Dumas
The Black Tulip

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ALEXANDRE DUMAS

The Black Tulip

INTRODUCTION BY
MARCEL GIRARD

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EVERYMAN, I will go with thee,

and be thy guide,

In thy most need to go by thy side

ALEXANDRE DUMAS

Known as 'the elder', born at Villers-Cotterets on 24th July 1802. Early life spent in poverty, but play-writing obtained for him the position of librarian of the Palais Royal. Left Paris in 1832, travelled abroad; returned to journalism and to write historical novels. Assisted Garibaldi at Naples in 1860. Returned to Paris in 1864 and died at Puys on 5th December 1870.

INTRODUCTION

HERE is a work that contrasts with the other writings of Alexandre Dumas. The author of *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo* has surely led us to expect something more ambitious than a mere two hundred or so pages; and indeed the histories of literature, which generally scorn even those longer romances, hardly mention *The Black Tulip*. Must we then consider it an insignificant work? True it is just a speck in the vast field of the novel; but it occupies a place all its own, which, though limited, is more frequented than many a more impressive monument. Since its publication in 1850 the famous tulip has lost none of its brilliance, it has given pleasure to several generations and its prestige remains untarnished to this day. To appreciate its delicate charm, one need only perhaps have retained a little of one's childhood spirit and be still responsive to the mystery of creation, to the poetry of sweet and secret ways, to the pathos of lost causes.

Once more, to use his own words, Dumas has 'hung his characters on the peg of history.' We are back again in his favourite period, the seventeenth century, which he had resurrected so successfully sixteen years earlier in his beloved *Musketeers*. *The Black Tulip* is written, so to speak, in the margin of that first long romance. Once again he is dealing with the wars of Louis XIV, with France's interference in Dutch affairs, which led to the return of the Stadtholder. Dumas does not hesitate to introduce William of Orange. No doubt he represents him as grimmer and more 'silent' than tradition warrants. But on the whole he has not detracted from that noble figure; towards the end of the book, in fact, he credits him with a splendid gesture of magnanimity. His picture of the two great middle-class democrats, John and Cornelius de Witt, who perished as victims of popular ingratitude, may be slightly idealized, but it agrees more

or less with the view of them taken by modern Dutchmen. The story, of course, does not quite tally with historical fact; one would scarcely expect that from a novelist, and one would have to be more than touchy on points of history before accusing Dumas of having distorted or embellished the truth.

Love of the past never prevents our author from revealing the bent of his imagination. History inspires but does not paralyse him. He gives free rein to his pen when engaged in depicting those scenes which delight him. The first chapters particularly give a dramatic and highly coloured picture of the riots at La Haye in 1672; they must be recognized as most effective with all their noise, their deeds of violence, their barricades, pursuits, murders and executions. Alexandre Dumas invented the 'Western' long before the coming of the cinema.

Nor does he hide his political opinions. Son of a revolutionary general who had been disgraced by Napoleon, and grandson of a black slave-woman from Santo Domingo, he remained all his life faithful to the republican ideal. He wrote *The Black Tulip* very soon after the young French Republic had taken to herself a prince-president, Louis-Napoleon, in whom the future 'stadtholder' of France was already beginning to appear. Dumas was filled with anxiety (he was to go into exile after the *coup d'état* of 1851); he did not miss this opportunity to criticize personal power and to defend the regime for which the brothers De Witt had given their lives.

The first European republic and bastion of liberty, Holland is also a privileged land where, more than anywhere else, men appreciate the good things of life. Dumas delighted to extol its delicate atmosphere and the warm serenity of its social life, which harmonize so well with the great calm of its plains. He was personally acquainted with the country, having experienced its charm on a journey made in 1849 when he attended the coronation of William III. As a contrast to his own disturbed existence in Paris, he enjoyed the peaceful landscapes, the stately curtains of tall trees, the canals with their reflecting waters, the bright colours of the towns, the tender intimacy of the houses. Reading certain pages,

one feels that he is setting down deep-seated impressions, mingled sometimes with a certain element of nostalgia. This it is which marks his book with a character at once documentary and poetic, one that is unique in all his work. Read again, for example, his description of Dordrecht, situated among 'the windings of the stream, which held in its watery embrace so many fascinating little islands, edged with willows and rushes and abounding in luxurious vegetation, whereon flocks of fat sheep were browsing sleepily and peacefully.' It is as if we gazed with our own eyes at that 'smiling city, at the foot of a hill dotted with windmills . . .' those 'fine red-brick houses, mortared in white lines, bathing their feet in the water, and their balconies, open toward the river, decked out with silk tapestry embroidered with gold flowers.' It is like a painting by some lesser master of the Dutch school. And when he describes the house of Cornelius van Baerle we are reminded of Vermeer or Pieter de Hooch: 'White, trim, and tidy, even more cleanly scoured and more carefully waxed in the hidden corners than in the places which were exposed to view.' Dumas is in danger of eclipse from such glorious comparisons. He is no artist; his feverish activity allowed him no time for that. He is a dim figure, for example, beside Eugene Fromentin, who some years later brought back from Holland in his *Maîtres d'autrefois* an incomparable web of subtle portraiture. There rises, however, from beneath his more hasty brush a fair and penetrating idea of the Netherlands; he was keenly alive to her soul, and needed no long phrases in which to embody it. Here and there an original epithet reveals that, like Baudelaire in the *Invitation au Voyage*, he dreamed deeply of the vast Dutch skies, in which he saw a likeness to a certain style of art and a certain way of life, that alas, were beyond his reach. . . . 'There all is just order and beauty, luxury, calm, and delight.'

The plot of this romance is indeed its weak point. The sugary idyll of Cornelius and Rosa may seem to us very conventional; but let us remember that it springs from a very ancient popular source. All countries have their touching stories about a prisoner with whom the jailer's daughter falls in love and who escapes with her assistance.

It is the theme of many an old song and even of an opera. If the subject borrowed by Dumas needs to be justified, we may observe that such tales invariably please not only children, but the public at large. Despite the harsh climate of our own iron age, or perhaps because of it, the heart of man is ever responsive to the purity of this perfect love, is moved by whatever imperils it, trembles before the machinations of the infamous Boxtel, revolts against the brutality of Maître Gryphus the jailer. We are captives of our nobler feelings. Dumas, however, is no dupe of the arbitrary in his scenario. His sense of humour is transparent on every page; he winks at his reader, and is the first to smile ironically at his own inventions. So let us enter into the fun. We must look elsewhere for the interest of *The Black Tulip*. Where? In the history of the tulip itself.

Most novels have as their hero a man, a woman or even an animal. This one is the romance of a tulip—the first, perhaps the only one, devoted to a flower. But that flower is a strangely living thing.

A word must be said about the Dutchman's passion for tulips. Still great in our day, it was never as consuming as in the seventeenth century, when that oriental flower had but recently been discovered. Conrad Gesner had described it for the first time in 1559; then one Charles Clusius brought it from Constantinople to Holland, where it was acclimatized. The Dutch and the Flemings quickly became enthusiastic about this marvel of marvels; for at that time it surpassed the modest blooms of Europe, which were little cultivated and hardly distinct from wild flowers. Hence the appearance of those innumerable 'tulipo-maniacs,' who were ready to spend enormous sums on bulbs and shoots. Some bulbs were worth from 2,000 to 4,000 florins apiece—several thousand pounds sterling today. It was not uncommon to see people ruining themselves completely, selling their houses, their lands, their carriages, to become the happy owners of a rare species of tulip. 'How indignant they wax when the earthworms make holes in a bulb,' wrote one observer, Antoine le Grand, in 1663. 'You will find them as much afflicted by this loss as by that of a kingdom, and I am

not sure they would not prefer the death of their dearest friend to that of a tulip.' Towards the end of the century 'tulipo-mania' had assumed such proportions that the Dutch Government felt obliged to restrain it by enacting measures against dealers and their dupes. The trade at that time amounted to millions of florins each year; but the craze declined, and tulips, like everything else in this world, went out of fashion. The new 'English' style of garden required less formal plants; new and exotic species were introduced, and the old European strains were improved. The taste for tulips fell to the more moderate level it holds today, but it left its mark upon Holland and neighbouring countries.

Ever since his travels in 1849, Alexandre Dumas was fascinated by this extraordinary epic of a flower. Traversing vast fields of tulips, seeing the countless greenhouses and learning that this strange passion had given birth to an important industry, he allowed his imagination free play and conceived the idea of a book of which a tulip would fill the principal role. Numerous tales were current on this subject, particularly about a famous black tulip, a veritable challenge to nature, for which men had given their lives. It was told, for instance, how a certain poor cobbler of La Haye had managed to cultivate this marvel after years of effort. The Haarlem Society of Tulip-Growers, hearing of this, were so jealous that they did everything in their power to obtain it, and eventually bought it from him for 1,500 florins. But no sooner were they in possession of the plant than they destroyed it, lest anyone should be able to say that a humble amateur had succeeded where so many professional growers had failed. The cobbler was said to have died of grief.

It was on this loom of truth and fiction that the author of *The Three Musketeers* wove his story of Cornelius van Baerle the tulip-fancier. Another writer would doubtless have analysed in greater detail the causes and effects of so ridiculous a passion. Imagine what Balzac would have made of it: another *Cousin Pons*, perhaps, another *Chef d'œuvre inconnu*! Dumas, also, must surely have recalled the *Caractères* (1691), in which La Bruyère had already drawn the portrait of a florist which is sharper and

goes much further than those of Cornelius and Boxtel together.

The florist has a garden in a suburb; he runs there at daybreak and returns only to go to bed. You see him rooted among his tulips: before the 'Solitaire' he opens wide his eyes, rubs his hands, bends down, takes a closer look at her, and has never seen her so beautiful; his heart expands with joy. Thence he moves on in turn to the 'Oriental,' to the 'Widow,' to the 'Golden Flag,' and to the 'Agatha,' returning once again to the 'Solitaire,' when he takes his stand, grows tired, sits down and forgets to dine. The plant is then tenderly shaded, banked and watered. He gazes at and admires either its beautiful petals or its splendid calyx. Yet in all this, God and Nature receive no admiration; he can see no farther than the bulb of his tulip, which he would not let go for a thousand crowns but which he will give away for nothing when tulips are out of favour and carnations are all the rage. This rational man, who has a soul, a cult and a religion, comes home tired and hungry, but well pleased with his day's work. He has seen some tulips!

Dumas has not exploited all the moral and philosophical implications of this admirably drawn picture. He was content just to tell a story in his usual manner. Even so, *The Black Tulip* is a fine tale. It is a study of the Impossible. Critics have remarked that all the heroes of his novels are haunted by the impossible. D'Artagnan wishes to rescue Charles I on the very scaffold. In the *Tour de Nesle*, Busidan seeks to tame the female vampire. Above all, Edmond Dantès dominates the *Count of Monte Cristo* like a sort of present-day knight—indefatigable, invincible.

This passion for lost causes possessed the very soul of Dumas, as he himself admits in his *Mémoires*: 'My first desire is always boundless; my first impulse is always towards the impossible. Only, because I am stubborn (partly through pride and partly through love of art), I attain the impossible.' In this light *The Black Tulip* is seen as a kind of popularized *Recherche de l'Absolu*, as a version of the *Grail Quest* adapted to the Dutch bourgeoisie of the seventeenth century. The black tulip itself is far more than a tulip: it represents all that a man will never see twice and for which he would sacrifice his life. It is, in fact, a symbol of the Ideal.

The genius of Dumas makes it flower in the depths of the abyss, in the darkness of a dungeon. The gentle Cornelius is brother to Edmond Dantès. In the prison of Loewenstein, as in that of the Château d'If, one man, armed with nothing but intellect and will, lives only through and for that which transcends him. It matters not whether his concern be with Justice, Knowledge or a miraculous Flower, the value of the objective lies in the effort made to reach it. What is more, both men win freedom, fortune and love at one stroke. Such are the rewards of those who have devoted themselves entirely to a single end, a single labour. They attain happiness.

Happiness! This is what is symbolized by *Tulipa nigra Rosa Baerlensis*. . . . That unique flower blossoms for the two lovers, but at the price of what suffering! As in his other works, Alexandre Dumas gives us here a lesson in cautious optimism—but optimism all the same, misfortune notwithstanding. There is a celebrated maxim of William of Orange: 'One need not hope in order to undertake, nor to succeed in order to persevere.' It has a bitter taste; but Dumas replies in these more kindly words of the philosopher Hugo Grotius: 'Sometimes a man has suffered so much that he need never say, "I am too happy."' Bravo, Dumas, who so generously grants to his heroes, on the morrow of their tribulations, that peaceful happiness which life has always denied him!

MARCEL GIRARD.

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