

The Sacred Bird

Octave Mirbeau

1890

A few leagues from my cottage, in one of the most fertile areas in France, there lies a certain immense property. For only the past ten years the place has belonged to a well-known banker, but it isn't used for hunting parties. The chateau was partly demolished during the first revolution. Nothing remains of it but an uncrowned brick tower and some charred walls that invade the weeds, which grow into trees, and the moss. The banker considered rebuilding it according to its original design, but then abandoned the idea because of the expense involved. He already had an historic estate near Paris that sufficiently accommodated his pride. But here the beautiful and well-preserved outbuildings have been converted into residences, and they make superb figures in the vast park, planted with giant trees, woven with royal lawns that roll down, waving, to meet the Forest of P____, which is a State Forest renowned for its high stands of timber. To the right, at a distance of ten kilometers, interspersed here and there with groves and thickets, lie the lands that depend economically on the estate. The new owner has much aggrandized the primitive place. All around the chateau, he has bought up the fields, the farms, and the meadows, so as to create for himself a sort of inviolable kingdom, where he could be the sole master—a harsh, implacable master who did not take his property rights lightly. He did not have any political designs on the country. The peasants, lured by the banker's gold, have little by little ceded the soil they once possessed. They have left to work elsewhere. Only a few old people lingered, aside from some woodcutters and paupers. It's sinister, and makes one shudder, to encounter one of them.

I recall looking there as a child, and seeing the fields covered with crops, the grassy meadows, and the farms, from which the alert and joyous sounds of work-songs would escape. How it's all changed, today! I recognize nothing of my old haunts. One could say that a bad wind has passed by, which has dried up the sap of bygone days with its power, destroying all of that generous gait in one stroke: the wheat, the barley, and the oats as well. Even the hedges, big and leafy along the drainage ditches, have been razed. To the left and right of the road, up to the edge of the forest, the fields are symmetrically planted with somber gray thorn bushes, and here and there, squares of buckwheat and alfalfa had been planted and then left to rot on the stalk. The fences, bristling with their closely pressed wooden pickets, defend the approaches of the untresspassable estate where the pheasant struts about. Here, all is sacrificed to the pheasant, and the pheasant enjoys the style of a sacred bird—a deified bird, nourished by perfumed berries and precious grains that are served by gamekeepers, devoted and vigilant as those ancient priests with braided beards

who watched over the sacred ibises in ancient Egypt. Instead of the mossy-roofed farmhouses, there are pinnacled kennels comprised of huge, turreted aviaries. The rigid trellises of steel wire now run along where I, in another time, would see the hazels and the aspen trees climb, ever so thin and light against the sky with their silver leaves. From place to place, the guard houses fire their evil looks onto the countryside from dreaded windows.

The poor people who wander along, and the vagabonds, looking for the night's shelter, pass quickly over this piece of earth, where there is nothing for their fatigue and their hunger, and where the very banks of the roadside ditches are hostile. If by chance a small-time traveling salesman, that misunderstood and pitiful wanderer of the markets and fairs, should linger on these thankless roads, the gamekeepers will soon be chasing him off. They've hardly gotten unhitched, and tethered their skinny nag, just lit a fire out of dead leaves and branches by their wagon, with its poles raised in the air and its awning torn, to cook some potatoes for supper, and already the gamekeepers have arrived.

"Move along, you thieves! What are you doing here?"

"But the road belongs to everybody..."

"And that wood you've stolen —does that belong to everybody? Bullshit! Get moving, or I'll write you a summons!"

Sometimes a pheasant will accompany these menacing words with the mocking sound of its wings.

One sees the sacred creatures in troops behind the trellises, running under the shadowy tufts of the thorn bushes in their little tracks, slipping between the rustling alfalfa stalks, and perching proudly on the fence rails. They powder themselves with sunlight in the road, insolently wearing the plumage of their ill-gotten wealth. One is obsessed with the pheasant: everywhere you aim your eyesight, you see a pheasant. With shouldered rifles and a savage air, the gamekeepers stand along the road at intervals, and keep watch over the birds which might be crippled by some passing peasant who bashed them with a stick. These men in military caps, who stare at you with a brutal glare, their gun-barrels gleaming, and these fields that are either mowed short or covered with dark leaves, all become an obsession. You forget where you are. It seems that you walk on ravaged, conquered soil, in enemy territory. It brings back evil memories of other times and blurry, painful visions of past defeats. Yes, it's the same sadness, the same silence, the very bereavement of the Earth, the same heaviness below the horizon! What's going to happen? What corpses, what panic, what disasters wait, just past a bend in the road? This recollection of somber days, of the broad plains we marched over, it enters into your heart, pursues you, and terrifies you. And the spikes of the fences bristling from either side of the road, with the points shining, had me thinking of victorious bayonets, waving as far as the eye can see, under the implacable cruelty of the sky.

It was very cold that day, and since I'd walked for quite a while, I was thirsty, and so I stopped at the door of a little house that crouched sadly alongside the road and I asked for some milk. At the back of the room there was a man, eating a morsel of grayish bread. He didn't turn around. Some ragged children were swarming around him. A shotgun was mounted above the fireplace. Out of this sad interior there breathed a violent stink of poverty! A baby with a terrified face started crying when he spotted me. Then a woman, the likes of whom I've never seen, appeared from out of the shadows. She was badly emaciated and wore a tortured expression, like a specter of misery. Her eyes carried a hateful glow so openly murderous that I was intimidated by them.

She looked me over for a few mute and terrible seconds, and then, shrugging her shoulders, she said:

“Some milk! You’re asking for some milk? Well there’s no milk around here! There’d have to be some cows for that! But take a look around! There’s plenty of pheasants —the pheasants of sorrow!” She gazed in front of her with a ferocious air, and saw the fields of thorn bushes that stretched into the distance, protecting with their shade and nourishing with their berries the “bird of sorrow” that had taken both her cow and her field away from her.

The man had not lifted his head. Sitting on a stool with his back turned and his elbows on his knees, he continued to chew on his piece of hard bread. On the packed dirt floor, crouching in a tangled heap of skinny gooseflesh, the children were still terrified by my presence and continued to cry. I entered this hovel and was I moved by its poverty.

“You certainly look awful, my friends,” I said, handing out some small change to the kids. “Why haven’t you left this place? Everyone else is gone.”

“And just where would we go?” the woman asked me.

“I don’t know —it doesn’t matter where. And you have no work here, right?”

“He trims the trees at the chateau, but the bastards fired him because, according to them, he goes out at night, waits behind things till a pheasant comes along, and kills it. Three times now, those thugs have grabbed him and locked him up for eight days at a clip. He just got out again, the day before yesterday.”

“Shut up!” the man shouted to his wife, turning the tragic face of a hunted animal in my direction.

“Why should I shut up?”

“Shut up!” he yelled again with an imperious voice.

At that moment, a gamekeeper appeared in the doorway. The woman threw herself in front of him, shaking with anger, to prevent him from entering.

“What do you want here? I won’t let you in! You have no right to come in here! Beat it!”

The gamekeeper wanted to come in.

“Don’t touch me, you murderer,” she shrieked, “don’t you dare touch me, or you’ll regret it. That’s all I’ve got to say to you!”

The gamekeeper asked, “Is Motteau here?”

“It’s none of your business.”

““Is Motteau here?”

“What do you want with him this time?”

“Again this morning,” the gamekeeper said, “I found a pheasant’s feather on the White Road, and I recognized Motteau’s footprints on the ground.”

“You’re lying!” the woman yelled.

“I’m lying?”

“Yes, you’re lying.”

“No, really, I’m not lying. And tell him to watch out, because the day we catch him, there’s gonna be one hell of a...”

“Watch out yourself, you murderer! Thief! Because... because...”

“All right, shut up.” Motteau said to his wife. Then, addressing the gamekeeper, he said, “You’re making a mistake, Bernard. It’s not me. I can’t take any more of your jail. It ain’t me. I was sick last night. I had a fever. It isn’t me.”

“I said what I said,” the gamekeeper replied. “And that shotgun, over the fireplace! At any rate, we’ve got to confiscate your...”

“This gun?”

“Yeah, that gun...”

“That’s nothing,” Motteau explained. “It’s just an old shotgun, and it doesn’t shoot. No, it’s not for your pheasants. Not that gun.”

The two men exchanged a look of raw hatred. Then, after throwing me a suspicious look, the gamekeeper repeated,

“I said what I said.”

As his wife moaned, Motteau returned to his place on the stool and got lost in a dark dream. Staring at his shotgun, he was saddened by its rusted barrels, and he lurked on vengeful nights in ambush, waiting for the bloody drama in the thorn bushes, underneath the moon.

THE END

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Original text from RevoltLib.com, 2021.

Translated from the French by Robert Helms; "L'Oiseau Sacri" first appeared in the literary supplement of the Paris anarchist paper *La Rivolte* #3 (Sept. 27, 1890), reprinted from L'Echo de Paris.

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