

Gustave DORÉ (Strasbourg 1832 - Paris 1883)

Gilliatt Struggles with the Giant Octopus

Pen and black ink, black and grey gouache, extensively heightened with white, on paper laid down on board.

Signed and dated G. Doré / 1866 in white gouache at the lower left.

853 x 495 mm. (33 5/8 x 19 1/2 in.)

This monumental signed and dated drawing by Gustave Doré, although almost certainly intended as an exhibition piece, also served as the model for a much smaller engraving used as one of two frontispiece illustrations for the first English edition of Victor Hugo's 1866 novel Les Travailleurs de la mer, published as Toilers of the Sea in London and New York in 1867. Written during Hugo's long period of exile on the island of Guernsey and dedicated to its people, Les Travailleurs de la mer is set in the Channel Islands in the 1820s.

Hugo's book centres around the rugged Guernsey fisherman Gilliatt, a loner and a dreamer who is secretly in love with Déruchette, the beautiful niece of the wealthy Guernsey shipowner Mess Lethierry. Lethierry's prized steamship La Durande, into which he had invested his entire fortune, is deliberately run aground off the coast of Guernsey by its malicious captain, in an attempt to ruin Lethierry. The ship becomes tightly wedged between two large sea rock formations on the Douvres reef, suspended some twenty feet above the surface of the reef and the raging sea. The desperate Lethierry offers the hand of his niece and heir Déruchette to whoever can recover the valuable steam engine from the wreck of the Durande. Gilliatt takes up this seemingly impossible challenge and spends two months on the

offshore reef battling the elements in order to salvage the engine. Not only does he need to find shelter, food and fresh water on the inhospitable reef, but he has to salvage wood, ropes and chains from the wreck in order to make tools and build a working forge. Finally, he has to disassemble the huge engine and lower the pieces onto his boat, while all the while being battered by wind, tide, rain and, at the end, a huge and powerful storm. In the words of one literary scholar, 'In essence, Gilliatt is called upon to accomplish alone – by sheer force of body, will, and intellect – what a team of skilled workers could never achieve in such a hostile environment. He must, in other words, transcend human boundaries.'

Just when he appears to have survived the storm and accomplished his task, the exhausted Gilliatt is attacked in a sea cave by a giant octopus: 'Suddenly he felt himself seized by the arm. A strange indescribable horror thrilled through him. Some living thing, thin, rough, flat, cold, slimy, had twisted itself round his naked arm, in the dark depth below. It crept upward towards his chest. Its pressure was like a tightening cord, its steady persistence like that of a screw. In less than a moment some mysterious spiral form had passed round his wrist and elbow, and had reached his shoulder. A sharp point penetrated beneath the armpit. Gilliatt recoiled; but he had scarcely power to move! He was, as it were, nailed to the place. With his left hand, which was disengaged, he seized his knife, which he still held between his teeth, and with that hand, holding the knife, he supported himself against the rocks, while he made a desperate effort to withdraw his arm. He succeeded only in disturbing his persecutor, which wound itself still tighter. It was supple as leather, strong as steel, cold as night.'

The octopus - the 'Devil-Fish', as Hugo names the creature - slowly enlaces Gilliatt with five of its arms, while the other three anchor it to the rock walls of the cave: 'In this way, clinging to the granite on the one hand, and with the other to its human prey, it enchained him to the rock. Two hundred and fifty suckers were upon him, tormenting him with agony and loathing. He was grasped by gigantic hands, the fingers of which were each nearly a yard long, and furnished inside with living blisters eating into the flesh…it is impossible to tear oneself from the folds of the devil-fish. The attempt ends only in a firmer grasp. The monster clings with more determined force. Its effort increases with that of his victim; every struggle produces a tightening of its ligatures. Gilliatt had but one resource, his knife. His left hand only was free; but the reader knows with what power he could use it. It might have been said that he had two right hands. His open knife was in his hand.' Gilliatt eventually uses his knife to decapitate the creature and, freed from its grasp, escapes from the cave, bleeding profusely from where the octopus's suckers were attached to his skin.

Gilliatt eventually succeeds in returning the steam engine to Lethierry, who is ready to honour his promise and allow him to marry his niece. But he refuses to marry Déruchette, since she knows she has accepted a marriage proposal from Ebenezer Caudray, a young Anglican priest who has just arrived on Guernsey. The fisherman sacrifices his love for Déruchette to ensure her happiness, and helps the couple to wed and leave the island on the sloop Cashmere. As he watches the ship sail away with his beloved Déruchette, Gilliatt sits on a rock in the sea and allows the rising waters to drown him as the Cashmere disappears over the horizon.

It appears that Gilliatt's battle with the octopus – perhaps the most memorable scene in the novel – may have been inspired by an actual event that took place on the small Channel Island of Sark. Hugo and his son Charles were swimming in a sea cave on Sark when Charles was accosted by its resident octopus, terrifying both men. It may also be noted that Hugo's Les Travailleurs de la mer has been credited with introducing pieuvre, the Guernésiais word for octopus, into the French language, alongside the more commonly used poulpe.

An early or proof copy of Toilers of the Sea with Dore's two illustrations seems to have been sent to Hugo shortly before the English edition appeared in print. In a letter to Doré, written from Guernsey on 18 December 1866, Hugo addressed the artist as 'Jeune et puissant maître' and went on to state: 'Thank you. This morning, in the midst of a storm worthy of it, your magnificent translation of 'Travailleurs de la Mer' arrived. You have put everything in this picture, the wreck, the ship, the reef, the hydra, and the man. Your octopus is terrifying, and your Gilliatt is great. It is a beautiful sheet to be added to your charming and terrible in-folio works. This splendid specimen from my book demands the rest. God, yourself and the publisher willing, it certainly will be. I will be another monument to you. I send you my applause and my heartfelt thanks. Victor Hugo.' For the rest of his career, Doré was very proud of this letter, in particular as Hugo had used the word 'translation' rather than 'illustration' in his praise of the draughtsman's treatment of his tale.

As William Blanchard Jerrold, a friend, collaborator and early biographer of Gustave Doré, noted of him, 'He has been called the Hugo and the Dumas of French art. He has the impetuosity of Hugo, his sense of grandeur, conceptions akin to his of sublime, ideal effects of nature, the vision and the faculty divine, that roamed and observed in Paradise and in Hades…The whole truth seems to be that Doré's poetic power was closely akin to that of Hugo.' Nevertheless, Toilers of the Sea was, in fact, the only book of Victor Hugo's that Doré came to illustrate.

Literature:

Victor Hugo, Toilers of the Sea, London, 1867, illustrated as frontispiece (as The Fight with the Devil-Fish); Blanche Roosevelt, Life and Reminiscences of Gustave Doré, New York, 1885, p.255; Annie Renonciat, La vie et l'oeuvre de Gustave Doré, Paris, 1983, pp.184-185, illustrated (the illustration after the present work); Dan Malan, Gustave Doré: Adrift on dreams of splendor, St. Louis, 1995, p.91, illustrated p.88 (the illustration after the present work); Eric Zafran, ed., Fantasy and Faith: The Art of Gustave Doré, New York, 2007, p.16, fig.6 (the illustration after the present work).

Artist description:

Arguably the most widely-known French artist of the 19th century, Gustave Doré was immensely prolific as a draughtsman, printmaker, watercolourist and illustrator. Born in Alsace, he was a precocious artist, and drew from a very early age. He produced his first lithograph at the age of eleven and his first album of lithographs, Les Travaux d'Hercule, appeared four years later. It was also at the age of fifteen that Doré settled in Paris, having gained employment as a cartoonist for the newly-founded Journal pour Rire, while at the same time continuing his studies at the Lycée Charlemagne. He made his debut at the Paris Salon of 1848, where he exhibited two drawings, and two years later showed his first painting. He also began producing albums of his lithographs. By the middle of the 1850s Doré was working extensively as an illustrator, producing highly inventive and original wood engravings to accompany editions of such novels as François Rabelais's Gargantua and Pantagruel and Honoré de Balzacs Contes drolatiques, as well as his La Légende de juif errant, which appeared in 1856. His fame as an illustrator was well established by 1860, and later projects found him producing illustrations for editions of works by Dante, Cervantes, Perrault, La Fontaine, Chateaubriand, Milton and Tennyson, as well as the Bible. He also continued to produce illustrations for such magazines as the Journal amusant.

Despite his renown as a book illustrator, which brought him considerable wealth, Doré always wanted to be recognized as a painter. Although he was a regular exhibitor at the Salons, his paintings never achieved much critical success, at least in France. (He received an honourable mention for a battle scene in 1857, while in 1865 one of his paintings was purchased by the State.) In England, however, where he began to establish close ties in the 1860s, his work as a painter was much more highly regarded, and among the collectors of his work was Queen Victoria. Several of the artist's large Biblical paintings were exhibited in London, mainly at the Doré Gallery on New Bond Street, which opened in 1868 and was devoted to his work. (The Doré Gallery continued to show the artist's work to the paying public in London until 1892, long after his death.) In 1872 he published the illustrated London: A Pilgrimage, in collaboration with the journalist William Blanchard Jerrold, based on some 250 drawings made while exploring the sprawling city between 1869 and 1870. Doré served in the National Guard

during the Franco-Prussian War and the Siege of Paris, and produced a number of works with patriotic themes. An accomplished watercolourist, Doré began working extensively in the medium from 1873, following a visit to Scotland, and exhibited several works at the Société d'Aquarellistes Français in 1879, 1880 and 1882. He was also active as a sculptor, most notably with a statue of the writer Alexandre Dumas, completed in 1881, but it is for his accomplishments as a book artist - with an oeuvre of nearly ten thousand illustrations - that he remains best known and most admired today.