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**The Engraves of Macau
by Auguste Borget
and Léon Benett in Stella Blandy's
'Les épreuves de Norbert en Chine'
(1883)**

Born Stella Boué, at the end of 1836, in Montesquieu-Volvestre, in the Occitan region, and there died in 1925, she would become much better known as Stella Blandy, her literary name. After studying in England, our feminine author returned to France to publish translations, some original titles, and articles throughout the main cultural magazines of Paris, especially the *'Revue Contemporaine'* and the grand *'Revue des Deux Mondes'*. Her prolix and varied works have been progressively rediscovered, mainly due to Stella feminist ideals, spread out in several Romans, short stories and serious essays.¹ In 1883, she published a novel entitled *Les épreuves de Norbert en Chine*, which is an apparent singularity in her literary corpus. Merging an odd intrigue

¹ BERTHOUMIEUX, A. & LAGABBE, A. C. *Stella Blandy (1836-1925): une femme de lettres à Montesquieu-Volvestre*. Montesquieu-Volvestre: Syndicat d'initiative de Montesquieu-Volvestre, 1996; BNF - Stella Blandy (1836-1925): http://data.bnf.fr/12122725/stella_blandy/; <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb12122725s>.

to hasty writing, but becoming a very appreciated book due to its appealing collection of 22 full-page lithographs made from drawings of Auguste Borget (1808-1877) and Léon Benett (1839-1917).²

This is a novel far from brilliant and is not even easy to fully follow and understand. The narrative focuses on the young Norbert de Valney who, recently graduated in Law, receives unexpected news of his father's death and his complete ruin: indebted, he is obliged to sell furniture, jewelry, books, and, finally, Valney's own family castle. To survive, he becomes personal secretary of his neighbor, Crawford, an English aristocrat and amateur scholar working along with his traveled friend Archibald on a new monumental book about Chinese history and civilization. After a while, an unforeseen fire destroys Crawford's library and his manuscript on China. Norbert ends up embarking with the two Englishmen on a maritime trip to the Far East, an unexpected opportunity to find the lost tracks of his uncle Jacques de Valney, who, abroad for decades, was referred as a very wealthy businessman installed in the Indies and China trade circuits. During the sea voyage, Norbert builds up a close friendship with a Chinese passenger, Tchao, who introduces him to the history and culture of the great middle empire.

In Macao, Tchao and Norbert think had found Jacques trail and, after tortuous adventures, they discovered a wealthy traveler adventurer, Jean de Valdrey, whose name is mistakenly jumbled with uncle Jacques. As one would expect, the complicated intrigue reaches a happy ending: the uncle reappears by the final novel pages and rescues castle, honor and renew the Valney family prosperity, soon allowing the marriage between Norbert and Jeanne Bernier, his father protégé and lasting love since childhood.

The novel is merely far-fetched: heavy writing, implausible scenes, mannered dialogues and a considerable ignorance of China reduced to topic imagined scenarios in Macao, Hong Kong, and Canton. The book does not offer us any credible representation of Macao, although it places

² BLANDY, Stella. *Les épreuves de Norbert en Chine* (Dessins de A. Borget et L. Benett). Paris: Hetzel, 1883.

two scenes in the territory and refers to the voyage passage through the old Portuguese-Chinese enclave in transit to Canton: “Macao, the Portuguese colony, now ruined”.³ The first novel scene evolving in Macao is strange, and accounts the presumably previous sale by uncle Jacques of a luxurious Hindu belt to a Jew in the city, object rescued by Tchao: “I paid a far more expensive price than the Israelite bought it from mister Valney”.⁴ Some of the insinuations of the text about this “Israeli” dealer settled in Macao are as close to xenophobia as many of the comments addressed to the most different types of Chinese. This textual passage is illustrated with a beautiful engraving by Auguste Borget entitled “Market in Macao”, which worth the entire book.

A second Macanese scene evolves at a dinner offered by Norbert, Crawford and Archibald to the adventurer Jean de Valdrey aiming to compensate him for the equivocal resemblance with the mysterious uncle Jacques. During the meal, Valdrey accounts his arrival to Macao aboard the *La Ville de Dieppe* and his impromptu encounter at the port with an old ragged Chinese man who was, after all, French and probably the missing and enigmatic Jacques de Valney. This short story is illustrated with a full-page engraving taking the title from a brief textual passage: “Je fus heurté ... (I was bumped)”. It is signed by the great illustrator Leon Benett well known by his hundreds of drawings for Jules Verne countless adventure books.⁵ This second engraving, along with tens of others from Borget and Bennet would certainly invite readers to forget a mediocre novel and to preserve the book as a precious collection good: to show not to read.

The engraving by Auguste Borget is not original. It was firstly published in the fictional book by Paul-Émile Daurand Fourgues,⁶ using

³ BLANDY, 1883: 74-75.

⁴ BLANDY, 1883: 270.

⁵ BORGEAUD, Georges. “Les Illustrateurs de Jules Verne,” *Arts et Lettres* 15 (1949), p. 72; CHAUCHOY, Philippe. *Léon Benett, illustrateur de Jules Verne*. Amiens: Centre Culturel de la Somme, 1991; DUMAS, Olivier “Jules Verne et Benett, avec cinq lettres inédites de Jules Verne”, in: Raymond, François (ed.). *Jules Verne 4: texte, image, spectacle*. Paris: Minard, 1983, pp. 184-185.

⁶ ARSENAULT, Julie. “Émile Daurand Fourgues, translator and critic of the English and American literatures in France during the XIXth century”, in: *Plume*, vol. 9, n. 20 (Fall 2014-Winter 2015), pp. 25-47; PINVERT, Lucien *Un ami de Stendhal. Le critique É. D. Forgues (1813-1883)*. Paris, Librairie Henri Leclerc, 1915; BNF – Émile Daurand Fourgues [http://data.bnf.fr/11898752/emile_daurand_forgues/].

the nickname of Old Nick, *La Chine Ouverte: aventures d'un Fan-Kouei dans le pays de Tsin*⁷, and offering a considerable series of drawings entirely made by the French painter. Borget had already died in 1877, but his many drawings made *d'après nature* in Macao, in 1838-1839,⁸ were still searched by late 19th books addressing China between documentary, essay, and fiction.⁹ This engraving is a superb historical document. The daily market of the Chinese Macau bazaar reveals all its vibrant social and trade life: the busy confusion of sellers, tents, vegetables and poultry, diverse types of people selling, buying, talking, thus building a unique Chinese space of sociability. Borget is close to an accurate ethnographic observation, but the image has nothing to remotely do with the textual scene recalling the “Israeli” owner of a mercantile shop in Macao.

⁷ FOURGES, Paul-Émile Daurand [Old Nick]. *La Chine Ouverte: aventures d'un Fan-Kouei dans le pays de Tsin*. Paris: H. Fournier, 1845, p. 91.

⁸ BORGET, Auguste. *Carnet de voyage Auguste Borget*. Issoudun: Musée de l'Hospice Saint-Roch à Issoudun, 2008.

⁹ BORGET, Auguste. *La Chine et Les Chinois* (Lits. Eugène Cicéri). Paris. Goupil et Vilbert, 1842 [*Sketches of China and the Chinese*. London: Tilt and Bogue, 1842].



Auguste Borget [Lit. Bernard], *Market in Macau*
[*Marché à Macao*], E. XVI

The second engraving, by Léon Benett, intended help readers to imagine the encounter described between the wealthy adventurer Jean de Valdrey and the old fake Chinese, who was French, not really poor and probably the much sought-after uncle, Jacques de Valney. As Benett never set a foot remotely near Macao, the drawing is only diligent and literal, albeit not exempt of mistakes: a Chinese feminine figure in the foreground seems more the patterned Japanese-alike type of woman frequented by 19th-century European art. The houses, summarily drawn, display lanterns, more or less curved roofs, a ponytail child plays with a ball or balloon, and passers-by try to look Chinese.

The engraving concentrates on the bumped encounter of the textual passage. Benett imagines Valdrey much better than the novel that never comes to describe him. Our illustrator draws one of those character types of the wealthy Western colonial adventurer of the late nineteenth century: good stature in contrast to the “indigenous”, elegant mustache, the usual “pith helmet” on the head and a convenient baton in the right hand if necessary. The presumptive uncle Jacques disguised as Chinese is the paradigm of the wretched. As miserable and ragged as other figures scattered in the drawing: here is a poor barefoot Chinese with two dead chickens by the hand; on the opposite side, a figure with a long mustache lean on a rustic cane. The Chinese uncle is drawn with long beards, patched trousers, and an imitation of poor sandals. The truth is that Benett’s work is more than strenuous: so often referred to, sought after, mistaken, finally returned, Jacques de Valney is never minimally featured in the novel. The art of literary portrait was certainly not Blandy’s best resource, but it was a major condition for being a great illustrator in nineteenth-century Europe. Benett had this artistic skill for illustrating fantastic books of Jules Verne giving body and soul to the most bizarre characters, from the moon to the depths of the oceans, from the interior of the earth to the tribulations of a Chinese in China. However, this is not the art of Borget with its ethnographic care, careful observation of social and folkloric types, perfect geometry of sites and

buildings, always trying to imagine the “other” in astonishing *chinoiserie* taste. Borget, as already known, luckily stayed in Macau from late October 1838 to June 20, 1839, met and learned from the English master George Chinnery (1774-1852) and his wealthy disciple William Prinseps (1794-1874). He produced in loco tens of paintings and drawings that supported his success in France, after that selling many works, receiving governmental commissions and winning several prizes in the famous Paris arts saloons.¹⁰ He gave sole authority and art to Stella Blandy’s fictional novel visiting China.

Moreover, edited by the referential Paris-based publisher Pierre-Jules Hetzel, famous for many beautiful editions of Jules Verne’s books, this was a volume of the famous *Library of Education and Recreation* series. One does not finally know how much Stella Blandy’s novel owes to Borget fame and Benett unique drawing skills: very little or too much? Verily, today it is still possible to buy - or try to buy, leastwise appreciate - these engravings detached from Blandy’s book and sold free to present hairs of the 19th-century fashion of assembling prestigious collections of travel drawings and paintings picturing the most far exotic and fantastic places.

¹⁰ HUTCHEON, Robin. *Souvenirs of Auguste Borget*. Hong Kong: South China Morning Post, 1979.



JE FUS HEURTÉ...

Léon Benett [Lit. P. Louis], *I was bumped...*
[Je fus heurté], E. XXI