

English translation

Article by Théophile Gautier published in the *Moniteur Universel* on 6 August 1866

Théophile Gautier (1811–1872) was a French writer and poet, first a Romantic and later a precursor of the Parnassian school. A staunch defender of the ideal of *art for art's sake*, he excelled in style and form. His works include *Captain Fracasse*, *The Dead in Love*, and *Enamels and Cameos*. A passionate traveller, he also published vivid and elegant travelogues. As an influential art critic, Gautier left a lasting mark on 19th-century literature.

On August 6, 1866, in the theatre section of *Le Moniteur Universel*, Gautier published this article after attending a performance by Blondin on the plateau of Gravelle in Vincennes. There, he expressed his deep admiration for the celebrated tightrope walker.

(Appears in the Biography by Jean-Louis Brenac, Tome II, Page 106)

(Translated by ChatGPT with respect for the original style)

Fashion is subject to the most inexplicable whims. Blondin, who caused a frenzy in the New World — and by reflection, in the Old — when American newspapers relayed accounts of his aerial feats, which were then echoed throughout the European press; Blondin, the one and only, the true Blondin, has now renewed, before a far too sparse audience, his dizzying displays. Had Fame, with her hundred trumpets, been lying? Was the glory of this illustrious acrobat nothing more than a hoax — a transatlantic humbug, one of those elaborately crafted pranks in the style of Edgar Allan Poe? Not at all: Blondin delivered — and beyond — all that his reputation had promised.

What, then, can explain this undeserved indifference? Is it because, beneath the tightrope stretched at prodigious height, the roaring Niagara does not hurl its thunderous cataract, its plumes of foam soaring skyward to meet their own rainbow halos? That backdrop, no doubt, would have added to the spectacle's majesty and drama. But, honestly, Blondin could not very well pack the Niagara among his accessories. If it is not the grandeur of the scene one regrets, perhaps one imagines the danger is lesser. Yet whether one falls from over thirty metres onto the earth or into a cataract, death is equally certain — and truth be told, being shattered on the ground seems a more ghastly fate than being swallowed by the whirl of a mighty river.

The remoteness of Blondin's performance is no sufficient excuse either, for the announcement of a mere horse race draws out what we agree to call "all Paris." No — it is because so much has been said of Blondin that he is prematurely worn out in the public's mind. It feels as though he has already been seen — and yet never has a more extraordinary acrobat walked so effortlessly above the heads of ordinary mortals.

Since this week's absence of theatrical premieres leaves us room, let us now recount, as faithfully as possible, the marvels we had the privilege of witnessing.

At the far end of the Vincennes parade ground, on the plateau of Gravelle beyond the steeplechase grandstands, Blondin had stretched a rope one hundred metres long, at a height almost rivaling that of the Vendôme Column. Two massive square masts upheld it at either end, and it was steadied at intervals of five metres by cords that gave the impression of the skeleton of an immense tent stripped of its canopy.

At the appointed hour, a sort of mannequin was seen ascending into the air, hoisted by a cord gliding through a pulley atop the western mast. This dummy alighted on a narrow platform aligned with the cable and, bearing a massive balancing pole in both hands, ventured forward in measured steps. This mannequin was, in fact, the acrobat himself. He was dressed as a crusading knight — troubadour-style — a fashion still current in America. His legs, sheathed in a mesh of gleaming mail, sparkled in the last rays of the sun, and his helmet, topped by a tricolour plume, glinted with each beam it caught.

A great peal of laughter greeted the first steps of this celestial Mengin, who lacked only a Verdigris behind him playing a barrel organ. But soon, astonishment, admiration, even stupefaction replaced that initial — and not unjust

— burst of irony. To see that knight tread solemnly and majestically across the sky, one might have thought him a hero of Ariosto walking upon clouds in quest of some Angelica, a Roger without hippogriff, borne in his impossible journey by the hands of an invisible genie. To the eyes of the rapt imagination, the crude means of ascent vanished — no pole, no cable, no balance bar: only the lone hero remained, accomplishing his superhuman task.

Reaching the far end of the cable, Blondin paused. He cast a swift glance at the crowd gathered below, and, letting his gaze plunge toward the horizon, beheld one of nature's most magnificent panoramas. At his feet, the Marne unfurled its broad silver ribbon, fringed with the green of reeds and aquatic grasses. The forts that guard Paris, and Paris itself — vast, bluish, a din of roofs, towers, and spires — lay sprawled beneath him like a giant topographical map. From his rope, he dominated all. The empire of the air was his, and he gazed upon a spectacle usually reserved for birds and balloonists. It lacked the savage grandeur of Niagara plunging into its abyss, but it was just as beautiful.

Soon the acrobat resumed his passage across the cable — this time at a brisk pace. Returned to his starting point, he vanished briefly beneath a tent hastily raised on the platform, and reappeared clad in the true costume of his trade: flesh-coloured tights, the chest adorned with medals, short dark breeches.

The hero had given way to the funambulist gymnast — no less astonishing, no less admirable. Reaching the centre of the rope, Blondin lay down upon it, abandoning his balance pole. Motionless on the tightrope, he supported himself with both hands on the pole, then placed his head on the cable and lifted his legs skyward, remaining thus, inverted and still. He then began to contort himself like an aerial telegraph transmitting cryptic signals.

At the far end of the rope, Blondin had his eyes bound and a sack thrown over his shoulders — pierced at the arms to leave them free. Thus hooded, balance pole in hand, stumbling at each step, he advanced upon that perilous path — as narrow as the dread bridge of Al-Sirāt, which the faithful must cross to reach the paradise of Mahomet. A wave of terror — almost horror — rose from the crowd watching him. The thrill they had come seeking now felt too acute. Many turned their heads away, fearing to witness the fall of the daring performer. Even Henri Monnier's street urchin, who once quipped, "I've never seen anyone fall from the fifth tier," would have shut his eyes before Blondin's audacity.

And yet, reaching the mid-point, Blondin, still hooded, repeated the feats he had accomplished with open eyes: lying down, crouching, pirouetting on his head, then falling astride the rope. When he returned to the platform and removed the sack and blindfold, long applause greeted him. To the silence born of piercing suspense — verging on anguish — succeeded a clamorous, enthusiastic ovation, which must have reached the triumphant acrobat as a mere murmur, lost in the azure heights.

Then the gymnast took a chair, slung it around his neck, walked to the middle of the rope, and sat upon it, holding it in perfect balance. Next, tilting it diagonally so that only one front and one back leg touched the cable, he climbed the rungs and stood upright atop the backrest — arms outstretched, heel lifted, poised like a Victory who had lost her wings yet still hovered above the earth. The genius of the July Column gives some idea of this posture — which seems impossible for a creature without feathers. Blondin thus confirms Nadar's axiom: to fly, one must be heavier than air.

Back on the platform, he set out for his final feat: carrying on his back an assistant — the same companion he once bore across Niagara, undeterred by the thunder of the furious waters or the howling of the outraged abyss.

At that moment, one did not know whom to admire more: the acrobat crossing his aerial path with such a burden, or the man who trusted his life to the skill of a rope-walker. Even with the promise of eternal exemption from theatre columns and a cushy sinecure, we would not accept the invitation for such a stroll through empty air.

What sets Blondin's talent apart is his utter ease: his movements are so natural, so fluid, so confident, that his devilish feats appear simple, and one might be tempted to hoist oneself up to the rope and try them in turn. But that would be folly. The tightrope walker's trade is one in which self-deception is not allowed. One pays in full — in hard coin. The trick is done, or it is not. The slightest mistake is punished by death. One may err upon the stage,

but one errs on the wire at one's peril. There are ten ways to interpret a speech, but only one way to traverse a rope stretched thirty metres above ground. Truly, not enough esteem is shown to the acrobat: he is a serious artist — he delivers what he promises, or he dies. His feats are beyond dispute, and he deserves every cheer that rewards the life he risks.

So let us grant Blondin, hero of Niagara, the honours of the feuilleton.

THÉOPHILE GAUTIER