



# VICTOR HUGO THE MAN WHO LAUGHS

## URSUS

### I

Ursus and Homo were friends. Ursus was a man, Homo a wolf. It was the man who had christened the wolf: probably he had also chosen his own name. Man and wolf were partners at fairs, at village holidays, at the corners of streets, where people were ready to listen to idle gossip and to buy **quack medicine**<sup>1</sup>. The wolf, gentle and courteously subordinate, diverted the crowd. It is a pleasant thing to behold the tameness of animals. Our greatest delight is to see all the varieties of domestication parade before us. This it is which collects so many folks on the road of royal processions.

Ursus and Homo went about from cross-road to cross-road, from country-side to country-side, from shire to shire, from town to town. One market exhausted, they went on to another. Ursus lived in a small van upon wheels, which Homo drew by day and guarded by night. On bad roads, up hills, and where there were too many ruts, or there was too much mud, the man pulled fraternally, side by side with the wolf. They had thus grown old together.

They encamped in the wood, on the waste patch of grass where roads intersect, at the outskirts of villages, at the gates of towns, in market-places, in public walks, on the borders of parks, before the entrances of churches. When the cart drew up on a fair, the curious made a circle round the pair, Ursus harangued and Homo approved. Homo, with a bowl in his mouth, politely made a collection among the audience. They gained their livelihood. The wolf was lettered, likewise the man. The wolf had been trained by the man, or had trained himself, to divers wolfish arts, which swelled the receipts.

---

<sup>1</sup> **quack medicine** – шарлатанские снадобья

“Above all things, do not degenerate into a man,” his friend used to say.

The wolf never bit: the man did **now and then**<sup>2</sup>. At least, to bite was the intent of Ursus. He was a misanthrope, and to italicize his misanthropy he had made himself a juggler. To live, also; for the stomach demanded something. Moreover, this juggler-misanthrope was a doctor. To be a doctor is little: Ursus was a ventriloquist. You heard him speak without his moving his lips. He counterfeited anyone’s accent or pronunciation. He imitated voices so exactly that you believed you heard the people themselves. All alone he simulated the murmur of a crowd, and this gave him a right to the title of **Engastrimythos**<sup>3</sup>, which he took. He reproduced all sorts of cries of birds, as of the thrush, the wren, the pipit lark, otherwise called the gray cheeper, all travellers like himself. At times, he made you aware either of a public thoroughfare filled with the uproar of men, or of a meadow loud with the voices of beasts – at one time stormy as a multitude, at another fresh and serene as the dawn. Such gifts, although rare, exist. In the last century a man called Touzel, who imitated the mingled utterances of men and animals, and who counterfeited all the cries of beasts, was attached to the person of **Buffon**<sup>4</sup> – to serve as a menagerie.

Ursus was sagacious, contradictory, odd, and inclined to the fables. He read people’s hands, opened books at random and drew conclusions, told fortunes, taught that it is perilous to meet a black mare, still more perilous, as you start for a journey, to hear yourself accosted by one who knows not whither you are going; and he called himself a dealer in superstitions. He used to say:

“There is one difference between me and the Archbishop of Canterbury: I avow what I am.”

Hence the archbishop was justly indignant. But Ursus cleverly disarmed his grace by reciting a sermon he had composed upon Christmas Day. The archbishop pardoned Ursus.

As a doctor, Ursus wrought cures by some means or other. He used the hazel, the catkin, the white alder, the white bryony, the mealy-tree, the traveller’s joy, the buckthorn. He treated phthisis with the sundew. He cured sore throat by means of the vegetable

---

<sup>2</sup> **now and then** – порой

<sup>3</sup> **Engastrimythos** – энгастримит, «говорящий животом» – чрево вещатель

<sup>4</sup> **Buffon** – Жорж-Луи Леклерк де Бюффон (1707-1788), французский натуралист, биолог, математик

excrescence called Jew's ear. He knew the rush which cures the ox and the mint which cures the horse. He was well acquainted with the beauties and virtues of the herb mandragora. He had many recipes. He cured burns with the salamander wool. Ursus possessed a retort and a flask; he effected transmutations; he sold panaceas. He had once been for a short time in Bedlam; they had set him free because he was only a poet. This story was probably not true.

The fact is, Ursus was a savant, a man of taste, and a poet. He could compose Jesuit tragedies. He had peculiar figures of speech, and a whole family of classical metaphors. So much knowledge could only end in starvation. The school of Salerno says, "Eat little and often." Ursus ate little and seldom.

Ursus used to say: "The wolf is comforted by its howl, the sheep by its wool, the forest by its finch, woman by her love, and the philosopher by his epiphonema."

Ursus composed comedies, which he all acted; this helped to sell the drugs. Among other works, he composed a pastoral in honour of Sir Hugh Middleton.

Ursus was great in soliloquy. He was unsociable and talkative, desiring to see no one, yet wishing to converse with someone. So he talked to himself. It was, as is well known, a custom of Socrates; he declaimed to himself. Luther did the same. Ursus questioned himself, answered himself, praised himself, blamed himself. You heard him in the street soliloquizing in his van. The passers-by used to say: "He is an idiot."

Fortunately Ursus had never gone into the **Low Countries**<sup>5</sup>. There they could certainly weigh him, to ascertain whether he was a sorcerer or not. Nothing was simpler or more ingenious. It was a clear test. They put you in a scale. Too heavy, you were hanged; too light, you were burned. The scales in which sorcerers were weighed are now used for weighing cheeses; how religion has degenerated! In his travels Ursus kept away from Holland, and he did well. Indeed, we believe that he never left the United Kingdom.

However he was very poor and morose. He had taken the wolf into partnership, and with him had gone forth on the highways, living in the open air. He had great skill in everything connected with healing operations, restoring the sick to health. He was considered a clever mountebank and a good doctor. To tell the truth, Ursus was suspicious, because he often went to gather herbs in rough thickets. But Ursus, although eccentric in manner and dis-

---

<sup>5</sup> **Low Countries** – Нидерланды

position, was too good to invoke or disperse hail, to kill a man with the torment of excessive dancing, and to cause the birth of cocks with four wings. He was incapable of certain abominations, such as, for instance, speaking German, Hebrew, or Greek. If Ursus spoke Latin, it was because he knew it.

To sum up, Ursus was not one of those persons who live in fear of the police. His van was long enough and wide to lie down in it on a box. He owned a lantern, several wigs, and some utensils, among which were musical instruments. He possessed, besides, a bearskin with which he covered himself on his days of grand performance. He used to say, "I have two skins; this is the real one," pointing to the bearskin.

The little house on wheels belonged to himself and to the wolf. Besides his house, his retort, and his wolf, he had a flute and a violoncello on which he played prettily. He concocted his own elixirs. In the top of his van was a hole, through which passed the pipe of a stove. The stove had two compartments; in one of them Ursus cooked his chemicals, and in the other his potatoes. At night the wolf slept under the van, amicably secured by a chain. Ursus was fifty, unless, indeed, he was sixty. He accepted his destiny: he ate potatoes, the food of pigs and convicts. He ate them indignant, but resigned. He was not tall — he was long. He was bent and melancholy. Nature had formed him for sadness. He found it difficult to smile, and he had never been able to weep, so that he was deprived of the consolation of tears as well as of the palliative of joy. He had the loquacity of a charlatan, the leanness of a prophet, the irascibility of a **charged mine**<sup>6</sup>: such was Ursus. In his youth he had been a philosopher in the house of a lord.

This was 180 years ago, when men were more like wolves than they are now.

## II

Homo was no ordinary wolf. From his appetite for medlars and potatoes he might be taken for a prairie wolf; from his dark hair, for a lycaon; and from his bark, for a dog of Chili. He was five feet long, which is a fine length for a wolf; he was very strong. He looked at you askance, which was not his fault. He had a soft tongue, with which he occasionally licked Ursus. Before he knew Ursus and had a carriage to draw, he did his fifty miles a night.

---

<sup>6</sup> **charged mine** — заряженная мина

Ursus met him in a thicket near a stream. Ursus preferred Homo to a donkey. The ass, a four-legged thinker, has a habit of cocking his ears uneasily when philosophers talk nonsense. As a friend, Ursus preferred Homo to a dog, the love of a wolf is more rare.

Hence it was that Homo sufficed for Ursus. Homo was for Ursus more than a companion, he was an analogue. Ursus used to pat the wolf's empty ribs, saying:

"I have found the second volume of myself!" Again he said, "When I am dead, I shall leave a true copy behind me."

Ursus had communicated to Homo a portion of his talents: such as to stand upright, to restrain his rage into sulkiness, to growl instead of howling, etc. On his part, the wolf had taught the man what he knew – to live without a roof, without bread and fire, to prefer hunger in the woods to slavery in a palace.

The van traversed many different roads, without, however, leaving Great Britain. The van was strong, although it was built of light boards like a dove-cot. In front there was a glass door with a little balcony used for orations. At the back there was a door with a panel. It had been painted, but of what colour it was difficult to say.

Ursus admired Homo. To be always raging inwardly and grumbling outwardly was the normal condition of Ursus. He was the malcontent of creation. He gave his satisfaction to no one and to nothing. It is probable that in secret Ursus criticized Providence.

He approved of none but princes. He travelled freely from one end of Great Britain to the other, selling his philtres and phials. He passed with ease through the nets which the police at that period had spread all over England in order to sift **wandering gangs**<sup>7</sup>, and especially to stop the progress of the **Comprachicos**<sup>8</sup>.

Ursus belonged to no gang. Ursus lived with Ursus, a **tête-à-tête**<sup>9</sup>, into which the wolf gently thrust his nose. The solitary man is a modified savage, accepted by civilization. The sight of towns increased his taste for brambles, thickets, thorns, and holes in the rock. His home was the forest. What he disliked in his van was its having a door and windows, and thus resembling a house.

He did not smile, but he used to laugh; sometimes, indeed frequently, a bitter laugh. There is consent in a smile, while a laugh is often a refusal.

<sup>7</sup> **wandering gangs** – бродячие шайки

<sup>8</sup> **Comprachicos** – компрачикосы, скупщики детей, преступное сообщество торговцев детьми

<sup>9</sup> **tête-à-tête** – наедине (фр.)

His great business was to hate the human race. He was implacable in that hate. It was clear for him that human life was a dreadful thing. He observed the superposition of evils, kings on the people, war on kings, the plague on war, famine on the plague, folly on everything. He recognized that death was a deliverance — but when they brought him a sick man he cured him. He put lame cripples on their legs again, and hurled this sarcasm at them,

“There, you are on your paws once more; may you walk long in this valley of tears!”

When he saw a poor man dying of hunger, he gave him all his money, growling out,

“Live on, you wretch! eat! I won’t shorten your penal servitude.”

After that, he would rub his hands and say,

“I do men all the harm I can.”

Through the little window at the back, passers-by could read on the ceiling of the van these words, written within, but visible from without, inscribed with charcoal, in big letters, —

Ursus, Philosopher.

## THE COMPRACHICOS

### I

Who now knows the word Comprachicos, and who knows its meaning? The Comprachicos, or Comprapequeños, were a hideous and nondescript association of wanderers, famous in the 17th century, forgotten in the 18th, unheard of in the 19th. The Comprachicos are part of old human ugliness. They belong to the colossal fact of slavery. Joseph sold by his brethren is a chapter in their story. The Comprachicos have left their traces in the **penal laws**<sup>10</sup> of Spain and England. You find here and there in the dark confusion of English laws the impress of this horrible truth, like the foot-print of a savage in a forest.

Comprachicos, the same as Comprapequeños, is a compound Spanish word signifying Child-buyers. The Comprachicos traded in children. They bought and sold them. They did not steal them. The kidnapping of children is another branch of industry. And what did they make of these children? Monsters. Why monsters? To laugh at.

---

<sup>10</sup> **penal laws** — УГОЛОВНЫЕ КОДЕКСЫ

The populace must laugh, and kings too. The mountebank is wanted in the streets, the jester at the Louvre. The one is called a Clown, the other a Fool. The efforts of man to procure himself pleasure are at times worthy of the attention of the philosopher.

A child destined to be a plaything for men — such a thing has existed; such a thing exists even now. In order that a human toy succeeds, he must be taken early. The dwarf must be fashioned when young. We play with childhood. But a well-formed child is not very amusing; a hunchback is better fun.

Hence grew an art. There were trainers who took a man and made him a **misshapen creature**<sup>11</sup>. They took a face and made a muzzle; they stunted growth; they kneaded the features. Where God had made harmony, they made discord; where God had made the perfect picture, they re-established the sketch; and, in the eyes of connoisseurs, it was the sketch which was perfect. They de-based animals as well; they invented piebald horses. Nature is our canvas. Man has always wished to add something to God's work. Man retouches creation, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse.

To degrade man tends to deform him. The suppression of his state was completed by disfigurement. Certain vivisectors of that period succeeded marvellously well in effacing from the human face the divine effigy. The inventor of this branch of surgery was a monk named Avonmore — an Irish word signifying Great River.

## II

The manufacture of monsters was practised on a large scale. Scarcely human beings, they were useful to voluptuousness and to religion. They knew how to produce things in those days which are not produced now; they had talents which we lack. We no longer know how to sculpture living human flesh. Men were once virtuosi in that respect, but the art has become so simplified that it will soon disappear. The surgeons were cutting the limbs of living men, opening their bellies and dragging out their entrails. The vivisection of former days was not limited to the manufacture of phenomena for the market-place, of buffoons for the palace, and eunuchs for sultans and popes. One of its triumphs was the manufacture of cocks for the king of England.

---

<sup>11</sup> **misshapen creature** — уродец

It was the custom, in the palace of the kings of England, to have a watchman, who crowed like a cock. This watcher, awake while all others slept, ranged the palace, and raised from hour to hour the cry of the farmyard, repeating it as often as was necessary.

The memoirs of Catherine II. inform us that at St. Petersburg, scarcely a hundred years since, whenever the czar or czarina was displeased with a Russian prince, he was forced to squat down in the great antechamber of the palace, and to remain in that posture a certain number of days, mewing like a cat, or clucking like a sitting hen, and pecking his food from the floor. These fashions have passed away; but not so much, perhaps, as one might imagine.

The commerce in children in the 17th century was connected with a trade. The Comprachicos engaged in the commerce, and carried on the trade. They bought children, worked a little on the raw material, and resold them afterwards.

The venders were of all kinds: from the wretched father, getting rid of his family, to the master, utilizing his stud of slaves. The sale of men was a simple matter.

For a long time the Comprachicos only partially concealed themselves. Under the Stuarts, the Comprachicos were welcome at court.

The Comprachicos had a genius for disfiguration. To disfigure is better than to kill. There was, indeed, the iron mask, but that was a mighty measure. Besides, the iron mask is removable; not so the mask of flesh. You are masked for ever by your own flesh — what can be more ingenious? The Comprachicos worked on man as the Chinese work on trees.

Not only did the Comprachicos take away his face from the child, they also took away his memory. This frightful surgery left its traces on his countenance, but not on his mind. The Comprachicos deadened the little patient by means of a stupefying powder, and suppressed all pain. This powder has been known in China, and is still employed there in the present day. This is convenient: by ordering your dwarf betimes you are able to have it of any shape you wish.

### III

James II. tolerated the Comprachicos for the reason that he made use of them. We do not always disdain to use what we despise.

The Comprachicos were honest folk. Whatever you may think of them, they were sometimes sincerely scrupulous. They pushed open a door, entered, bargained for a child, paid, and departed.

They were of all countries. Under the name of Comprachicos fraternized English, French, Castilians, Germans, Italians. The Comprachicos were rather a fellowship than a tribe; rather a residuum than a fellowship. To wander was the Comprachicos' law of existence – to appear and disappear. Even in the kingdoms where their business supplied the courts, they were ill-treated. Kings made use of their art, and sent the artists to the galleys.

It was, as we have said, a fellowship. It had its laws, its oaths, its formulae. The Comprachicos, like the Gipsies, had appointed places for periodical meetings. From time to time their leaders conferred together. In the seventeenth century they had four principal points of rendezvous: one in Spain, one in Germany, one in France, one in England.

The laws against vagabonds have always been very rigorous in England. A tramp was a possible public enemy. "Where do you live? How do you get your living?" And if someone could not answer, harsh penalties awaited him.

But the Comprachicos, we insist, had nothing in common with the gipsies. The gipsies were a nation; the Comprachicos were a compound of all nations. The gipsies were a tribe; the Comprachicos a freemasonry – a masonry having not a noble aim, but a hideous handicraft. Finally, the gipsies were Pagans, the Comprachicos were Christians, and more than that, good Christians. They were more than Christians, they were Catholics; they were more than Catholics, they were Romans.

## PORTLAND BILL

An obstinate north wind blew without ceasing over the mainland of Europe, and yet more roughly over England, during all the month of December, 1689, and all the month of January, 1690. One evening, towards the close of one of the most bitter days of the month of January, 1690, something unusual was going on in one of the numerous inhospitable bights of the bay of Portland.

In this creek, the most dangerous of all, a little vessel, almost touching the cliff, was moored to a point of rock. The sun had just set. With no wind from the sea, the water of the creek was calm.

The twisting of the pathway could be distinguished vaguely in the relief of the cliff. The pathway of this creek terminated on the platform where the plank was placed. The passengers for whom the vessel was waiting in the creek must have come by this path.

Excepting the movement of embarkation, a movement visibly scared and uneasy, all around was solitude; no step, no noise, no breath was heard. The people who were going to sail away in the boat formed a busy and confused group, in rapid movement on the shore. To distinguish one from another was difficult; impossible to tell whether they were old or young. The indistinctness of evening intermixed and blurred them; the mask of shadow was over their faces. There were eight of them, and there were among them one or two women, hard to recognize under the rags and tatters in which the group was attired.

A smaller shadow, flitting to and fro among the larger ones, indicated either a dwarf or a child.

It was a child.

## LEFT ALONE

All wore long cloaks, torn and patched. They moved with ease under these cloaks. One of the men in the group embarking was a chief. He had sandals on his feet, and was bedizened with gold lace tatters and a tinsel waistcoat.

The crew of the boat was composed of a captain and two sailors. The boat had apparently come from Spain, and was about to return thither. The persons embarking in it whispered among themselves. The whispering was composed — now a word of Spanish, then of German, then of French, then of Gaelic, at times of Basque. They appeared to be of all nations, and yet of the same band. The crew was probably of their brotherhood.

Amid the confusion of departure there were thrown down in disorder, at the foot of the cliff, the goods which the voyagers wanted to take with them. Bags of biscuit, a cask of stock fish, a case of portable soup, three barrels — one of fresh water, one of malt, one of tar — four or five bottles of ale, an old portmanteau buckled up by straps, trunks, boxes, a ball of tow for torches and signals. These ragged people had valises. They were dragging their baggage with them.

No time was lost; there was one continued passing to and fro from the shore to the vessel, and from the vessel to the shore; each

one took his share of the work — one carried a bag, another a chest. Also, they overloaded the child.

It was doubtful if the child's father or mother were in the group. They made him work, nothing more. He appeared not a child in a family, but a slave in a tribe. No one spoke to him.

However, he wanted to embark as quickly as possible. Did he know why? Probably not: he hurried mechanically because he saw the others hurry.

The moment to put off arrived. Nothing was left to embark but the men. The two objects among the group who seemed women were already on board; six, the child among them, were still on the low platform of the cliff. A movement of departure was made in the vessel: the captain seized the helm, a sailor took up an axe to cut the hawser.

The child rushed towards the plank in order to be the first to pass. As he placed his foot on it, two of the men hurried by, got in before him, and passed on. The fourth drove him back with his fist and followed the third. The fifth, who was the chief, bounded into rather than entered the vessel, and, as he jumped in, kicked back the plank, which fell into the sea. The vessel left the shore, and the child remained on land.

## ALONE

The child remained motionless on the rock — no calling out, no appeal. He spoke not a word. The same silence reigned in the vessel. No cry from the child to the men — no farewell from the men to the child. The child watched the departing bark. It seemed as if he realized his position. What did he realize? Darkness.

A moment later the boat gained the crook and entered it. Then it was seen no more — all was over — the dark had gained the sea.

The child watched its disappearance — he was astounded. His stupefaction was complicated by a sense of the dark reality of existence. He yielded. There was no complaint — the irreproachable does not reproach.

He forgot the cold. Suddenly the wave wetted his feet — the tide was flowing; a gust passed through his hair — the north wind was rising. He shivered. There came over him, from head to foot, the shudder of awakening. He cast his eyes about him. He was alone. Those men had just gone away. And those men, the only ones he knew, were unknown to him.

He could not say who they were. His childhood passed among them. He was in juxtaposition to them, nothing more. He had just been forgotten by them.

He had no money about him, no shoes to his feet, scarcely a garment to his body, not even a piece of bread in his pocket. It was winter – it was night. It will be necessary to walk. He did not know where he was. He knew nothing. He was ten years old. The child was in a desert, between depths where he saw the night and depths where he heard the waves.

He stretched his little thin arms and yawned. Then suddenly with the agility of a squirrel, or perhaps of an acrobat he turned his back on the creek, and began to climb up the cliff. To climb is the function of a man; to clamber is that of an animal – he did both.

The intensity of cold had, however, frozen the snow into dust very troublesome to the walker. His man's jacket, which was too big for him, **got in his way**<sup>12</sup>. Now and then he came upon a little ice. Once he came on a vein of slate, which suddenly gave way under him.

Crumbling slate is treacherous. For some seconds the child slid like a tile on a roof. He rolled to the extreme edge of the decline; a tuft of grass saved him. Finally he jumped on the level ground, or rather landed, for he rose from the precipice.

Scarcely was he on the cliff when he began to shiver. The bitter **north-wester**<sup>13</sup> was blowing; he tightened his rough sailor's jacket about his chest.

The child gained the tableland, stopped, placed his feet firmly on the frozen ground, and looked about him. Behind him was the sea; in front the land; above, the sky – but a sky without stars; an opaque mist masked the zenith.

Far away the waters stirred confusedly in the ominous clear-obscure of immensity. The boat was going quick away. It seemed to grow smaller every minute. Nothing appears so rapid as the flight of a vessel melting into the distance of ocean.

A storm threatened in the air. Chaos was about to appear. Suddenly there came a gust of wind. The boat sank into the horizon. The little star which she carried into shadow paled. More and more the boat became amalgamated with the night, then disappeared.

At least the child seemed to understand it: he ceased to look at the sea.

---

<sup>12</sup> **got in his way** – стесняла движения

<sup>13</sup> **north-wester** – северо-западный ветер

## ON THE LAND

It was about seven o'clock in the evening. The wind was now diminishing. The child was on the land at the extreme south point of Portland.

Portland is a peninsula; but the child did not know what a peninsula is, and was ignorant even of the name of Portland. He knew but one thing, which is, that one can walk until one drops down. They had brought him there and left him there. They and there — these two enigmas represented his doom. They were human-kind. There was the universe. In the great twilight world, what was there for the child? Nothing. He walked towards this Nothing.

He crossed the first plateau diagonally, then a second, then a third. The slope was sometimes steep, but always short. The high, bare plains of Portland resemble great flagstones. From time to time he stopped, and seemed to hold counsel with himself. The night was becoming very dark. He now only saw a few steps before him.

**All of a sudden**<sup>14</sup> he stopped, listened for an instant, and with an almost imperceptible nod of satisfaction turned quickly and directed his steps towards an eminence of moderate height. There was on the eminence a shape which in the mist looked like a tree. The child had just heard a noise in this direction, which was the noise neither of the wind nor of the sea, nor was it the cry of animals. He thought that some one was there, and soon he was at the foot of the hillock.

In truth, someone was there. The child was before a corpse, dumb, wondering, and with eyes fixed.

To the child it was an apparition. The child saw a spectre. Besides, he did not understand. The child took a step, then another; he ascended and approached. Bold, yet trembling, he went close up to survey the spectre.

When he got close under the gibbet, he looked up and examined it. The spectre was tarred; here and there it shone. The child distinguished the face. It was coated over with pitch. The child saw the mouth, which was a hole; the nose, which was a hole; the eyes, which were holes. The body was wrapped in coarse canvas. The canvas was mouldy and torn. A knee protruded through it. Partly corpse, partly skeleton. The face was the colour of earth. The canvas, glued to the bones, showed in reliefs like the robe of a

---

<sup>14</sup> all of a sudden — вдруг