

A Critique of Monsieur Poe

By MELVILLE DAVISSON POST

ILLUSTRATED BY GEORGE GIBBS

rocks and she came to the pawnshop with the salvage. And then, what did it matter? In love-land all treasures are alike—oak leaves on the morning after!

The remarks of Hugette had found a lodging with M. Duclos. He was ready for this step into a fashionable quarter of Paris. He would take with him, beyond a doubt, that rare thing which Hugette had named. But it was not entirely upon this virtue that he would depend out there in the Rue de la Paix. He had, locked up in the great safe in his shop, thirteen diamonds that could not be equaled in the whole of France. He had put in half a lifetime at matching those diamonds. It was with great acumen that M. Duclos had gone about assembling this treasure. He had observed that jewels, like the blood, were always moving; and, like that blood, they followed the impulses of the heart. At least, it was so with diamonds. If there were a good stone in France it would finally come into the possession of the light-o'-loves that foraged on Paris; and when this flying squadron came to sell its loot M. Duclos could obtain that stone for a fraction of its value.

It was on account of these diamonds that M. Duclos came so early—or, since the place is Paris, shall we say so late?—into the Café des Oiseaux. He was a prudent bourgeois. Since there lay the earnings of a lifetime in that shop, M. Duclos wished it always under some one's eye. And he had managed in this fashion: Until midnight there was no danger; then until half-past four his friend, the gendarme Jacques Fullon, watched over the Rue des Petits Champs. One found him always, like a gigantic Cerberus, before this shop. And at half-past-four M. Duclos came, always exactly on the hour; for the gendarme, a cog in the police machinery of Paris, controlled his movements by the hand of the clock.

It was the custom of M. Duclos to enter the Café des Oiseaux for his cup of black coffee before he went on guard; and as he waited for the day to open it was his custom also to read romances. He carried one always under his arm; he opened it in the Café des Oiseaux before his cup. M. Duclos preferred tales in which tragedies were accustomed to happen—wherein a mystery seized one in the opening lines and one trailed it through with one's nose against the page. M. Duclos had about exhausted the literature of Parisian mystery. He had come to the last of the intricate adventures of M. Lecoq when, by accident, a new door had been thrown open to him.

In the Café des Oiseaux—as sooner or later it must have happened—had he chanced upon the author of Hugette's advancing fortunes. This elegant young man had bowed to M. Duclos as he sat over his coffee and from how he had advanced to a word of comment upon the literature that M. Duclos affected.

"Ah, if one admired tales of mystery, then one should by all means read those of Monsieur Poe, the American. He was the master of such tales; the others, all the others—Gaboriau, Monsieur le Docteur Doyle—these were mere imitators of him."

M. Duclos had inquired where the tales of this Monsieur Poe could be had; and, having been directed, he had found them. He came now, on this morning, with a volume of them tucked under his arm.

As M. Duclos entered from the Rue des Petits Champs he observed that his elegant preceptor in the literature of mystery was already there. He stood at the back of the café before the clock, as though he came at this moment from a bandbox. His fair hair was curled and performed under the silken brim of his English opera hat; there were double pearl studs in his shirtfront; his immaculate hands were loaded with rings; he wore a jeweled bangle on his wrist beneath the cuff. Before him on the table were his gloves, his cane and a glass of liqueur. But for the moment he stood with an evening journal extended in his hands, idly glancing down its columns like one who performed a certain habit with but little attaching interest. M. Duclos thought that the elegant young man had been facing the other way and had turned swiftly as he entered, but if so, he did not advance toward M. Duclos—he bowed slightly, as to a chance acquaintance, and returned to the columns of his journal.

M. Duclos crossed to his table; the rotund *voeur*, Consenat, who maintained this Café of the Birds, brought his coffee.

"Monsieur is early tonight," she said. M. Duclos, who was never in his life either late or early, bowed, congratulated Madame Consenat for her excellent coffee—as he had been accustomed to do every morning for two years—tasted his cup and opened his book. He sipped both the coffee and the tale. At length, when he had come to the bottom of the cup, he closed the volume and looked up over the rim of his nose-glasses. At this moment the elegant stranger, with an air of annui, folded his journal, tossed it on to a near-by table, and moving forward took up his cane and gloves as though about to depart. It was then that the café clock came into view and M. Duclos observed that by this clock Madame Consenat's words were verified—it was but three o'clock and thirty minutes; he was early by half an hour.

The elegant stranger, sauntering out of the Café des Oiseaux, paused by M. Duclos' table as he had been accustomed to do. He bowed with a trifle of condescension. Had monsieur found the great Poe to his liking?

M. Duclos replied profusely, like one who has received a benefit that he cannot measure. He was wonderful—this Poe! Gaboriau—the great Gaboriau—could not approach him; and that *docteur anglais*—what did one call him—Doyle? Poul! He was an echo. Who was Doyle? Who was Poul? Was Sherlock Holmes beside this Master Dupin! These were the successors of Alexander! . . . And when he wrote weird tales one's blood chilled. That German, Hoffmann, whose head was full of horrors! He could not make one hear the piercing cry, or feel the awful suffocation, or see the ghastly dead face, like this Poe! The German told like one who had heard of such hideous tragedies, but this American like one who had survived them.

The elegant stranger was charmed. One takes a certain merit from merely discovering a pleasure to another. He became more friendly. M. Duclos read with a discriminating taste—it was so rare a thing! His opinion, then, would be most interesting to hear. Monsieur had observed the great Poe's tales to lie in two separate zones. In which of these did M. Duclos believe him to excel?

M. Duclos was certain upon this point. "Monsieur," he said, "the tales in which M. Poe unravels his mystery from some tiny incident are his greatest. They seem to me to move along the lines of a profound truth—that is to say, there are always evidences which, if one did but observe and correctly interpret, would presently disclose the whole mystery. It is not upon some elaborate



"In the City of Washington, in les Etats-Unis, When M. McKinley was le President"

AT FOUR o'clock in the morning M. Duclos entered the Café des Oiseaux in the Rue des Petits Champs. It was an unusual hour for an honest shopkeeper to be out of bed in Paris, but M. Duclos had a sufficient reason.

Fair dealing, albeit somewhat slow of foot, had brought M. Duclos to a substantial shop looking from a cross street into the Rue de la Paix. It was edging him slowly into that fashionable quarter. Already Hugette Rozier, who created hats in the rooms above his shop, had said the word:

"Monsieur Duclos, we belong out there!"—pointing into the Rue de la Paix.

"But, madame," he had said, "to get on there one must have something in his shop not to be found elsewhere in Paris."

"And that thing you have, monsieur."

He had scratched his head then. "I cannot think of it, madame."

"But I can: it is called honesty, Monsieur Duclos." The creator of hats was very charming and monsieur bowed. Then there came a twinkle into his eyes.

"And you, madame?"

The petite Hugette laughed like a blackbird. "Ah, monsieur, I am perhaps not so fortunate, but for that reason I do not despair."

Her hand darted between the buttons of her blouse, a ribbon snapped and she extended her half-closed palm near to the eyes of Monsieur Duclos. He saw there an elegant young man—a miniature studied with diamonds. It was only for a moment that Hugette's rosy palm flashed before the eyes of M. Duclos, but in that moment the shrewd bourgeois-dealer in jewels observed a number of things—namely, that the case of the miniature was a genuine antique; that the diamonds were false—the bent tines of the metal proclaiming how recently this paste had been substituted. And the painting on the ivory disk! It had been done yesterday, in the Rue de Rivoli—he could put his finger on the very shop.

Ah, well, if one were setting up a little modiste in the Rue de la Paix one could not afford to be too honest. There would be expense enough: the baker and the candlestick-maker would not take fairy gold—a bit of deception in this behalf could be forgiven him. If, when he had cast up the cost of the venture, this elegant Lothario had purchased an ancient miniature for a dozen francs, forced the noble face of some subject of a Louis to make way on the ivory disk for his own, set the denuded metal wreath with brilliants and hung it about the charming neck of Hugette under the lace blouse—why, from the viewpoint of an economical bourgeois, he was a prudent young man.

It was quite as well. Hugette would have no inkling of this prudence until the affair went on the



"Monsieur Takes His Liberty With the Heart of the One and the Clock of the Other"

theory that one must depend; it is upon the tiny evidences—the crook of a letter in a written word, a scratch on a table, a bit of paper. It is the value of these trivialities that M. Poe brings so forcibly before us. This, monsieur, is a great truth, a valuable truth, a useful truth—one to remember and apply, monsieur.”

“Did M. Duclos think so? The elegant stranger was of a different opinion. Now, he would select the great Poe’s weird tales as the most excellent of his writings. These were cups of opiate, which one tasted and forgot the place in which he sat; tasted and forgot his anxieties; tasted and forgot the flight of time. The interests of men in their affairs were so consuming, their anxieties so keen! To make them forget! Ah, this was the test!”

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“The incidents of them were things that did not happen. But those of M. Dupin—they rested upon a truth to be verified in one’s experience. They were didactic; the reader learned a thing which he might convert to his use.”

The stranger slipped into a chair beside M. Duclos at his table. In the interest which this discussion had inspired he forgot that he was going out.

But were those tales false? Did they not happen? For himself, he was not so certain. Of course, it was in the opinion of M. Poe so to stage them that one could not say, Ah! That was a trick that only a master could turn. To present the weird, the ghastly, the tragic, with such cunning that one could not say whether they happened in the narrator’s mind or in the world outside. But—and M. Duclos should mark it—men, in fact, sometimes had experiences like this. Strange, incredible adventures came to them now and then in such a manner that afterward they never could be certain whether or not they had happened. But—and M. Poe was not off the ground here. He was dealing with a certain order of human experience in these tales. True, they were experiences that men rarely spoke of, since they were things one could not verify. M. Poe had not exceeded those experiences. One had adventures on this borderline as strange as M. Poe had dreamed of. Did M. Duclos doubt it? The stranger knew a certain case in point. He put his cane and gloves upon the table.

Had M. Duclos ever by chance heard of Monsieur le Docteur le Duc de Borde? He was young. Perhaps his fame was local yet. M. Duclos had not? Well, a weird, a strange, an incredible thing had befallen this young man. In Paris? No. In the very land of this M. Poe, in the city of Washington, in les Etats-Unis, when M. McKinley was le Président, shortly before the Spanish-American War. “Monsieur le Docteur le Duc de Borde had been attached to the French legation there. He was a gay dog, this Monsieur le Docteur le Duc de Borde. Ah, one may find companions who dine late in other cities than Paris. And the good wines! They are not all poured out in France.”

“Well, it is a pity that every hour of the morning, after a dinner of the best, that Monsieur le Docteur le Duc de Borde was returning to his lodging. The good wine was in his head and he had dismissed his carriage and gone aloft to get the air. It was a bit cold and monsieur walked briskly.”

“Did M. Duclos know the city of Washington? He did not. The elegant stranger traced an imaginary map on the table with his finger. The road was traversed by a great boulevard, l’Avenue de Pennsylvanie, running from the Maison Blanche to le Capitole, and then, turning sharply, it passed la Bibliothèque Congressionale.

“As Monsieur le Docteur le Duc de Borde traversed this boulevard a hansom cab such as one sees in Londres, going at a slow jog, turned in. As the cab passed it struck M. Duclos that a woman thrust her arm out of the window and waved a handkerchief, as though to attract his attention. Now, Monsieur le Docteur

le Duc de Borde is very gallant. He began at once to run after the cab, shouting to the driver to pull up and waving his walking stick. The cab horse proceeded leisurely down l’Avenue de Pennsylvanie and turned out toward la Bibliothèque Congressionale. During all this time a woman’s hand remained thrust out of the cab window, and a tiny white handkerchief fluttered in her fingers. Monsieur le Docteur followed.

“In American cities there exists an inconceivable custom, when repairing a street, of digging a trench half across it, setting up a red lantern at each end and leaving Providence to care further for the traveler. In front of la Bibliothèque Congressionale there was such a trench to lay a water main cut half across the street, a red lantern marking its limit. As the cab passed, one of the wheels struck the lantern and went suddenly into the ditch;

The man’s breast was covered with decorations; his teeth gleamed through a tangle of black beard and he growled in a hoarse guttural tongue, which Monsieur le Docteur recognized as Russian.

“The man held Monsieur le Docteur with one hand and thrust the other into the bosom of his own coat. Monsieur le Docteur instantly divined that his adversary hunted a weapon and he seized the arm with both of his hands to wrench it away before the weapon could be got. The two men began to struggle desperately. The Russian cursed in that unintelligible Slavic jargon which is like the chatter of an engine. He shifted his hand from the shoulder to Monsieur le Docteur’s throat and began to choke him. The two men were now in the middle of the street and Monsieur le Docteur was facing le Capitole, in the direction from which he had come. He could not breathe; his eyes protruded; he felt that he was dying.

“At this moment, across the Russian’s shoulder, he saw a huge motor car coming swiftly down the street toward them. It seemed to pull up a bit as it approached; then, when it was nearly on them, it came forward as though all the power were suddenly applied.

“The car held only the chauffeur and carried no lights. It struck the Russian a frightful crushing blow to the back and both he and Monsieur le Docteur le Duc de Borde were flung far down the street.

“The first impression of returning consciousness that came to Monsieur le Docteur le Duc de Borde was that of a heavy cloth lying over his face and body. He raised his hand, pushed it back and sat up. He saw that he had been lying on the floor of a dimly lighted room, under the corner of a great silk Oriental rug, which remained spread out as though covering other persons asleep on the floor.

“The room, which seemed to be a library, was lighted by a lamp somewhere behind him. He turned his head to see. A large table stood in the center of the room, littered with books, papers and various articles. Over it leaned a man holding a small copper coffee-pot in the flame of an alcohol lamp. At the sound of Monsieur le Docteur’s turning around on the floor the man looked up. He was tall, thin, dark and apparently Spanish.

“‘Ah!’ he said, with a curious lisping accent. ‘One of them returns!’

“Then he came swiftly over to Monsieur le Docteur, took him by the arm and helped him into a big leather chair directly before the table, poured out a cup of coffee and held it to his lips.

“The coffee was thick, strong and black, and Monsieur le Docteur le Duc de Borde at once began to feel the effect of it. He could sit up by holding on to the arms of the chair, but his head ached frightfully and his senses were dazed.

“‘Perhaps,’ said the Spaniard, as though speaking to himself, ‘I would better see if the others are intending also to return.’

“He seized a corner of the great rug and threw it back, revealing the body of the woman which Monsieur le Docteur had found tied in the cab and, beside her, lying at full length, the body of the man in the uniform of a naval officer—his black beard clogged with blood where it had dripped from his mouth.

“‘Ah,’ he said, ‘these are more courteous; they prefer to await our arrival.’

“Then he poured out a cup of coffee and drank it.

“‘It is in all countries the same,’ he continued; ‘the coffee for the last course—no, the cigarette; and then—the end. A word of explanation, señor, before the cigarette, that you may feel less among strangers when we presently join madame and the admiral.’

“‘Madame and I are rather famous specialists of a certain order, usually employed by the Government when its

(Continued on Page 34)



The Café des Oiseaux Was Filled With Gendarmes

the cab lurched heavily to one side and, to the horror of Monsieur le Docteur—who was close behind—the woman plunged out, striking her head on the asphalt pavement. The cab righted itself and went on, the heavy wheel rolling over the woman’s coat.

“Monsieur le Docteur le Duc de Borde ran to the woman and bent over her to lift her up. To his utter amazement, he found that the woman was not only dead but that she was cold and her limbs set in *rigor mortis*, showing that she had been dead for hours.

“She was a very beautiful woman, perhaps thirty, of a decided continental type, black hair, heavy brows, long black lashes and a low oval brow. She wore a magnificent sealskin coat, trimmed in ermine and reaching to her feet. M. le Docteur noticed that her hands were small, with delicate tapering fingers; in one of them a handkerchief was tied; there was also a broken leather strap around the waist. Monsieur le Docteur le Duc de Borde shuddered with horror. The dead woman had been tied in the cab!

“He had been flirting with a corpse!

“Monsieur le Docteur sprang up to call for help. He had hardly got to his feet when a hand seized him by the shoulder; he whirled around to find himself in the grasp of a powerful man, wearing the uniform of a naval officer.

A CRITIQUE OF MONSIEUR POE

(Concluded from Page 31)

diplomatic corps proves a bit inefficient. Omission here was to determine whether, in fact, it is the intention of les Etats-Unis to attack the Kingdom of Spain. "One does not fail when one's country is in peril—and when one is paid enough. Today we have learned the truth: there will be war!"

"The Spaniard smiled; then he went on: "Ah, señor, madame is a charming woman. You yourself will say it when you come to know her better—exquisitely charming! The admiral here could not fail to mark it. And madame! She has a heart so tender! So susceptible! Alas, I alone remained to mark this happiness! And what am I, señor, to stand in the way of Paradise? A drop or two of a drug in a cup of coffee and my interest in events would cease. Unfortunately I have made it a custom never to drink anything which the hand of another is unnecessarily placed; it is not hygienic. And so tonight at dinner I tip my coffee out on to the floor. A little later I pretend to sleep. Madame leans over me, doubtless to secure some articles which I should no longer need. I seize the hands. I tie them behind the back with a silk stocking—an excellent thing a silk stocking, señor! and more excellent, since there are always two. The other I tie around the throat. Then, with a riding crop thrust through it, I have a beautiful garrote." He moved his hand among the books, took up a twisted silk stocking and tossed it over into the chair beside Monsieur le Docteur, who, still dazed and hardly knowing what he did, put it into his pocket.

"The Spaniard paused and drew a cigarette-case from his pocket.

"Monsieur le Docteur le Duc de Borde noticed a little black line of something resembling ashes, running from the leg of the table around the chair in which he was seated. He put down his hand and brushed a little of it into his palm. It was gunpowder!

"The Spaniard sat down on the corner of the table and began to roll his cigarette in his hands.

"In madame's bosom I find a delicious little note from the admiral asking her to come on this night to the rendezvous. Ah, the rendezvous! I faithfully kept it for her. I excellently kept it for her. She was to wave her handkerchief from the cab somewhere between this house and la Bibliothèque Congressionale. I do not know where—but I do not disappoint the admiral. I get a hansom from the stable beyond the library. I dismiss the driver. I tie her in. I put the hand out of the window. I tie the handkerchief in the fingers. I send the horses home. So the rendezvous was beautifully kept after all." He nodded to Monsieur le Docteur le Duc de Borde.

"The Spaniard leaned over on the table to get a pinch for his cigarette.

"Afterward," he said, "I bring the three of you comfortably home in the motor car." He sat up and puffed his cigarette for a moment; then he said softly:

"If you quite understand we will not keep the others waiting."

"The full import of the man's plans came suddenly to Monsieur le Docteur le Duc de Borde and he sprang up shouting.

"Instantly the Spaniard leaped to the floor.

"Let us be going, señor!" he cried.

"Then he jabbed his lighted cigarette down on the table. A flash of light ran to the leather chair. Monsieur le Docteur rushed into the hall and tried to open the door to the street, but the hall was dark and he was unable to find the bolt that held the door. Each moment he expected the house to blow to atoms. Fortunately for an instant the light was switched on, illuminating the hall and the great library.

"Monsieur le Docteur le Duc de Borde saw the Spaniard on the floor, groping for his broken powder train. He also saw the bolt holding the door and in a moment he was outside, running down an old garden path. He broke through a hedge into the street and continued to run madly, with his head down. Finally, running thus, overwhelmed with terror, Monsieur le Docteur le Duc de Borde collided with a gendarme.

"Monsieur le Docteur was incoherent then. The gendarme took him to the Department of Police. It was morning when he came before the prefect. That official laughed at the story of Monsieur le Docteur le Duc de Borde. Wine had carried monsieur into the region of the fancy! Since Monsieur le Docteur le Duc de Borde was of the French diplomatic corps he was at liberty to go. But the story! Monsieur must pardon his incredulity. And, in fact, what proof had Monsieur le Docteur le Duc de Borde of this adventure? True, there was the silk stocking in his pocket! But, monsieur"—the speaker made an elegant gesture—"I ask it of you, what does a silk stocking prove?"

The consuming attention of M. Duclos, set on the interest of the tale, relaxed. The elegant stranger arose with a laugh that rippled through the Café des Oiseaux. He pointed to the clock.

"Ah, monsieur," he cried, "have I not proved my point? Here is a tale infinitely below the genius of M. Poe, and yet, see what it has done! It has held Monsieur Duclos, a dealer in jewels of the Rue des Petits Champs, for some thirty minutes in the Café des Oiseaux. And it has held him against his anxiety to guard his shop—against his fear for his thirteen diamonds. Observe, monsieur; it is late. The gendarme Jacques Fullon has gone out at the

end of the Rue des Petits Champs for some thirty minutes by the clock!"

He took up his cane and gloves from the table. He lifted his silk English opera hat from his curled and perfumed hair.

"I bid M. Duclos good morning."

M. Duclos did not rise.

"A moment, monsieur," he said.

The stranger paused. "Does not M. Duclos hurry to his shop?"

The dealer in jewels shrugged his shoulders. "What is the use, monsieur?" he said. "I am already late and there remains this question of M. Poe's tales to settle. And, besides, monsieur is charming. And this I must charge against this argument: told by another, monsieur's tale might not have held one so well. Such a quality goes very far. What one among us could resist monsieur? Not la petite Hugette, nor yet la jeune Consant. Monsieur takes his liberty with the heart of the one and the clock of the other."

The elegant stranger regarded M. Duclos now with a certain interest, but his gallant manner remained. He bowed.

"Monsieur does me too much honor."

Not so. M. Duclos did not recognize a merit. But this question of the tales: he must be permitted his opinion.

"Monsieur," he said, "those concerning M. Dupin I continue to regard as the masterpiece of M. Poe; and, for the following reason, which monsieur will himself deem excellent when he has heard it."

M. Duclos leaned forward on the table.

"Monsieur," he said, "on yesterday morning I noticed a crumb of plaster on the floor of my shop, in the Rue des Petits Champs. Now, monsieur, what is a crumb of plaster? It is nothing. But for these tales of M. Poe—but for these warnings of M. Dupin—I should have passed it over. But having, through the courtesy of monsieur, read these tales, I reflected.

Whence came this crumb of plaster? Why, obviously, monsieur, from the ceiling above. I examine that ceiling and I find there a tiny crevice. I go into the shop of Hugette above. I remove the carpet. Ah! I find a hole cut in the floor!"

M. Duclos paused. The elegant stranger had taken one swift stride, stopped abruptly and now stood, very pale, his gloves clutched in his fingers, his eyes on the door of the Café des Oiseaux. Something moved out there in the Rue des Petits Champs.

M. Duclos continued softly:

"Ah, monsieur, that is not all. To point out how the gendarmes could take the poor creatures who were to execute monsieur's design was an unpleasant duty; but to entertain monsieur until they should come for him—that has been a pleasure."

M. Duclos did not finish his discourse. He was interrupted by a cry. The Café des Oiseaux was filled with gendarmes.