girl.

We again endeavored to lull ourselves off to sleep, but could not, one awoke in a fright, another was constantly starting, a third had frightful dreams, and M. Jules moaned so dreadfully, that we were obliged to shake him, and then he told us he had been troubled with a dreadful nightmare.

"Ah!" exclaimed Madame Vernet, "we ate too much for supper at Chalons." And every body concurred in the opinion thus expressed.

AT length day dawned, and the first beams of morning, falling upon the white dress of the deaf and dumb girl, again collected our attention toward her.

We looked at her in silent amazement. Such a form we had none of us ever beheld before; we were fearful of trusting to our senses, and thought it an illusion. But the sun rising above the horizon put an end to our doubts, and the frightful appearance of our companion became evident. Her skin was of a deadly white color, and it seemed to cover nothing but bare bones; her lips were thin, so thin indeed, that they scarcely enclosed a perfect set of projecting teeth, and two small eyes sparkled like live coals from the bottom of immense orbits with a vivacity of motion which made her turn her singular countenance from one side to another with an appearance of insatiable curiosity. Her eyes seemed to interrogate us all in succession, and there was a smile upon her lips, but it was so inconsistent with the general character of her countenance that we averted our heads: it was as if death's head were laughing on our faces.

The silence which the contemplation of this strange figure led to was first broken by M. Jules, who said, "Were it not for the respect I entertain for the present company, I would say with the conductor, I wish the devil would take her. Did you ever see such a face as hers? She makes us all shudder."

His observations were interrupted by the extraordinary looks of the subject of them; she gazed rapidly upon us all, and then burst into a fit of laughter but to the sight only, for we heard no sound. This silent laughter raised in us feelings of horror; but not the least sympathy for her misfortunes.

WE had not time to express our feelings to each other, for directly afterward a sudden jolt occurred, and the falling of the diligence intimated that the axle-tree had broken.

The confusion which this accident threw us into was great, the females shrieked, the gentlemen expressed themselves in terms not to be mentioned by ears polite. The deaf and dumb girl quickly scrambled over the other passengers and got out first. Happily no one was hurt, and as soon as we extricated ourselves we all congratulated ourselves, except the conductor, who gave vent to loud imprecations.

"I knew how it would be," he said, "that speechless woman has brought all this misfortune upon us. This is the third time she has wrought mischief."

Happily there was an inn by the road-side in which we could take our breakfast, while the diligence was being put in travelling order again. It was a delightful morning, and though there was nothing in the scenery to make it attractive, we, nevertheless, preferred a ramble to staying at the inn, while breakfast was being prepared for us. At a short distance from the house there was a large cross, surrounded by young elm trees. A small hedge, formed by sweetbriar and common bramble waved gently around a grass-plot, extended round the stone at the foot of the cross. It was the most picturesque object in the neighborhood, and M. Jules resolved upon taking a sketch of it.

"We only want the speechless woman," said he, "to complete the picture."

"Possibly," said I, "it would not be difficult to induce her to sit to *you* for her portrait, for in the diligence she seemed to flirt with you. She looked at you as if she desired to catch your attention."

"The poor wretch," replied M. Jules, as he raised his black silk D'Orsay, and twirled his moustache. "The speechless woman is a *coquette*! And why not! O, woman, woman, you are alike, all the world over."

"I should not suppose that you had much reason to complain. Have you been often in love?"

"Yes; but it seldom lasted for more than a week."

"And yet you are going to be married."

"Oh, that's a different thing altogether. When a man gets thirty years old, it looks respectable to have a wife. A woman takes your name, and you avail yourself of her property, and leave your titles and estates to your children. It is decidedly respectable to have a wife when you become thirty years old. But that is not what I call love. Josephine is charming, beautiful as an angel, but I have known many angels. Marriage is good, because it fixes you in the station you are to live in. But love is the most delightful thing in the world—"

The *roué* would have proceeded, but old Madame Vernet, who did not at all agree with him upon these subjects suddenly arose, and fetching the deaf and dumb girl who was playing with a herd of goats, a short distance off, made some signs to the poor creature to kneel and pray with her at the foot of the cross. I know not what the poor girl had at first thought Madame Vernet wished her to do; but she had quietly suffered herself to be led under the elms; but when the good old lady importuned her to kneel, she tripped away, laughing, and returned to the goats, which she at length led to browse upon the briar that formed a hedge round the cross.

"I verily believe," exclaimed Jules, "that the speechless woman is the genius of evil. Look, she is destroying the only beautiful object in this landscape!"

He would have gone and desired her to desist; but at that moment the old goat-herd and his dogs advanced, and drove away the goats from the hedge. The speechless woman looked for a moment at the old man, and then skipped after the animals, whilst Jules and I advanced and desired the goat-herd to continue to protect this pretty little spot. The old man knew nothing of landscape effects, his only motive he said for driving away the goats was, that they should not eat the bushes and grass where a female had been buried about eighteen months before. The whole party were astonished, and made inquiry for further particulars; but the old man knew nothing more, and referred them to the landlady of the inn, where the female had died.

We all returned to the house, and upon making inquiry, were informed by the hostess that the female in question arrived at her house one rainy night, weary and sad; and her eyes were inflamed with weeping. She asked to have a private room, and being so accommodated, had resided there for nearly a month, paying her expenses every day; but small those expenses were, for the poor creature ate scarcely anything. She used to wander about at night, and was often seen sitting upon the stones at the foot of the cross, and at other times was heard praying devoutly, and in extreme agony. At length she was one day found suspended from a branch of one of the elms by a silk handkerchief. This was all the hostess knew of the poor girl's story.

"The victim of man's perfidy, no doubt," exclaimed Madame Vernet, and the good old lady retired from the company to weep.

"The mayor came," continued the landlady; "and scolded us for giving shelter to a vagabond, for she had no writing about her to indicate who she was; and the priest refused to bury her, or allow her remains to be interred in consecrated ground; but I had pity," said the good hearted creature, "and I begged that the body might be buried near the cross, thinking that the ground there must be almost as good as consecrated ground; and they granted my request."

The old woman wiped away a tear, and added, "I have, besides, what I may call her will; it was the only thing she ever wrote in this house, and I have put it into an old frame which she would buy of me for the purpose, after taking from it a fine portrait of the Emperor; and I have also placed it in the public room, according to her last request."

Our curiosity being strongly excited, we desired the landlady to show us this paper, and presently she brought in a glazed frame of black wood, but the glass was so dirty that not a word could be read until the dirt was removed. M. Jules then took it in his hand; he gazed upon it and changed color, "Heavens!" he exclaimed, "how singular!"

"Do you know the hand-writing?" I inquired.

"I—I," he replied, much embarrassed, "how should I know it?" And he gave the frame into my hands.

The writing was to the following effect:

"If you recognise my hand-writing, be silent, I beseech you;— I implore you not to tell my name, for I shall be afraid of my father, even after death. I am dishonored, and I must die. It is a dreadful thing; but I cannot look my friends in the face again — I cannot endure my mother's rebuke;—I cannot endure my

father's curse. I have no more money;—I have not strength to work; and he whom I love bade me farewell, with laughter! Would that I were mad. I fear death—greatly do I fear it; but still I must die. I am not yet eighteen. Let poor girls beware of men who come to them with smiling looks, and words of love;—their voices are ever soft—their promises are always great; they swear before the face of Heaven;—but O! believe them not. I erred, but I dearly loved him who destroyed my peace. All must now end. I hope for the prayers of every Christian soul who passes this way. Let them pray also for him, for he is the cause of all. But let them say nothing to my father."

The sobs of the female passengers, and of our good hostess, while I read these simple wailings of a seared heart showed how much they were affected—even the men betrayed emotion, and, "albeit unused to the melting mood," I found it impossible to restrain the tears which *would* gush out, despite my efforts to restrain them, when I reflected upon the condition of this wretched girl, *murdered* by some heartless villain; for he who brought ruin upon her was the murderer. Poor girl! poor girl! heaven will have mercy on thee, though the man she loved had none!

Madame Vernet uttered a vehement philippic against male perfidy as soon as she could well speak, and became much warmer when M. Jules, who had recovered his presence of mind, endeavored to turn the whole into ridicule.

"It is a very lucky thing," he said, "that our *beautiful* little fellow-traveller from Chalons is condemned to silence, for I should have had her also for an antagonist; and it must be confessed, that such a face, talking of love and romance, would have been irresistible."

This observation recalled the speechless lady to our recollection; and we now, for the first time, remarked that she was not present at the breakfast table. We were informed by the conductor that she never sat at table, but contented herself with a crust of dry bread. Upon looking through the open door, I saw her distributing this bread to the goats by which she was surrounded. Poor creature! the goats, after taking from her hand the bread she proffered them, fled away hastily, as if frightened by her looks.

It was at length announced that the damage experienced by the diligence had been repaired; and accordingly our journey was resumed. During the whole of the way we constantly felt a damp chill, which we could not account for, and experienced much physical and mental uneasiness. M. Jules endeavored to re-assume his wonted gay and easy manner, but vain was his attempt; and we were all well pleased when the diligence stopped at Lyons.

After partaking of some refreshment, M. Jules and I agreed to embark in one of the passage boats which descends the Rhône, he for Valence, and I for Avignon. Freed from the looks of the strange girl in the diligence, my companion renewed his self-possession, and again amused me much by his gay and lively recitals and descriptions of adventures and places. The subject of his approaching marriage, was, of course, uppermost in his mind, and, really, he seemed to be a most fortunate fellow, for his cousin, whom he was about to lead to the altar, was extremely beautiful, and very rich.

THE navigation of the Rhône was by no means pleasant, for the sources whence the river is supplied were obstructed, and the water was so extremely low that our boat frequently touched the bottom; so that, on the second evening, we thought it advisable to put up at a miserable inn at Pomier; but there we found the food was detestable, and the beds worse. You may be sure that our contemplation of the exchange we had made, did not produce any very pleasant feelings; and, in a state of vexation and discontent, we retired for an inspection of the inn-kitchen, which was, indeed, the only public room in the house. Imagine our surprise when, by the dim light of a solitary iron lamp, we discovered, in a corner, the speechless woman, with her flashing eye-balls fixed upon us.

"Horrible!" exclaimed Jules, "I cannot endure this. I will return and sleep in the boat. Had I been aware that she had chosen this conveyance, I should not have come by it."

I endeavored to prevail upon him to abandon his intention, but in vain, and he quitted the house. Supper was now ready, and a good appetite caused me to forget, for the moment, the speechless woman in the corner; and when I had finished my meal, I found that she was gone. I conjectured that she had retired to rest, and soon afterward went to bed myself.

ON repairing to the boat the next morning I was alarmed by the altered appearance of M. Jules. He sat apart and abstracted, his countenance pale and haggard; and when I addressed him, he muttered a few indistinct words, and appeared to wish to be left alone. The night had made a woeful change in him; and, during the remainder of the journey, he continued to be reserved and thoughtful. At parting he pressed my hand, and, in a faint voice exclaimed, "*that awful night.*"

"Sir!" I rejoined.

"I could not pray while *she* stood before me."

"Whom?"

"She!" he exclaimed, "with her fire-like eyes glaring upon me, searing my heart and brain."

"What do you mean?" I enquired.

"I had sworn, that when I could possibly come to Chalons again I would make her my wife. And thus I triumphed over her unsuspecting virtue. Then I laughed at the ruin I had made; and—" Here his voice became quite indistinct, and he muttered several sentences, among which all that I could distinguish was the name of "Ursula."

I was glad when I parted from this strange man, for he seemed now to be intimately connected with the dumb girl; and I began to have the most painful and terrifying apprehensions.

It was some time before I could shake off the unpleasant emotions which the presence of these individuals had occasioned; but time, which effaces strong impressions, soon caused me almost to forget both Jules and the speechless woman.

HAVING an engagement with a friend in Paris, about a month after the journey above described, I retraced my steps. The passage boat and the miserable

inn at Pomier brought back the traveller's companion to my recollection; and, as I turned my eyes to the corner of the inn-kitchen, where I had last seen the terrible female, I felt anxious to know more concerning her; but all my enquiries were made in vain; and even the conductor of the diligence could only tell me, that whenever he had conveyed the speechless woman, some accident was sure to occur to the vehicle.

I determined upon stopping at Autun, and making enquiries for M. Jules. Therefore, ordering my luggage to be conveyed to its destination, I left the diligence, and proceeded toward the château of the destined bride. But I had not advanced more than a hundred paces up the avenue, when I heard a trampling noise behind me, and, turning round, I perceived that a funeral procession was returning to the château.

I conjectured that one of the parents of Josephine was dead; and, stepping aside, I looked enquiringly for M. Jules in the melancholy group. But he was not there. There were several gentlemen; but all strangers to me, and all appeared in a state of terror and alarm, and all hurried past me into the château. I detained one of the domestics, and asked the name of the departed. With a look of fear, and in an indistinct voice, he answered "*M. Jules.*"

The domestic was hurrying away, when I caught him by the sleeve, and asked for more particulars; but he broke from me, and rushed into the house.

I sought the inn where I intended to rest that night, and there discovered the cause of the strange emotion among the funeral group. Jules had returned to Autun in a weak and feeble state; the best medical assistance was obtained; but it was all unavailing. He became delirious, and was continually shrieking, as if in agony; several times a speechless woman in white had been observed about the château, and on the day of his death they found her at his bedside, with her fire-like eyes glaring upon him.

They drove her from the room, and she tripped laughingly away. M. Jules had then called for the priest, to whom it was said he had made confession of some grievous crime, and then, his conscience being relieved, he prayed fervently; and thus he died.

And the consternation among the funeral party had been occasioned by the appearance of the speechless woman at his grave. She stood among the mourners, looking down upon the remains of Jules. His relatives regarded her with feelings of horror, and shrunk from her. The officiating priest advanced, bearing the sacred symbol of his faith, toward her, when she seemed to glide into the grave. A shriek from the assemblage rent the air. They looked for the strange female, but all they beheld in the grave was the dark coffin which contained the remains of M. Jules.

