

The Etruscan Vase
and Other Stories

Prosper Mérimée

Translated by Douglas Parmée



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Introduction

Mérimée was lucky in his parents. One year after his birth in 1803, his father Léonor was appointed Secretary of what was shortly to become the state-run *École des Beaux-Arts*. Though not well paid, it was an important post: it gave him – and his son – entrée into a wide circle of artists, architects and intellectuals, as well as into government salons which the sociable Prosper would later use to full advantage in promoting his career. As a former art teacher, his father was able usefully to guide him when, having seen some of his son's early daubs and sketches, he felt competent to warn him he'd never make his living as a painter and told him instead to study law, the universal gateway into government service. Reluctantly, Prosper obeyed – there was a decent paternal allowance attached – and graduated as a lawyer in 1823, but he continued his amateur sketching, which provided considerable solace in his later years. His cultivated Voltairean mother had an important impact in more personal aspects of his life: as a freethinker, she did not have her son baptized, and he grew up in an atmosphere of irreligion. His mother, incidentally, was once described as being capable of tenderness only once a year, and Prosper's own impassive aloofness in public was proverbial. He traced this trait back to his schooldays, when he had been victimized for expressing his feelings too openly or enthusiastically – an experience which may well have led to him, like his character Saint-Clair, having his signet ring engraved: "Remember to be mistrustful".

His ambitions were never much in doubt: literary and social success. The first came quickly and pleasurably, and from

the outset his work showed his love of foolery. In 1825 there appeared his anonymous *Théâtre de Clara Gazul*, a collection of six short plays by an entirely fictitious Spanish actress, providing exotic fodder for a growing generation of Romantic readers. Two years later came *La Guzla*, a spurious collection of “Illyrian” (i.e. Serbo-Croat) national songs and poems by Hyacinthe Maglanovich: another pure but successful hoax. He liked pulling his readers’ legs – a trait we must bear in mind when reading the present selection of stories. After a further anonymous play about the fourteenth-century Peasants’ Revolt, *La Jacquerie*, and another about incestuous love (he was already keen to shock his readers, particularly the fashionable Romantics’ *bête noire*, the bourgeoisie), Mérimée turned to another popular genre, the historical novel. *Chronique du règne de Charles IX*, an account of the massacre of St Bartholomew, allowed him to kill two birds with one stone. His first concern was to create shock: the unwitting murder of a man by his brother provided the perfect vehicle for Mérimée’s early and enduring fondness for the bloodthirsty. The second was to attack the Roman Catholic Church – an irresistible target of his irreverence, sometimes hidden under a clever but thin veil of irony. He now felt able to launch out under his own name into a long and successful career as a short-story writer, consolidated in 1844 by his election to the Académie Française and cemented a year later by his most famous work, *Carmen*.

His literary ambitions had been fully achieved. His social ambitions took longer, though they turned out, at the time, to be even grander. He refused on principle the offer of a post under the reactionary, clerical Bourbon monarchy; but when it was finally ousted in the peaceful revolution of 1830, he accepted various ministerial posts under the new “King of the French” (no longer “King of France”) Louis-Philippe, who proved his bourgeois credentials by carrying his own homely umbrella. Always meticulously conscientious in performing his duties, even if uncongenial, he finally landed the perfect job to

suit his talents and tastes: in 1834, he was appointed Inspector of Historical Monuments, which involved surveying the entire architectural heritage of France and deciding what was worth preserving or restoring. He loved travel and had, or was easily able to acquire, the necessary technical knowledge for his task, which he was to perform for the rest of his official life. While the renovative zeal of some of his architects has been considered excessive or misplaced, there is no doubt that, even today, his countrymen – and millions of tourists – have reason to be grateful for his efforts. These efforts were undoubtedly appreciated at the time – so much, indeed, that during the stormy days of the 1848 revolution, when the monarchy of France was overthrown once and for all, and the country became first a republic and then an imperial power, Mérimée retained his post. His services were recognized: he was on a winning streak.

Emperor Napoleon III wanted an heir, and his choice for a mother fell on Eugenia Montijo, whom Mérimée had met when she was a young girl, on one of his early visits to Spain. The new Empress remembered Mérimée with affection and he soon found himself transformed into a senator, with emoluments ten times greater than an Inspector of Monuments; Mérimée decided to confine his hitherto liberal principles to his private correspondence. He found that life as a senator under a semi-dictator was quite bearable – and we can note that his views on the human race had a basis in personal experience. Although constantly complaining, particularly as his health deteriorated, of the courtier's obligations – dressing up in uncomfortably tight trousers, staying up late, following the Imperial Court in its routine moves at set intervals to Compiègne or Fontainebleau, being expected to lay on charades or reading sessions to help pass the evenings – he was, as always, prepared to accept and assiduously perform his duties. He had achieved his supreme ambition at a relatively low cost to his integrity and was prepared to conform, with ironic, though unexpressed, reservations. After all, he commanded respect

and could largely pursue his own way of life and his dandified tastes; his trousers, even if too tight for comfort, were made by the best London tailors, and he was a notorious gourmet.

He also had freedom enough to slip away to spend his winters in Cannes, husbanding his steadily failing health; he suffered increasingly from asthma and other complaints of old age. It was in Cannes that he died in 1870, too late to avoid learning of France's disastrous defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (to which he was strongly opposed – he had met Bismarck and had a high opinion of him), but fortunately soon enough not to learn that, in Paris, his private library and documents had been destroyed by fire during the bloody uprising of the Paris Commune. Since it was impossible in France in 1870 to bury an atheist with dignity, a compromise was reached by burying him in the Protestant cemetery; it had many graves, for the south of France was sought out as a refuge for people suffering from tuberculosis who were rich enough to travel and live there.

'The Vision of Charles XI', first published in 1829, is one of the earliest of Mérimée's stories, little more than a short tale. It is very closely borrowed, but not entirely plagiarized, from an article first published in German and translated into French. Mérimée's contribution was to change details – the blood-stained slipper seems to have been his own brilliant invention. It already bears the hallmark of his later works: the retelling, concisely, in the most matter-of-fact manner, of an event, in this case a horrible event. (He does save the reader from some of the horror – Anckarström's punishment included the cutting-off of his hand.) And naturally the author insists that this appalling tale is true, though nobody has yet discovered the alleged document that would prove its truth. Mérimée is already artfully beguiling and entertaining his readers, here rather more superficially than in later works.

'Tamango' is equally appalling but less fantastic. It is also far more intricate and offers a wider variety of themes and

incidents. Humorous, ironic (the Captain of this slave-trader is called Ledoux, *doux* meaning “gentle”, and his vessel is christened the *Hope*), the irony is rather obvious and the drama is saved from drifting into melodrama only by the author’s studied factual approach to horrible happenings. In this story, Mérimée again found help in various documentary and personal sources: the slave trade was a topical issue and a number of his acquaintances were actively engaged in bringing about public agreement to abolish it. His description of the structure of the vessel is scrupulously accurate.

Here too, Mérimée’s pessimism about the human race becomes particularly evident: when the lugger containing most of the survivors of the *Hope* capsizes, the crew of another, smaller boatful of survivors rows very hard – to get away from the slaves flung into the sea, in order not to feel obliged to pick them up. The smaller boat disappears on the horizon and is never heard of again – but Mérimée does not say that its occupants did not survive; leaving the reader in uncertainty is one of his major skills as a storyteller. We also note that Mérimée is continually drawing our attention to the large part played in life by chance. We are not told explicitly how Tamango dies; we are left to surmise – perhaps too much Jamaican rum, or its cheaper rotgut equivalent? We hope it is this – a merry end to a born survivor.

The title story in this collection, written for publication in the *Revue de Paris*, first appeared in 1830, and its tale of a lover consumed by jealousy displays the author’s rapidly increasing dexterity with the form. Mérimée is a master of rhythms, moving – often abruptly – from one action, one scene or one mood to another. He is equally expert in misleading, in supplying an anticlimax: a dramatic scene fizzles out undramatically, a calm suddenly becomes a storm and vice versa; we become expectant, are lulled into security and then shaken out of it. The agitated young man who suffers agonies at the sight of the Etruscan vase is needlessly agitated; but how long will his

THE VISION OF CHARLES XI, KING OF SWEDEN

*There are more things in heav'n and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*

Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 5

PEOPLE SCOFF AT THE IDEA of supernatural visions and apparitions, and yet there are some which are so well authenticated that if you refuse to believe them you'd be forced, logically, to reject all historical evidence. There exists an official report, drawn up in due form and signed by four trustworthy people, which should guarantee that the story I'm about to tell you is true. Let me add that the events related in this report were predicted long before they had actually happened, in our time.

Charles XI, the father of the more famous Charles XII, was one of the most despotic monarchs who ever lived – and one of the wisest that Sweden has ever had. He restricted the monstrous power of the nobility, he got rid of the powerful Senate and made laws on his own authority; in a word, he changed Sweden's previously oligarchical constitution and forced the Estates to accept his own absolute power. He was, by the way, an enlightened man, courageous and greatly attached to Lutheranism; he was inflexible, cold, pragmatic and completely devoid of imagination.

He'd recently lost his wife, Ulrike Eleonora. Although his harsh treatment of her was said to have hastened her death,

he admired her and seemed to have been more saddened by her death than might have been expected from such a hard-hearted man. Since her death, he'd become even more gloomy and taciturn than before. He concentrated on his work in a way which showed that he was determined not to brood over his sorrow.

Late one autumn evening, he was sitting in his dressing gown and slippers in front of a blazing fire in a private room in his palace in Stockholm. With him were his chamberlain, Count Brahe, whose services he had come to value, and his doctor, Baumgarten, for whom he had sent earlier in the evening for some reason or other. Baumgarten, incidentally, prided himself on being a freethinker and thought the only thing you could believe in was medicine.

It was getting late and the King had not wished either of them "Goodnight", his normal sign that they were free to leave. He was staring down, watching the flames, with his chin on his chest, not uttering a word, bored by his company but, for some obscure reason, afraid of being left alone. Count Brahe could see that his presence was not particularly welcome and had remarked several times that His Majesty might be wanting to go to bed. The King gestured to him that he wanted Brahe to stay. The doctor had also pointed out that late nights were bad for His Majesty's health.

Charles replied, clenching his teeth: "Stay where you are. I don't feel like going to bed yet."

So they tried to talk about this and that, but after a couple of sentences the conversation petered out. It was obvious that His Majesty was in one of his black moods and in such cases the courtier finds himself in a tricky situation. Suspecting that the King was saddened by the recent loss of his wife, Count Brahe, after looking for a while at the portrait of the late Queen, hanging on the wall, exclaimed, with a sigh:

"What an excellent portrait that is of Her Majesty! Her living image, majestic but so gentle."

“Nonsense!” snarled the King. Whenever the Queen was mentioned in his presence, he felt that he was being blamed for his treatment of her.

“That portrait is far too flattering. The Queen was ugly!”

Then, secretly annoyed with himself for his unkind remark, he stood up and walked around the room to hide the fact that he felt ashamed. He stopped in front of the window, which looked out on to the courtyard. It was a dark night and the moon was in its first quarter.

The present royal palace hadn't yet been completed and Charles XI, who'd started building it, resided in the old palace on the tip of Riddarholm, overlooking Lake Malar. It was a large building, in the shape of a horseshoe, and the King's rooms were at the extreme end, almost facing the Assembly Hall where the Estates would sit when the King had some proclamation to make.

The King was greatly surprised to see that the windows of the Hall seemed to be brilliantly lit. His first thought was that some servant was in there; but what could a servant be doing there at this time of night? The Hall had long been closed and unused. In any case, the light was far too bright to be coming from a single torch. It could have been a fire but there was no sign of smoke or sparks. There was complete silence everywhere and this suggested that there was just a very bright light in the Hall.

Charles stood for a long time looking at the windows, not saying a word; but Brahe tugged a bell-cord to summon a page to go and find out what was happening. The King stopped him and said: “I intend to go and look at the Hall myself.”

As he spoke, they saw him go very pale and he seemed suddenly to have been gripped by some sort of religious terror. But he walked firmly out of the room, followed by his chamberlain and the doctor, each carrying a lighted candle.

The concierge who had charge of the keys had already gone to bed. Baumgarten woke him up and told him the King wanted

him to open up the Assembly Hall immediately. Greatly surprised, the concierge got up and first opened the door of the gallery which was the entrance hall to the main Assembly Hall. The King went in and you can imagine his surprise when he saw that the walls were completely draped in black.

“Who ordered this to be done?” he enquired angrily. The concierge was completely at a loss.

“Nobody, Sire, as far as I know,” he stammered. “The last time I had the gallery swept out, the walls were just panelled in oak, as they always have been. These hangings certainly didn’t come from the royal furniture store.”

The King quickly went two thirds of the way along the gallery, followed closely by the Count and the concierge. Baumgarten was hanging slightly back, as afraid of being left behind as of the possibility of being exposed to the dangers of what seemed to be turning into a very strange affair.

“Don’t go any farther, Your Majesty!” exclaimed the concierge. “There must be some witchcraft here... It’s very late and since the death of your dear Queen, people have been saying that she has been seen walking in this gallery at night... God save us!”

“Don’t go on, Sire,” cried Count Brahe. “Can’t you hear that strange noise coming from the Assembly Hall? Who can tell what dangers you’ll be facing in there.”

“At least, Your Majesty,” said Baumgarten, whose candle had just been blown out by a sudden gust of wind, “let me go and fetch one of your personal guards.”

“We shall go into the Assembly Hall,” replied the King. “Open this door!” he said to the concierge. He kicked the door and the sound echoed like a gunshot from the vault of the gallery. The concierge was trembling so much that he couldn’t fit the key into the keyhole.

“An old soldier trembling like a leaf,” said the King, shrugging his shoulders. “Can’t you open this door for us?” he asked Brahe.

“Your Majesty,” replied the Count, taking a step back, “if you were to command me to march into the mouth of a German or Danish cannon, I should do so without hesitation, but you are ordering me to enter the mouth of hell itself!”

The King tore the bunch of keys from the concierge’s hand.

“I see,” he said contemptuously, “that this matter concerns me alone.” And before anyone could stop him, he’d unlocked the heavy oak door of the Assembly Hall and gone in, saying as he went: “May God help me!”

Their curiosity overcoming their fears, his companions followed him in – they may even have felt that it would be shameful to desert their king.

The Hall was lit by a vast array of flaming torches. Black hangings had replaced the figured tapestry on the walls. The German, Danish and Muscovite flags – victory trophies of the great Gustavus Adolphus – were displayed, as usual, in their correct order; amidst them all, the Swedish banners stood out: they were all draped in funereal black crêpe.

The benches were packed with the four orders of the Estates: the nobility, the clergy, citizens and peasants, all sitting in their order of rank. All were dressed in black. Against this dark background, the multitude of faces shone out so brilliantly that the four observers of this extraordinary scene were too dazzled to be able to recognize any individuals.

On the high throne where the King would sit to address the assembly, there sat a corpse wearing the royal insignia. On the right of this corpse, which was covered in blood, a boy was standing, wearing a crown and holding a sceptre; on his left was an older man – perhaps I ought to say an older ghost – leaning against the throne. He was wearing the ceremonial cloak that had been worn by the Administrators of Sweden before it became a monarchy under the Vasas. Facing the throne were several men sitting at a table covered with large volumes and a few documents; their long black robes and their austere and serious demeanour suggested that they were judges. Between

the throne and the benches occupied by the Estates there was an execution block, covered with black crêpe cloth; nearby, there was an axe.

None of this assembled company seemed to have noticed the presence of King Charles and his three companions. As they'd come in, they'd heard a confused murmur of voices, but it had been impossible to distinguish any words.

The eldest of the black-robed men of law, who seemed to be the presiding judge, stood up and rapped sharply on a large folio volume lying in front of him. Immediately, complete silence fell. A number of well-dressed and fine-looking young men, with their hands tied behind their backs, came in through a door at the far end of the hall. They were holding their heads high and they looked confident. The young man in front, who seemed to be the most important of the prisoners, stopped in front of the execution block in the middle of the hall and looked down at it with an expression of supreme contempt. At the same moment, the corpse jerked convulsively and fresh red blood seemed to spurt from his wound. The young man knelt down, placed his head on the block, the axe rose in the air and fell with a loud thud. A stream of blood gushed onto the dais, mingling with the blood flowing from the royal corpse. The head bounced several times on the blood-covered floor and rolled up to Charles's feet, staining one of his slippers with blood.

Till then, surprise had kept him silent, but this horrible act moved him to speak. He took several steps towards the dais and addressed the man who was wearing the Administrator's cloak.

"If you are God, speak out; and if you are the Other, leave us in peace!"

The ghost replied slowly and solemnly:

"KING CHARLES! No more blood will flow during your reign" (at this point, his voice started to grow fainter and fainter) "but five reigns from now, woe, woe, woe on the blood of the Vasas!"