Villiers de l'Isle-Adam

THE VAMPIRE SOUL

and Other Sardonic Tales

adapted by

Brian Stableford

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A Black Coat Press Book

Table of Contents

To the Apathetic, with kind regards [1]

Introduction

The surname Villiers de l'Isle-Adam was once one of the proudest in French history. Jean de Villiers de l'Isle- Adam (1384-1437) was a Marshal of France who captured Paris twice–once in the civil war of 1418 and then from an English army of occupation in 1436. Philippe-Auguste de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam (1464-1534) was the Grand Master of the Order of the Knights of Saint John of Jerusalem and the founder of the Order of the Knights of Malta. It is not obvious that the 17th century Breton naval officer Jean de Villiers, who attached the extra suffix to his own name, was entitled to do so, although his descendants were fiercely defensive of its legitimacy; they were very conscious of the prestige and privilege that were supposed to be attached to their name, and exceedingly conscious of the fact that their steadily declining fortunes represented a terrible process of unnatural decay.

By the time Jean-Marie-Mathias-Philippe-Auguste, Comte de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam–known within the family as Mathias–was born in the coastal town of Saint-Brieuc on November 7, 1838, the family was entering upon the final phase of its financial devastation. Mathias' father, Joseph, was determined to restore the family fortunes by means of "business," but his idea of business was very strange indeed. Working on the theory that many aristocrats who perished in the Revolution of 1789 must have hidden their treasures away, he repeatedly bought up unpromising tracts of land, dug haphazardly for gold and jewels, then sold them at a loss in order to move on. As time went by, his behavior became increasingly erratic; he was continually subject to fits of wild and altogether irrational enthusiasm, which made him an easy target for confidence tricksters, although he required little enough help to maintain his path to utter ruin.

Mathias shared some of his father's eccentricities; he too was easily carried away, and clocked up an impressive record of expulsions from school, but he never fancied himself a man of business. Instead, he decided

that he was a poet–no mere poet, of course, but a literary genius without parallel. While his father still had a little money to indulge this dream, he followed it blithely, and whenever his father was in difficulties, he turned to his mother's maiden aunt, Marie-Félix Daniel de Kerinou, who lent out her own money at a sufficiently measured rate to keep the wolf from her niece's door and was also prepared to indulge Mathias' ambitions in a modest fashion. And so, in 1855, Mathias set out for Paris, determined to establish himself in salon society. He was forced to return to Saint-Brieuc in 1856, but in 1857 the whole family moved to Paris, and stayed there–although they moved around continually, frequently pursued by creditors. He paid for the publication of his first book of poems, *Premières Poésies* (*First Poems*) in 1859–signing himself Auguste rather than Mathias, because it seemed more fitting.

No one took any notice of Villiers' first book–nor, for that matter, of the others that he subsequently issued himself in tiny editions, most of whose copies were given away. He seems to have been more committed to the notion of being a writer than to writing itself, and he had great difficulty bringing any of his projects to completion. In 1860s Paris it was, however, perfectly possible to be a writer without publishing very much, or receiving any substantial critical praise for one's work–and making money was, of course, an irrelevance even for many writers of far less distinguished descent. All that was required to be recognized and received as a literary genius was to make the right acquaintances in the salons and persuade them of one's merits–and that is what Villiers set out to do. That he succeeded so spectacularly is firm evidence that his ambitions were not delusional. He persuaded men who were far from being fools–who were, in fact, among the finest minds of their respective generations–that he had genuine ability and might do great things.

Charles Baudelaire, who was notorious for his inability to suffer fools–or almost anyone else–gladly, was persuaded that Villiers had real ability. When Baudelaire died in 1867, Villiers became one of the principal bridges connecting the author of *Les Fleurs du Mal* (*Flowers of Evil*) with the Decadent Movement, based on groundwork laid in that collection, which flowered in the 1880s. Villiers had a much greater impact on the impressionable Stéphane Mallarmé, who was quickly convinced that Villiers was not merely a genius, but a model and type specimen for a new and distinctive kind of genius uniquely appropriate to his time. In arriving

at this conviction, Mallarmé was doubtless influenced by certain fashionable ideas of the era, especially the notion of aristocratic degeneracy and the theory that genius is closely allied to madness.

Edgar Allan Poe, whose works were translated into French by Baudelaire, had helped to popularize the idea that aristocratic lineages were inclined to suffer a certain loss of virility over the generations as they became "worn out," their later representatives often suffering from various mental disorders, including hypersensitivity and "neurasthenia." This was, however, not altogether a bad thing, because artistic genius was also a form of mental abnormality that might be encouraged in such delicate specimens.

The fact that Villiers had fallen on hard times despite his prestigious name, and that, as well as having a mad father, he was by no means immune to eccentric behavior himself, must have assisted him considerably in cultivating his image within the salons of Paris. He must also have been a fine performer, not merely as a spirited talker and satirical humorist but in a more literal sense. Many of his contemporaries commented on his ability as a storyteller–and regretted the waste of so many brilliant ideas that never quite got written down–and on his remarkable ability to quote extensively from Poe and Baudelaire while accompanying his recitations on the piano. (Villiers considered himself to be a gifted pianist–not to mention an expert boxer and fencer–and seems to have had some reason for so doing, although he was never inclined to underestimate his abilities in any field of endeavor.) Given that Villiers' burgeoning reputation was closely connected with a tendency for getting carried away, it is hardly surprising that his name rapidly became associated with a number of highly amusing anecdotes, such as the one telling how he put himself forward as a candidate for the vacant throne of Greece. It is very difficult to estimate the real value of the nuggets of truth contained in these rumors, but Villiers' biographer A. W. Raitt,[2] bringing exactly the right balance of sympathy and scrupulousness to his subject, has undoubtedly gotten as close to the truth as anyone ever will. The one thing no one can determine, of course, is the exact extent to which Villiers nourished his own reputation for eccentricity.

Raitt is rightly reluctant to hazard guesses as to the exact nature of the mental problems experienced by Villiers and his father, although he points out that Villiers was certainly sane enough to get a good deal of work done in his later years. It is impossible at this remove to determine whether

Villiers or his father were subject to regular cyclic fluctuations of the kind associated with “bipolar disorder” (formerly called “manic depression”) but they certainly seem to have gone through manic phases. Joseph’s phases clearly took him beyond the reach of reason on occasion, but his son appears to have had sufficient self-discipline to rein himself in before his behavior got too far out of hand.

Much has been written about the usefulness of mild manic states (or *hypomanic states*) to creative artists, and it is by no means impossible that Villiers found much of his inspiration in slightly altered states of consciousness. Like Poe before him, he was suspected of being a drunk because staid people sometimes mistook his bouts of extravagant enthusiasm for intoxication, but there is no evidence that Villiers was a heavy drinker; if wine occasionally went to his head with uncommon alacrity, it is probably because there were intervals–especially later in life–when he could not afford to eat.

Perhaps, in sum, Villiers was a slightly unbalanced character–but there can be no doubt that his eccentricity was both appealing and productive. If he had been saner, or luckier, he might have written a great deal more than he did, and might actually have brought more of what he did write into a conclusive form–but if he had, his works might have been far less original and intriguing than they are. Among the occasions when he was highly likely to get carried away, the most reliable of all was when he had proofs to correct–he was such an inveterate tinkerer that he lost numerous publishing opportunities by failing to return proofs to his publishers in time, or by marking them up so extensively that the printers despaired. Most of his completed works exist in several different versions, and it seems certain that, if he had lived longer, many of them would have undergone further revisions. For this reason, the “final” versions of his works are often patchworks in which beliefs once held are hastily and incompletely amended in an attempt to take aboard later changes of mind. The difficulties thus made for the reader are, however, usually compensated by the sheer *bizarrerie* of the work. Even hostile critics have to admit that no one else ever wrote like Villiers de l’Isle-Adam.

Claire Lenoir (*The Vampire Soul*) was one of the first projects that Villiers managed to bring to a conclusion of sorts. He wrote to Mallarmé in 1866 to

say that he had completed a novel of that title, but Raitt is sure that he had not.[3]

One of his rare strokes of good luck occurred in 1867, however, when he and Armand Gouzien, whom he had met at the salon of the august Parnassian poet Charles Leconte de Lisle, persuaded Armand's rich brother, Théophile, to fund a magazine–the *Revue des Lettres et des Arts*–which Villiers was to edit. In order to take full advantage of the opportunity thus provided, Villiers began serializing *Claire Lenoir* in the first issue, and managed to bring it to a conclusion of sorts by the eighth issue, probably writing it as it appeared in great haste to meet his own deadline. He obviously intended it to be the first in a series of *histoires moroses* (*surly stories*), but the only other item in the projected series to appear before the *Revue* folded in 1868 was *L'Intersigne* (*The Sign*), the first of the stories that were to be collected many years later as *Contes Cruels* (*Cruel Tales*). The designation "*contes cruels*" was employed in the *Revue*, but the label was there attached to a series of poems that was later to be the one non-prose item in the famous collection (it is omitted from both the English versions).

Claire Lenoir was a new departure for Villiers in several ways. His earlier published works were as earnest as they were ambitious, seemingly aimed towards a synthesis of the ideas and ideals of Catholic theology and German idealist philosophy as propounded by G. W. F. Hegel. *Claire Lenoir* is vaguely aimed in that direction too, although the Hegelian Césaire and his more orthodoxly religious wife are at odds throughout, having been driven apart by Césaire's justified suspicion that his wife is an adulteress. Their division is, however, a minor matter by comparison with the narrative device Villiers employs in order to convey their ideas to the public: Doctor Tribulat Bonhomet.

Bonhomet is by no means the first "unreliable narrator" to be found in French prose fiction, but he was by far the most extreme to have appeared by 1867, and it is arguable that he has not been equalled since. Bonhomet is the incarnation of all that Villiers hated and despised: a smug bourgeois who is utterly devoid of taste, intellect and sensitivity, although he considers himself uncommonly discriminating and unchallengeably wise. He probably owed his origins to a comic character that Villiers had invented in the course of his performances, and grew in grotesquerie as more and more follies were added to his account. He was not the first archetypal

bourgeois to be prominently featured in French fiction, his most obvious predecessors being the protagonist of Henri Monnier's *Mémoires de Joseph Prudhomme* (1857; translated as *M. Prudhomme*, 1871) and the pharmacist Monsieur Homais in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857), but he is far more grotesque than these earlier models. The fact that his name contains echoes of both Prudhomme and Homais owes less to direct influence than the common inspiration of the word *homme*–but while Monnier's bourgeois anti-hero is a straightforwardly, if unjustifiably, proud man, Villiers' is full of perverted bonhomie, and subject to many compensating tribulations.

Such monsters as Tribulat Bonhomet were to appear again in French literature, similarly used as alienating devices, the most famous being Alfred Jarry's Papa Ubu in *Ubu Roi* (1896) and its sequels. Papa Ubu is, however, a character on a stage, to be observed by spectators; as the narrator of a piece of prose fiction, Tribulat Bonhomet invites the reader to identify with him, and to agree with the judgments that seem to him so obvious.

Villiers appears to have hoped that the avid readers of popular *romans feuilletons* would be easy prey to this trap, recognizing many of their own tendencies and opinions in the narrator before subsequently realizing, by slow and painful degrees, what a horrid person he is. Indeed, Villiers wrote to Mallarmé explaining that he intended to use the *Revue* as a vehicle of intellectual subversion, saying that "as soon as we have a few subscriptions, we must drive the reader mad." {4} He looked forward optimistically to the prospect of sending some few of his subscribers to the lunatic asylum, although even Mallarmé must have suspected that his idol was more likely to end up there than his readers.

Whether Bonhomet fooled contemporary readers or not, he seems to have confused Arthur Symons,{5} who was the first person to attempt to translate *Claire Lenoir* into English. Symons' translation, seemingly done in a tearing hurry without frequent recourse to the dictionary, is an error-laden farrago that often lapses into sheer gibberish, but it is also seriously skewed by Symons' decision to omit many of the passages in which Bonhomet manifests his crassness, stupidity and appalling insensitivity. No reader of Symons' English text is likely to have been driven mad, but the vast majority must have been sorely disappointed, and quite unsure as to how the text ought to be construed.

The most curious thing about Bonhomet, however, is not the extent to which he embodies everything Villiers loathed but the extent to which he is a kind of photographic negative of his creator. Bonhomet's runaway self-confidence may be absurd, but an objective observer might consider it no more absurd than Villiers'. Bonhomet's table talk, and the difficulty his dining companions have in getting a word in edgewise, is similarly absurd–but Villiers must have been aware of the fact that his less sympathetic hearers thought him guilty of the same fault. There are several places in the novel where Bonhomet's preoccupations echo Villiers', albeit in wryly amended forms, and there certainly seems to be an element of self-parody in the character, which cannot be wholly unintentional.

From the viewpoint of the modern reader, the issue of Bonhomet's unreliability is further confused by the dubious reliability of the various assertions made by Césaire and Claire. Even those readers who can swallow Césaire's version of Hegelianism (of which Villiers' understanding might not have been as complete as he fondly imagined) are unlikely to find his parallel interest in occultism appealing; nor is Claire's idiosyncratic version of religious faith likely to strike a chord. Given that the Lenoirs' not-very-well-hidden agendas leave much to be read between the lines, the sensitive reader is likely to conclude that all three of the novella's characters are unreliable narrators, and that the story has no secure anchorage at all.

Given Villiers' fervent dislike of contemporary popular fiction, which he seems to have considered dire hackwork, it is slightly puzzling that he provided *Claire Lenoir* with such a melodramatic conclusion, echoing devices that had become familiar in French imitations of German horror stories and on the reckless fringes of the *roman feuilleton*. Perhaps this, too, was a joke at his readers' expense, or even a calculated insult–but the highly idiosyncratic nature of the supernatural entity featured in the later chapters (all the more so if it is supposed to be delusional) suggests that in this matter too Villiers was extrapolating something he had detected in himself to a grotesque extreme.

It is not entirely surprising that a work that tries to do as many things as *Claire Lenoir* is something of a chimera. Nobody had ever attempted to do anything like it before, and it is hard to think of a later example that stitches so many different elements into a single patchwork.

The novella did, however, attract compliments from those of Villiers' peers who were sympathetic to his ambitions. Paul Verlaine called it "unique" and thought it a "genial melange of irony, metaphysics and terror." Rémy de Gourmont described it as "enormous, admirable and tragic buffoonery" and thought it "perhaps the most original creation of its era" in combining "the gifts of the ironist and the philosopher." {6}

The story's reputation might have held up a little better had its philosophical pretensions and its satirical targets not fallen so far behind the times, but its cavalier combination of horror and comedy seems less peculiar today than it did in the 19th century, and the caricaturish crudity of its climax is no longer so outré. The confusions which Arthur Symons tried–ineptly and vainly–to diminish can nowadays be appreciated as a subject-matter in their own right.

The version of *Claire Lenoir* that is familiar today is not the original, but an amended text included in the collection *Tribulat Bonhomet*, issued in 1887, one of a series of texts which Villiers released in rapid succession during the brief period of celebrity he enjoyed between the publication of *Contes Cruels* in 1883 and his death in 1889.

By that time he and his family were utterly destitute, and his increasingly desperate attempts to make a living from his pen brought little enough respite. The differences between the two versions of the novella–which are conscientiously mapped out in the edition of Villiers' *Oeuvres Complètes* issued by Gallimard in 1986–served to augment the confusions already inherent in the text.

Raitt states {7} that Claire and Césaire were allies against Bonhomet's crass materialism in the first version, and that it was only in the second that Claire's Christianity was made more explicit and Césaire's Hegelianism was treated with a certain disdain, but this exaggerates the differences between the two versions.

Given that the whole point of the story is that Claire and Césaire are at odds because of his suspicion of her adultery, their alliance was always loose and strained. There is, however, no doubt that Villiers had shifted his own intellectual ground considerably between 1867 and 1887. His Christianity had become considerably more devout, especially since he had come under the influence of the fanatical Léon Bloy,{8} he had lost faith in any possibility of synthesizing Catholic doctrine and German idealism, and his interest in fashionable occultism had declined markedly.

None of these shifts was calculated to lessen the confused quality of the novella when it was modified for the new edition, and each of them added an extra measure of uncertainty to its highly uneven progress. Behind the smokescreen thus provided, however, the story's central thread can still be followed with interest, and the effect on its interpretation of the eccentric narrative voice is quite fascinating to anyone interested in the mechanics of literary composition. At the end of the day, Verlaine and Gourmont were absolutely right; nothing else like *Claire Lenoir* was written in the 19th century, and it remains a bizarre literary landmark.

Tribulat Bonhomet appeared almost exactly a year after the book version of *L'Eve Future* (1886; variously translated as *The Future Eve*, *Tomorrow's Eve* and *Eve of the Future Eden*), a quasi-science-fictional fantasy in which Thomas Edison, in answer to the request of an English nobleman disappointed in love, builds an android designed to be the perfect woman.

These two books created the impression that Villiers was primarily to be regarded as a writer of fantastic fiction, although only a handful of the stories in *Contes Cruels* have any supernatural or science-fictional content and even fewer of the stories in his later collections have any inclination in that direction. It may be that the later work was purged of any fantastic elements because Villiers was slanting his material towards the market, but such elements were obviously no barrier to publication for the two longer stories.

Like *Claire Lenoir*, however, *L'Eve Future* was derived from much older work, begun at a time when Villiers was still fascinated by the legend of Faust. The first version, which bore the working title *Miss Hadaly Habal*, was begun in the early 1870s; by 1878, it had become *L'Andréïde Paradoxale d'Edison* (*Edison's Paradoxal Andreid*), although it was as *L'Eve Nouvelle* (*The New Eve*) that it began serialization in the newspaper *Le Gaulois* in 1880. That version was soon conclusively interrupted, and a different version was launched in a competing paper, *L'Etoile Française*, before the year's end. That, too, was suspended, although only three chapters remained to be printed (and perhaps also to be written). The book version, revised yet again, was the first to get all the way to the end, although the ending–amended in accordance with Villiers' new found devoutness–is not really consistent with the attitude of the earlier chapters.

Oddly enough, Villiers' reputation as a writer of supernatural fiction and pioneer of science fiction has helped to maintain interest in his work, especially in the English-speaking world. Although *Contes Cruels* has been translated twice, once by Hamish Miles as *Sardonic Tales* and once by Robert Baldick as *Cruel Tales*, it is difficult to believe that *L'Eve Future* would have had the privilege of a second and third translation had it not been for the hope of appealing to readers and scholars of science fiction.

The most recent reprint of *Claire Lenoir* in advance of the publication of the *Oeuvres Complètes*, was a *Tribulat Bonhomet* paperback issued by the Belgian publisher Marabout in 1973, as part of its acclaimed *Fantastique* imprint, and advertised as a horror story. *Claire Lenoir* would undoubtedly have attracted more attention in the English-speaking world had the Symons translation not been virtually unreadable, but Michael Ashley's entry on Villiers in *Who's Who in Horror and Fantasy Fiction* (1977) and Ben Indick's brief essay in Jack Sullivan's *Penguin Encyclopedia of Horror and the Supernatural* (1986) do not mention it; the ever-assiduous Everett Bleiler summarizes the Symons translation in *The Guide to Supernatural Fiction* (1983), but is understandably confused as to the point of the story. This new translation will, hopefully, allow a more accurate estimation to be made of the historical significance of *Claire Lenoir* as an item of fantastic literature as well as a significant element of Villiers' oeuvre.

The four short pieces with which Villiers bulked out his 1887 *Tribulat Bonhomet* collection are rather trivial, and his plans to extrapolate the series further came to naught. Villiers placed three of them ahead of *Claire Lenoir* in the collection, but the reasons for that decision are unclear and I have reverted to the chronological order of their first publications.

Only one of them–*Le Tueur de Cygnes* (*The Swan-Killer*), first published in 1886–has been previously translated into English.[9]

Le Banquet des Eventualistes (*The Eventualists' Banquet*) and *Motion du Dr. Tribulat Bonhomet Touchant l'Utilisation des Tremblements de Terre* (*Dr. Tribulat Bonhomet's Motion Regarding the Utilization of Earthquakes*) were initially published in 1887. Finally, the epilogue entitled *Les Visions Merveilleuses du Dr. Tribulat Bonhomet* (*The Marvelous Visions of Dr. Tribulat Bonhomet*) was original to the 1887 collection.

The four stories that I have added to this volume are similar in kind to two of the shorter tales above, in that they offer scathingly sarcastic

accounts of social innovations of one kind or another, and similar in spirit to all of them.

Une Profession Nouvelle (*A New Profession*) and *L'Agence du Chandelier d'Or* (*The Golden Candlestick Agency*) anticipate the kinds of chicanery which might have to be employed in order for couples desirous of divorcing to comply with the moralistic restrictions retained by a law reforming that institution, while *Maître Pied* is a cynical account of tactics which might be employed to fight future elections. *L'Inquiéteur* (*The Disquietor*) is more calculatedly absurd, responding to a recent trend in ostentatious mourning. The first appeared *Le Succès* and the second and third in *Gil Blas* in the mid-1880s, but *Maître Pied* remained unpublished during Villiers' lifetime, being issued posthumously in a supplement added to later editions of *Nouveaux Contes Cruels* (*New Cruel Tales*).

Brian Stableford

The Vampire Soul
(Claire Lenoir)

Memorandum of Doctor Tribulat Bonhomet
Honorary Member of Several Academies
Associate Professor of Physiology
Regarding
The Mysterious Case of
the Discreet and Scientific Individual
The Widowed Lady, Claire Lenoir

Non moechaberis.[{10}]
Moses

To My Illustrious Contemporaries.
T.B.

Chapter One

Precautions and Confidences

Touched with Pensiveness...
Thomas de Quincey {11}

The chain of dark events that I have taken it upon myself to record (in spite of my white hair and my disdain for vainglory) appears to me to comprise a sum of horror capable of troubling the minds of experienced lawyers. I must confess, at the outset, that I am only delivering these pages to a publisher as a concession to sustained pressure from devoted and proven friends. I dread the prospect of immersing myself for a second time in the sad necessity of attenuating–by means of the efflorescences of my style and the resources of a rich fluency–their unusual and suffocating hideousness.

I do not think that Fear is a universally profitable sensation. Would it not be the act of a madman to spread it recklessly in the minds of others, motivated by vague hope of profiting from the scandal? A profound discovery is not to be hastily thrown under the trampling feet of the procession of human thought. It requires appropriate seasoning in advance of mental digestion. Any great news, carelessly announced, can alarm–often to the point of madness–a large number of pious souls, overexcite the caustic faculties of wastrels, and reawaken the antiquated neurosis of *demonic possession* in timorous minds.

It is certainly true, however, that to make people think is a duty that takes precedence over an abundance of scruples. Having weighed it all up, I shall speak out. Everyone must answer to his own conscience. Besides, my century reassures me; for every feeble mind that I might overstrain, there are many strong minds that I might enlighten. When I say *strong minds,* I am not speaking lightly. As for the veracity of my story, no one, I wager, will recklessly poke fun at it; for, even admitting the possibility that the following account is rooted in a falsehood, the mere idea of their possibility is just as terrible as a conclusive and accepted demonstration of their

authenticity. When one thinks about it, are not all things possible in our mysterious universe?

When I say *mysterious* rather than *problematic*, I am not (if I may be permitted to repeat myself) speaking lightly.

Any digression on this subject, sketched in haste and without being properly tested, would be idle.

Now, my readers may certainly be assured that I am not scheming to obtain any purely *literary* honors. In truth, if there is any objective beyond the personal that I despise even more than the conventional expressions of high-flown language, it is that of the *literateurs* and their henchmen. I don't give a fig for all that!

Having been reduced to introducing myself to the public, the first thing I ought to do, to get it out of the way, is to describe myself.

I have often asked myself why people sometimes burst out laughing or seem disconcerted when they see me for the first time, but cannot figure it out no matter how hard I think about it. It seems to me, without being boastful, that my appearance ought rather to inspire thoughts along the following lines: "How pleasing it is to belong to a species that has produced an individual like that!"

Physically, I am what might be described in scientific terms as a *second epoch Saturnian*;{12} I have a tall and bony figure, and a slight stoop brought on by thinking to excess. The tormented oval of my face advertises my wisdom and forethought.{13} Under my bushy eyebrows, grey eyes shine forth penetratingly from their cavities, like Saturn and Mercury. My forehead is high, the barrenness of my temples announcing that they no longer sup the convictions of others because their nourishment is complete. My head is slightly hollowed out at the sides, like those of mathematicians. Hollow temples are crucibles!{14} They distill ideas so that my nose can judge their quality and offer its verdict.

My nose is considerable in dimension–large, even. It is an invasive nose, an atomizing nose, hooked in the middle like the arch of a foot–which, in anyone but myself, would indicate a tendency to dark obsession. The nose, you see, is the expression of the human capacity for reason; it is the organ that goes before, which enlightens, which proclaims one's presence, which scents trouble and which points the way. The visible nose corresponds to the *impalpable nose* which everyone carries within himself from birth. If, therefore, as a nose develops, one part grows imprudently to the detriment

of the others, it corresponds to some lacuna of judgment, to one particular thought nourished to the detriment of others. The corners of my pale, pinched mouth are the folds of a shroud; it is set so close to the nose so that it may take advice before speaking lightly–like a crow picking nuts, as the saying goes.

Without my chin, which gives me away, I might be taken for a man of action; but a senile Saturn, skeptical and lunatic, has chopped it off with a stroke of his scythe.{15} The color and texture of my skin is as durable as that of my peers in its symbolic contemporaneity. My ears, delicately lobed and extended, like those of the Chinese, advertise the scrupulousness of my mind.

My hand is sterile: the Moon and Mercury dispute the lines in its palm. The gnarled and spatulate middle finger has scars on the second joint, which do not affect its operation. The edges of my hand are vague and wan; clouds formed by Venus and Apollo have rarely confused that sky; my willful thumb rests upon the hazardous hill where Venus indicates her tendencies. The palm, however, is definitely that of a manipulator; the fingers can fold upon it like a woman's, with a certain coquettishness, touching the various arenas of their perfect education. I am, at any rate, the only son of the petty Doctor Amour Bonhomet, well-known for his dismal adventures in the Mines.{16}

Ever since I first became aware of who I was, I have worn the same kind of clothes, appropriate to my personality and gait, to wit: a wide-brimmed felt hat, like those worn by Quakers and the Lake Poets; a large double-breasted overcoat, always buttoned, like the grandiose phrases in which my thoughts are habitually couched; an old walking-stick with a red knob; a large diamond solitaire–a family heirloom–on my Saturnian finger. I am a match for the ancient Romans in the precious quality and delicate whiteness of my linen; I have the honor of possessing the same feet as King Charles the Great in my Souwaroff boots,{17} with which I trample down the soil very well: I nearly always have my suitcase in my hand, for I travel abroad more than Ahasuerus.{18} I am proud to believe that I wear the face of my century, that I am, in fact, its *archetype*.{19}

In brief, I am a doctor, a philanthropist and a man of the world.

My voice is sometimes shrill and sometimes (especially when I speak to women) rich and profound–and it can go from one to the other seamlessly, as I please. I have neither wife nor parents, thus having no attachments to

society of any kind–so I must hope, at least. I live on an annuity, provided by the little wealth left to me. My visiting card is formulated thus:

DOCTOR
TRIBULAT BONHOMET
EUROPE {20}

These are my particular moral principles:

The mysteries of positivist science have had exclusive command of my attentive faculties since the sacred moment when I first came into the world, often to the exclusion of every other human preoccupation. Infinitely tiny things, like those my beloved master Spallanzani named *Infusoria* {21} have been the ultimate object of my research from a tender age. To provide for the needs of my profound studies, I have eaten through the enormous legacy of my ancestors. Yes, I have dedicated the mature fruits of their centuries of sweat to the purchase of lenses and other apparatus requisite to denude the arcana of the temporarily invisible world!

I have compiled the names of all my predecessors.{22} *Non est hic locus* {23} to dwell too long on the enlightenment that I believe I have added to theirs; posterity will deliver its verdict on that subject, if I ever publish. What it is important to establish is that the analytical, magnificatory minuteness of my mind is so essential to my nature that the entire joy of life is, for me, concentrated in the precise classification of the most wretched *Tenebrio* beetles,{24} according to the bizarre entanglements–like some very ancient handwriting–formed by the nerves of such insects, narrowing phenomenal horizons which still remain immense in the retinas which reflect them! Reality thus becomes visionary–and I feel that I am entering a new level of the Domain of Dreams, microscope in hand!

But I am jealous of my discoveries, all of which I keep concealed. I have a mortal hatred of vulgar people, squalid as they are. When anyone questions me on this subject, I play dumb.{25} I try to pass for a mere fleck. {26} And I take great delight in thinking that I could disconcert those faces if I were to tell them what surprising and previously-unknown things my instruments have allowed me to glimpse!

Let’s leave it at that; perhaps I’ve already said too much...

My religious ideas are restricted to the absurd idea that God created man, *and vice versa*.

We do not know where we come from; Reason remains in doubt. I should add, to be frank, that Death astonishes even more than her sad Sister;{27} one can't make head nor tail of it. All inquiry into its mysteries results, inevitably, in a kind of analysis that inverts the logic according to which we satisfy ourselves, grudgingly, with a *course of life* which is obviously provisional and local.

As for ghosts, I'm not at all superstitious. I give no credence to insignificant twaddle about *signs*, which is so much ballyhoo, and I don't believe that the dead monkey about with us. Just between ourselves, though, I don't like cemeteries or other overly dark places–or people who exaggerate! I'm only a poor old man, but if Pluto {28} set me on the steps of a throne at birth, and if it only required a word from me, now, to wreak havoc among all these fanatics, I'd say that word–*just like peeling an apple*, as the poet says.

Nevertheless, I have to confess that I'm subject to a hereditary ailment that has long made a mockery of my reason and will-power! It consists of an *apprehension*: an anxiety, without any precise source; an anguish, in a word, which seizes me like a panic attack, making me savor all the bitterness of an abrupt infernal disquiet–frequently on account of derisory futilities! Doesn't it make one grind one's teeth to feel one's soul poisoned as mortally as that? Jut thinking about it makes me sick.

Having a cultured mind, I have the most enlightened views on everything, but–and this is odd–although I know how to explain, for example, the noise of the wind, both acoustically and physically, by reference to sudden extremes of heat and cold, when I actually hear the wind, I'm afraid. Amid the thousand shudders of Silence–produced by the simplest causes–I become pale. Whenever the shadow of a bird crosses my path, I stop and, putting my suitcase down, I mop my brow–a disconcerted traveler! Then, I am oppressed by the weight of a nervous dread of Heaven and Earth, the living and the dead. It's pitiful! And I surprise myself by saying, in spite of myself: "Oh! Oh! What can it mean–this caravanserai of apparitions, queuing up to disappear incontinently? Is the Universe meaningless? Is the all-devouring Universe–an infinite chain in which everyone's feet are consumed by the jaws of the next–destined to fall victim to the voracity of some Aeon? {29} What will be its earthworm? Tell me, noise of the wind, bird which passes by... and you who know the answer, O Silence?"

Such are the inconceivable, fervent, poetic and–in consequence–grotesque whims that haunt me and trouble the lucidity of my ideas. It's merely an illness; I'm an *anguisher*. I've treated myself with douches, quinine, purgatives, astringents and hydrotherapy–I'm better now, much better. I have begun to reassure myself and to recognize that Progress is not a dream–that it is spreading throughout the world, illuminating it and, ultimately, elevating us towards spheres of choice which are uniquely worthy of the leaps of our most disciplined imaginations. That is no longer questionable, today, among men of good taste.

I still have fits, though...

In the world, I conceal this emotion as a matter of politeness. If I happen, at some party, to spend too long chatting to a woman she never knows–fortunately, I can see it in her eyes–that at a given moment, at the very instant when I am letting some innocent bonbon melt in my mouth, smiling, with a soft and syrupy voice, droning on about *fanatics*... she never knows, I tell you, that at that very moment, the rusty, profound and lugubrious knell of midnight is reverberating within me–or *that the Midnight in question sounds more than a dozen strokes*!

Now, I have an inveterate habit, adopted years ago as a veil for my chosen endeavors. It allows me to go into any society, to chat with men, women and children and to be well-received. I hardly dare to name it, so fearful am I of misplaced mockery. I am talking about the habit of *matchmaking*. The brochette of my decorations has no other source.

As to why I adopted this habit, it's extremely simple.

To begin with, let's mention my weakness for Voltaire, the author of the immortal *Micromegas*, where a fair number of my countless discoveries are, so to speak, prefigured. Even so, my admiration for that invaluable writer is by no means servile; everyone must strive, in fact, to develop in himself a profound contempt for his teachers and all those who, having raised him, have sought to inculcate their own ideas in him.

What I admire in Voltaire is that ability lauded in Pozzo di Borgo {30} and Machiavelli–my favorite teachers–which consists in trampling underfoot all respect for his peers while maintaining an exterior appearance of obsequious humility: a perfect disguise to which the term *supreme* would be wholly appropriate! I recommend, in passing, that kind of charity. It is the only one worthy of being taken seriously; it serves to hide one's real objectives. Now, I am not anxious, on my own account, to make known my

devotion, body and soul, to the *Infusoria*. Visits, questions, consultations and compliments have prevented me from bringing the desirable concentration to my vertiginous studies. On the other hand, as it is necessary that I talk, when I happen to find myself in company, I am eager to talk to everyone about that which most interests him, in order to avoid any questions about the nature of my scientific researches, and isn't it nearly always marriage–his own or other people's–that preoccupies the most risible sons of Woman? Everyone knows that.

And that's how, without overtaxing my imagination, I have slid into the intimacy of so many people, and how–miraculously aided by Chance–I've made numerous marriages![31]

Most of the unions accomplished under my auspices have been favored by Heaven–even though, many a time, in my haste, I have brought couples together with their feet off the ground, as they say. Well, it always comes out right in the end. Except once–and it is the astonishing couple I riveted together in that union that I now intend to bring to everyone's attention.

Ought I to say, all things considered, that it was not happy, that marriage whose definitive and unnamable crisis gave way to my most deadly discovery? I would be an ingrate, vis-à-vis Destiny, if I had the impudence to think so for a second! Science–*true* Science–is inaccessible to pity; where would we be without it? In addition, even though the affair was the source of ample damnation for me–of a nameless terror which turns over in my brain to the point at which I am scarcely able to write, so that I, Tribulat Bonhomet, professor of diagnostics, have come to doubt my own existence and that of other things much more clearly evident–I maintain my opinion of Voltaire! I do not repent what I did! I wash my hands of the responsibility of having completed that catastrophe! And I take pride in still being one of the finest minds to have escaped the hands of the Most High. All truly modern men–all the minds which sense that they are *in the movement*–will understand what I mean.

I shall limit myself to a succinct statement of the facts, as they presented and represented themselves. Let whomsoever desires attempt to explain the story; I shall not overburden it with any scientific theory. The general impression it creates will thus depend on the intellectual capacity furnished by the Reader.

Chapter Two

Sir Henry Clifton {32}

> *To me, the city, blurred by fog and soft*
> *lights represented the Earth, with its sorrows and its graves–left far behind, but not wholly forgotten.*
>
> Thomas de Quincey, *Confessions* {33}

In the last days of July 1866, a gala dinner was given in honor of Captain Brick of the British merchant vessel *Wonderful*, then making sail for the coast of Brittany. When coffee was served at the end of the meal, I was embroiled in conversation with the person seated next to me, Lieutenant Henry Clifton. He was about 30 years old, with regular features and the tanned complexion of a seaman. His expression was friendly and I found his reserved manner congenial.

That night was our first real conversation, the casual chat that takes place between a ship's officer and a mere passenger having been succinct in our case. We had set out from Ireland and, plunged into the study of my dear *infusoria*, I had remained below decks most of the time, experimenting with old brine.{34}

We had exchanged a few words regarding our arrival at Saint-Malo, scheduled for the next day; then–the effects of the wine and the bright lights having given us a headache–we went up on deck to get some fresh air and light our cigars.

I had refrained, during the banquet, from getting mixed up in the discussion of politics that had inevitably broken out over dessert. Such arguments always become animated on occasions of that sort, and only interested me when they involved women. Well, who could be insensible, under such circumstances, of their delicate smiles, their gracious and ill-timed exclamations, their sensible manner, of the laudable efforts of their eyes to appear penetrating, troubled, surprised, and so on? I say again–discussing politics with women is a captivating business, which makes one think. In order to be worthy of their esteem and confidence, my face always

becomes more benevolent on such occasions, more paternal, and softer than usual. I deliver my lines gravely, lowering my eyes as I spout the most outrageous absurdities, to which my white hair lends dignity–with the result that the entire sex hangs on my every word, as if I were a magician.

Anyway, political conversation would be just as amusing with the virile sex, if one could only bring the necessary grace and entertainment into it, although I've never heard anyone say anything worth taking seriously about the future course of events.

Sir Henry Clifton, like me, had never opened his mouth. This was why I had a high opinion of him. Nothing is more difficult, in my view, than keeping silent at his age. In politics, I presumed, he ought to share my ideas, which I can summarize thus:

In every country, every citizen worthy of the name has about three hours of leisure a day, between work and sleep. Ordinarily, he fills these moments of respite with petty chitchat, innocent and easily digestible, about the affairs of his fatherland. Now, if nothing happens that is remarkable or *serious*, what would he have to talk about? He would become bored, for want of a subject of conversation–and the boredom of citizens is nearly always fatal to Heads of State. The arms are ready to get busy when the tongue is idle–and when it is necessary to fill the aforementioned three hours, yesterday's conversationalist becomes today's rioter. That is the sad secret of revolutions.

It appears to me, therefore, that it is the duty of every good government to stir up, as often as possible, wars, epidemics, dreads, hopes–events of every kind. It does not matter, in the ultimate analysis, whether they are fortunate or unfortunate, as long as they are capable of feeding the petty, innocent and easily digestible chitchat of every citizen. After 20, 30 or 40 years of incessant *who goes theres?* kings have diverted attention; their reign is tranquil. Adequately entertained, the whole world is content. This, in my view, is one of the best definitions of grand diplomacy: when the hand of God has bestowed on one the honor of being a leader of men, one must at all costs occupy the minds of one's citizens, so that all attention is deflected from oneself. Even my beloved master Machiavelli–I weep as I pronounce his name–never found a formula as neat as that! This explains my indifference to the events and the political disruptions and complications in which the governments of Europe are embroiled; I leave

interest in the controversies they stir up to minds rotted by an innate thirst for killing time.

For this reason, I silently commended Sir Henry Clifton for his reserve and his quiet way of drinking. Actually, he was in a worse state than the drunken sailor in the song; he had more color in his cheeks and I saw that he was about to wax sentimental. I was perfectly sober myself, so I decided to watch over him as if he were my patient.

The night was full of stars. The northwest wind freshened and gently pushed us forward; the red lantern on the quarterdeck illuminated the foam and silver vapor of the waves breaking on the ship's hull. The hurrahs of the officers gathered around the punchbowl reached us from time to time from below decks, mingling with the heavy sound of the waves.

Seeing the Englishman fall silent, I feared that he was about to ask me what I did for a living, perhaps even about my work–so I launched into conversation according to my infallible method.

"Hold on, my young friend," I said. "I know what you need! Shall I tell you? It occurred to me the first time I had the pleasure of shaking your hand." At this point, I lowered my voice, staring vaguely into space like a man talking to himself. "Very well, I'll wager that what would suit a capable person like you is an adventurous yet experienced widow–a beautiful woman, second-hand, with a fortune–oh yes, a *Thousand-and-One-Nights* fortune! That's just it." I raised my eyebrows abruptly, fixing my dull eyes on his epaulette, and added: "Yes, that's exactly what you need."

After a stunned pause, as expected, Sir Henry Clifton steadied himself, using his little finger to shake the ash from the end of his cigar.

"Ah!" he said. "What an excellent, shrewd doctor you are–sent by the Devil, if I understand you right."{35}

With my eyes utterly lost in celestial space, I placed my hand gently on his arm and whispered in his ear: "An introduction can be arranged for Monday, if nothing gets in the way, at one or two o'clock–and you can be married in six weeks. If I'm wrong, I promise to cut off my head right here, on the stern-post!"

He took me by the hands, astounded. The fish had bitten; I had avoided interrogation on scientific matters.

"I believe I understand, at last," he muttered, after a pause. "You are offering me something like..."

He stopped, out of a modesty for which I was grateful.

“A legitimate wife, Lieutenant.”

“A wife!” he finished, in an uncertain voice that was even slightly tremulous.

“And why not, Lieutenant?” I replied, scenting a mystery. “Your profession of mariner... considerable skill, aristocratic company, a good career...” I interjected, mechanically, “is not incompatible with a distant hearth. It is the softest nest for those... that you have the habit of casting off!”{36} I added, smiling agreeably. “Nevertheless, if you’re not interested, stay as you are. I won’t say another word.”

After a momentary pause, as if he had thought about it long enough, he withdrew slightly and said: “Monsieur!” Then, retreating into himself, probably thinking, *he’s a harmless eccentric*, he said: “Thank you for the kind thought, Doctor. I’ll tell you something in return...”

We were there. Perseverance {37} had done its work on the impressionable child. I pricked up my ears, solemnly.

“It’s doubtful,” he went on, “that we’ll ever meet again. Oh well! I must refuse your generous offer because there is a woman whose face I shall never be able to forget so long as I live.”

“Ah!” I said, smugly. “Very well–I understand.” I added, under my breath: *I would have been surprised if it were not so, but let me say to you...*

I sat up straight and made an expansive gesture of desolation, and said: “What a pity! It really is a shame!”

If there was anything of the Devil in me, it was that I had not the slightest idea what woman I could offer to him. My principal preoccupation was merely to avoid any question concerning *Infusoria*.

“And she is married!” murmured Sir Henry Clifton in a low voice, as if he were talking to himself.

I felt tears moistening my eyes.

“Can I do anything for you?” I asked him, at hazard, with profound tenderness. And I added, in a low voice: “It’s just that I’m a slick operator in complicated negotiations.”

There was a moment of the most peculiar silence, during which I felt the young man watching me as if he were undecided as to whether to slap my face or embrace me. I had known in advance that my words, correctly interpreted, would make a favorable impression on his mind.

“Thank you, my friend... my old friend,” he finished up saying, in a voice whose violent emotion melted my heart, “but the poor woman must never see me again....”

His distraught eyes no longer seemed to register my presence. Bitterly, he went on: “I dare say that she’s blind even now, as I speak. Yes! Yes, it’s all because of her poor eyes...!” And he lowered his head, which was doubtless still aching, into his hands.

At these words, I slowly removed the cigar from my mouth, and shot a terrible glance at Sir Henry Clifton, in the darkness. Although I have no idea why, the young man had made me think of my strange and beautiful friend–or, to be more specific, of the unfortunate eyes of my worthy friend–Madame Claire Lenoir.

I silently took my watch out of my pocket and rose to my feet.

“I look forward to seeing you again, my young lieutenant,” I said. “You have your secrets. “There are times when one ought to be left alone, and I respect such occasions...”

He shook my hand without raising his head. I buttoned my coat securely against the wind and I went down to my cabin, abandoning Sir Henry Clifton to his dreams, under the particular protection and inspiration of the night, the persistent wine and the sea.

Chapter Three

Supererogatory Explanations

> *That which* sees, *in our eyes, watches from hiding on this side of the depths of our fleshly pupils.*
>
> Lysiane d'Aubelleyne {38}

I went to bed in haste. My thoughts rocked along with my hammock, swaying with the movement of the boat. I supported myself on my elbows.

It was actually with the Lenoirs that I intended to stay for a fortnight after disembarking. A letter posted from Jersey had warned them of my coming; they would be expecting me.

Had I seen them since their wedding, three years ago? No, not once. I had an awful feeling, it seemed to me, of being somehow involved in their marriage. Indeed, during a rather long sojourn I had spent in the Pyrennées, at Luchon, for the sake of my health, I had become acquainted with Claire's family. An honest and respectable family of merchants, if ever there was one! Their only daughter was a very beautiful girl, about 20 years old, I think, when circumstance threw us together. Hers was a very educative kind of beauty. She had chestnut-brown hair, lovely features and a complexion like jade, which sometimes seemed almost luminously transparent.

The frontal region of her skull was, unfortunately, rather large, disclosing a useless cerebral capacity which could only be reckoned detrimental in a woman.

Her eyes were pale green. Excursions among the mountain crags had exposed her eyes–such large eyes!–to the hot and dusty wind that blows from the south. Her sight, which was naturally weak to begin with, had become much worse, and the unanimous verdict of her physicians was that she would soon lose it altogether.

However, in musing one day on the similarity of the names Lenoir and Luchon,{39} and my old comrade Césaire Lenoir of Saint-Malo, the idea had

come to me that Claire, instead of being called Mademoiselle, could became Madame Lenoir without overmuch difficulty.

Why not?

I wrote immediately to the excellent Césaire, who hastened to Luchon. That coincidence of names conveniently provided me with the pretext for a formal introduction. Césaire was a man scarcely 42 years old; the marriage was soon consummated. I rubbed my hands together in glorious satisfaction, having made the two of them happy.

Lenoir took his wife to Saint-Malo, installing her in his property at no. 18, Rue des Mauvais-Pleurs,{40} his usual place of residence. His occasional letters to me indicated that his happy home was untroubled by any anxieties, save for Claire's threatened loss of sight.

How could Sir Henry Clifton, the amiable and aristocratic child of the sea, have become acquainted with the young woman? Could I conclude– supposing that it was indeed Claire Lenoir about whom he had spoken– could I think it possible, that she had failed in her marital duty? No! Such a thought was hideous; I was imagining things.

Besides, Claire–beautiful Claire–was a studious woman and a collector: a metaphysician, unless my memory was playing me false. A savant! An impossible creature! An ecstatic! A quibbler! A wordsmith! A dreamer. Go on! It could not be her that the lieutenant had intended to sully with an accusation of adultery.

At that point, I smiled to myself and pulled my blanket over my head. As far as the young Englishman was concerned, I shrugged my shoulders and went to sleep.

Chapter Four

The Mysterious Paragraph

Besides, in these lethargic times,
As devoid of gaiety as of remorse,
The only smile that still makes sense
Is that of a dead man's skull.

Paul Verlaine [{41}]

The bell signaling our arrival woke me up. We were in the harbor at Saint-Malo. It was eleven o'clock, or a little later; the Sun was shining brightly. I took my walking-stick and my suitcase, leapt on to the gangplank and joined the flow of travelers going down to the quay, my boots flecked with the spume of the sea.

The first thing I did after setting foot on the soil of my illustrious fatherland was to go into a cafe which looked out over the entire foreshore–and, in the distance, the tomb of the Vicomte de Chateaubriand,[{42}] an old minister of Charles X whose ethnographic works on savage tribes are said to be remarkable. I ordered my usual enormous dose of absinthe, then sank back into my seat and–distracted by nostalgia–took up the first newspaper that happened to come to hand.

It was a local paper someone had left behind on the seat–soiled, tattered and long out of date. Now that I think about it, it comes back to me, distinctly, that the waiter wanted to tear it out of my hand and give me a more recent one instead–and that I resisted him with the reflexive action of any man from whom someone tries to take something away.

In skimming through the paper, my eyes were caught by a paragraph situated between a new case of encroachment on the part of the clergy–judiciously pointed out by the reporter–and an infallible recipe, recommended by some fly-by-night quack, for curing the most terrible earaches. This is what the paragraph said:

"*The Academy of Sciences in Paris has determined the authenticity of a most surprising fact. It is henceforth established that animals destined for our nourishment, such as sheep, cattle, lambs, horses and cats, retain in their eyes, after the fatal stroke of the butcher's sledge-hammer, the imprint of the objects of their last gaze. It is a veritable* photograph *of paving-stones, stalls, gutters and vague figures, among whom can nearly always be distinguished that of the man who strikes them down. The phenomenon lasts until decomposition sets in. As Ignorance diminishes, this discovery will obviously figure nobly among its companions in the already much-enriched catalogue of the achievements of our enlightened century.*" {43}

I had known this fact before, with particular reference to its recent application by the North American police, as advertised in the same country–and that will, I hope, leave not a shadow of a doubt in the mind of the Reader. But what struck me was a personal phenomenon which reading the piece then produced in me: a certain kind of *appropriateness* which the fact seemed to me to possess at that moment–even though it was conveyed by some miserable provincial joker.

This sensory deprivation could have been nervous fatigue, moral and physical, induced by my voyage; I therefore proceeded to examine myself. Then, mechanically, I raised my eyes–and my gaze fell upon a man standing, arms crossed, against a foremast 200 yards away. I recognized the noble lieutenant. Our eyes met as we turned spontaneously to look straight at one another, as if we had been discomfited. Why? Neither of us ever knew.

To cut short the dark thoughts that began to rise in my mind, I rose abruptly to my feet, downing the absinthe in a single gulp. Then, showing the place a clean pair of heels, I strode off rapidly along the road that led to the maritime district where the Lenoirs lived–a slightly out-of-the-way road that was deserted at that time of day.

The Sun was hot; I stopped from time to time to wipe my forehead and to cast a troubled glance behind and to either side of me.

Chapter Five

The Blue-Tinted Spectacles

Lovely eyes of my child, adored arcana,
You remind me of those magic grottoes
Where, behind a crowd of lethargic shadows.
Forgotten treasures dimly scintillate.

Charles Baudelaire, *Spleen et Idéal* {44}

Half an hour later, I was in front of an isolated country house, the home of my best friend Césaire, the Good Doctor. I say "Doctor" because that's the correct term, but Lenoir was, at bottom, a bit of a fool{45}—a natural person, if ever there was such a thing under the Sun! I rang the bell; an old manservant came to open it for me, escorted by an enormous red-haired basset hound, which served the household as both watchdog and rat-catcher.

The manservant took me to the reception room, asked me to wait, and went out. It was an ordinary ground-floor room. Through the window, which opened on to the garden, came the fresh odor of trees. An ancestral portrait hung on the wall; a shaded lamp sat on the cloth-covered table. A large oak-framed mirror over the mantelpiece reflected the old grandfather clock and the antique candelabras. The room was shot through with provincial quiet and the calm of isolation. I stood there with my hat and stick in one hand and my suitcase in the other, savoring the whole experience of that silent freshness, full of echoes.

Then, taking a brief tour, I thought, *One could be happy here!*

The movement left me standing in front of the mirror; in the glass I saw the door open soundlessly behind me, giving passage to a being whose appearance caused me to start in surprise. It was a woman wrapped in a green velvet dressing-gown with red tassels; two long ringlets of chestnut-colored hair fell, *à la* Sévigné,{46} on to her bosom; her eyes were hidden by a pair of gold spectacles with enormous round blue lenses as big as six-*livre* coins, extending almost as far as her eyebrows and the high-set bones of her

pale cheeks. She came in like a ghost, showing her teeth in a polite smile. I have said before and will say again: the unexpected sight of her sent a thrill of surprise right through me.

“So it’s you, Monsieur Traveler,” Claire Lenoir said to me in a voice as mordant and vibrant as a silver bell. “We went to wait for you on the quay yesterday evening! Stay there, and have a quick glass of this old Madeira; Césaire will be down in a minute.”

Once I had put my luggage in a corner, hastily, I took her by the hands. “Is it really you?” I murmured. “Is it possible?”

The young woman looked me up and down, somewhat taken aback.

“Of course,” she said. “There’s no doubt about it! Why so surprised, my dear Monsieur Bonhomet? I did not realize that I had changed so much... oh!” She suddenly burst out laughing. “I know what it is! It’s my spectacles! That’s right–you haven’t seen me since the day... alas, my friend, I’m resigned to wearing them, at my age, in the hope of prolonging my sight. Look! Look!”

And, lifting the large spectacles up with both hands, she let me see her *Eyes*.

They possessed a brilliance so vitreous, so pure, that her gaze was as cold as a gemstone; they hurt me. They were two emeralds.

“Put them back,” I said. “A sudden draught might be dangerous.”

Her eyelashes closed over the pupils.

“I don’t know what it is about my eyes,” she said, doing as she was told, “but I can tell, when I blink, that it is as much for the benefit of other people as for my own that I need to wear these thick glasses.”

There was a silence. I understood that the moment had come for me to sing her praises;[{47}] the situation certainly seemed to require it! But when I opened my mouth–to draw some comparison with the most gigantic stars in the vault of Heaven beloved of the nocturnal angels–another person appeared behind the glass-paneled door.

It was Lenoir.

As soon as he had recognized me, his eyebrows shot up and drew apart; he came in like a cannonball and threw himself into my arms without a word, with such frank enthusiasm that he nearly bowled me over. He knocked the breath out of me.

“Here I am!” I said to him. “And it’s a real pleasure to see, my dear Lenoir, that the years have treated you well.” Smiling, and feeling myself to

make sure that none of my ribs had been broken, I added: “As strong and vigorous as ever!”

He called the servants, getting quite out of breath, while his wife filled my glass with Madeira; he told them to take my things up to the room that had been made up for me. After which, we went into the drawing-room and set about chatting.

Chapter Six

I Kill Time Before Dinner

You fall silent, O sinister voice of the living!

Leconte de Lisle {48}

The furnishings, curtains and wall hangings of the little dining-room were dark red; there were alabaster vases on the mantelpiece. In the shadows was a painting in the style of the school of Rembrandt; there were sickly violet dahlias in a vase on the piano. A model of a warship made by my friend in his spare time, complete with rigging and cannons, was suspended from the ceiling as if it were a chandelier. The window was open, looking out over the shore of the Atlantic.

Sinking into the sofa, between Césaire and his wife, I offered them a sketchy account of my journeys through the five continents, my explorations of mountain peaks and the bowels of the Earth–from the summit of the Illimani {49} to the depths of the mines of Poullaouën.{50} I talked about the geysers and volcanoes of Iceland; the pointed skulls of the Seminoles; the rites of the Juggernaut;{51} the Chinese tortures whose mere nomenclature would fill a dictionary as capacious as Bottin;{52} the cults of African sorcerers who dance naked with sulphurous torches aflame in their armpits; the passport tattooed on my back that had been given to me as a sign of affection by Zouézoué-Anandézoué-Rakartapakoué-Boué-Anazenopati-Abdoulrakam-Penanntogômo V, King of the isles of Honolulu and Moo-Loo-Loo; Indian trees under each of whose leaves Buddhist maxims are inscribed; the serpent cults of the cannibals of Tierra del Fuego, the serpents in question being those who can kill human beings by biting shadows cast on sand by the Sun; the sap of the cruciferous hemlock of the South Pole, whose infusion can still produce hallucinations containing visions of the antediluvian world; the Canadian religion based on the belief that the universe was created by a great hare; the niam-niams{53}–men with

the tails of chimpanzees, which are classified above the gorilla and below the Kaffir negro in the apparent scale of living creatures (as I have established in my treatise entitled *On the Tadpole*); the Tibetan High Lama, whose regal visage is always veiled from the moment of birth to that of death; the Zealander tribal chief Ko-li-Ki (King of Kings) who lives exclusively on large chunks of flesh cut by machetes from the choice parts of the bodies of his subjects, in advance of his passage through their midst. I talked about huge trees, waves, rocks and distant adventures. I held the dice; I threw the ball back; I rang the bells of pleasantry; I narrated all these traveler's tales with great aplomb. I talked about this and that, right and left, without rhyme or reason–thinking that it was, after all, quite a treat for them.

In brief, I was charming.

They both seemed rather stunned, looking at me as if they hardly recognized me. I pity such provincial minds, which have to listen hard to know if it's raining.

Anyway, to tell the truth, I was rather annoyed with Lenoir, because he had squeezed me a little too tenderly between his muscular arms; I don't like expansive gestures.

Evening drew on; the rays of the setting Sun lit the three of us with a rather sinister glow in the depths of the red room.

During a moment of profound recollection, the old manservant discreetly pushed the door half-open, and intoned these words:

"Dinner is served, Madame."

We got up. I stretched my legs and screwed up my mouth, bent my arm and offered it to Madame Lenoir–who deigned to support herself upon it.

Césaire followed us, pensively holding his nose with the tips of his thumb and index finger, having furtively taken a pinch of snuff. His contemplative attitude did not escape my notice, even though he was behind me–because like all tactful people, I have eyes in the back of my head.

Illuminated candelabras were brought in; their glare was reflected by the glasses, the tablecloth and the crystal bowls.

We sat down and deployed our napkins with a certain silent solemnity, thanks to the atmosphere created by my conversation, but after the first glass of Bordeaux, we all had smiles on our faces.

Chapter Seven

Musical and Literary Chitchat

A dinner with much clucking.

Madame de Sévigné {54}

At the table, Claire talked about music in an improbably scientific fashion that I did not expect to find in an unfortunate woman.

She mentioned a certain German maestro whose name and epoch I have quite forgotten:{55} a "miraculous genius" she said, "but only accessible to the intelligence of the initiated, to complete human beings." His works concerned Brabantine legends,{56} a phantom ship,{57} a virtuous warrior kidnapped by the goddess worshipped at Paphos,{58} someone called *Tout-Fou*,{59} a mythological hotchpotch in four parts,{60} and so on. These last-named compositions seemed to fill Madame Lenoir with an inexplicable admiration. I remember quite clearly that she talked to us about a certain *crescendo in D* {61} resplendent–she said, with childish enthusiasm–with "terrible hosannahs."

She also specified some "Pilgrim's Song" or other,{62} "whose profound lassitude has something of the eternal!" This song captivated her to the point of distraction. If it could be believed, "it was, at first, stifled by enlacements of the aphrodisiac laughter of mocking sirens who appeared among the reeds by the light of the Moon." This took place "near to an enchanted mountain." This signified, simply, that the wheedling instigations of our passions sometimes obscure in us, earthly pilgrims all, the memory of the celestial fatherland–an idea that never occurred to any other note-cruncher, one must suppose, given that it is so puerile. "But," added Madame Lenoir, "the mystic fanfare burst forth in the end, triumphantly dominant: a choice decisively made, after due reflection, in the twilight; a hymn of glory and martyrdom, putting the shadows to flight–an authentic mission of Hope!"

At his pronouncement, I felt wild laughter rise into my throat. It was obvious that Madame Lenoir, abusing the privileges of her frivolous sex, desired to amuse herself at my expense. I deemed it advisable to take it all in good part, and her praise of this schemer enlivened the conversation during the first two courses.

After that, she ventured opinions on literature; there, I was on firmer ground. In the Chinchas,{63} rightly esteemed for their famous fertilizer, while suffering from an illness that I do not need to name, I had read a few books in order to stave off nocturnal boredom. There were two or three works by a prodigious writer whose books had already made him a ton of money–which is, for me as for all people who are incapable of eating their fill of words, the best possible recommendation. His pen is the most fecund and forceful in our great country and the elite of both sexes throughout the five continents argue over his products, such as they are. I've forgotten his name, but his kind of talent–which all his contemporaries strive in vain to attain–consists of cleverly veiling {64} the most scabrous situations in order to strike the imagination of the reader with a chain of harrowing, but logical, vicissitudes in which the main characters (usually taken from the lowest strata of society) lift the heart, nourish the spirit and calm needlessly scrupulous consciences. His heroes are mainly interesting in that they die on one page only to be brought back to life on another. In those pages, which the eye races feverishly through, are simultaneously projected the venerable shades of Orpheus, Homer, Virgil and Dante, if not Chapelain {65} himself. In sum, this man, this moralist, represents, here and now, *the purest expression of modern Art in its Renaissance and its Maturity*. And everyone loves his work. Personally, after that exile in the Chinchas, I was desperate to plant my furtive and uncertain feet on French territory again so that I could commit myself entirely to reading his new collections and periodicals loaded down with his genius, but only found a few feeble scraps authored by his powerful pen strewn hither and thither.

I forgot to say that I had also read two or three volumes of an old parliamentary deputy and former peer of France–if I can believe what I was told, inadvertently, by the captain–and the works of an American short story writer published in Richmond, South Carolina.{66}

I must confess that the prose of the peerless novelist, the Moralist of the Chinchas, had genuinely refreshed my heart. His characters, as solid as wood, had filled me with excitement, and oft-times with emotion–notably,

one of them named, I think, *Rocambole*.[{67}] The only fault I could find in him–and I say this in all humility–is that he was sometimes, perhaps, a little... metaphysical... a little–how shall I put it?–a little too abstract... in the end, as one might say, a little too *head-in-the-clouds*, as all poets are, alas.

Ah, when will a writer appear who talks to us of true things? Of things that happen! Of things that everyone in the world knows by heart, which run, have run and always will run through the streets–of *serious* things, in sum! Such a man would be worthy of public esteem because he would be the public's own Pen.[{68}]

As for the old deputy, his *verses*, according to his own astonishing expression, warmed my bile. They were, as far as I can remember, a kind of pot-pourri of discontinuous legends without, as they say, rhyme or reason. Mahomet, Adam and Eve, the Sultan, the regiments of the Swiss army and knights errant were all in there; it was, in its entirety, the most chaotic and extravagant lumber-room that ever came out of a fevered brain. A few nice words, here and there, some right-minded appreciations, only made them all the more dangerous, in my view, to feeble minds. I cannot understand that such an individual has been appointed as a parliamentary deputy: that collection gave me a truly pitiful idea of our beautiful French language.[{69}]

Did I mention the American? That one appeared to me to be a hearty fellow with a nice line in colorful rhetoric. But one thing that struck me was the way he labeled his works. He called them, rather conceitedly, *Unparalleled Stories* or *Extraordinary Tales* or some such.[{70}] I have read all these stories and have tried in vain to see anything extraordinary in what he relates. It is, in fact, the last word in banality–presented, it is true, in a bourgeois manner, but banal nevertheless. It sent me off to sleep many a time, in a delightful way. I can only conclude that the title was chosen by the editor to pique the curiosity of vulgar readers.

Claire Lenoir blushed deeply at the name of the Moralist of the Chinchas and confessed to me, in utter confusion, that this was the first time she had heard mention of him.

At this naive confession, unable to believe my ears, I naturally favored her with a sideways, almost snakelike, glance. It must be admitted that it was a sad reflection on a woman well-versed in the study of Literature and abstruse questions of philosophy. What had she read, then, I wondered? Of what did that little empty head dream?

Even so, her provincial candor warranted a certain indulgence, and I had no wish to abuse her charming hospitality by parading my superior knowledge, so I restricted myself to talking about the deputy and the American short story writer–whose names still, inexplicably, escape me. I described them, as I said, in the appreciative terms set out above.

Madame Lenoir appeared to listen to me most attentively for some time; she seemed to be entirely ignorant of what I wanted to say. But when I had specified the subjects–to which I returned forcefully–of some of the deputy's *legends* and the titles {71} of some of the *Unparalleled Tales* of the gentleman from South Carolina, she shivered as if she had woken up with a start, and her face look on a most peculiar expression. I can vouch for that! Something demonic... indefinable, that's the word!

She immediately transfixed me with her emerald eyes, covered by her spectacles, and stared at me as if slightly stupefied. Then, taking hold of the carafe, she refilled her glass, drank a draught of pure water, replaced the glass in front of her plate and suddenly, without any reason, burst out into musical, half-stifled laughter. I looked back at her, pity mingling with suspicion, and wondered about her state of mind.

She soon recovered a more decorous appearance and–I have very good ears–I heard her murmur in a very low voice: "Why laugh? It is written: '*The dead shall not praise you*.' " {72}

I literally did not know what to think. I looked at Césaire; he was devouring a saddle of hare with tomatoes, rolling his eyes as if drowning in ecstasy, and said not a word.

"Yes, it's the mysterious Law," the young woman continued, so quietly that I could hardly hear her. "There are beings so constituted that, even in the midst of cascades of light, they cannot help seeing shadow-beings. There are souls that have gained profane substance, haphazardly clad, which pass into the sepulchre of their mortal senses and are there immured."

I reprimanded her, silently, for this epigram, evidently addressed to her husband, but politeness demanded that I pretend not to have heard it.

"Ha ha!" I exclaimed. "You see, dear Madame Lenoir, I'm a straightforward man myself."

"There are other beings," she continued, softly, "who know the roads of life and are curious about the paths of death. Those, who must submit to the realm of the Spirit, disdain the years in order to possess Eternity. In the

depths of their sacred eyes, they are alert to a gleam more precious than a million tangible solar systems like ours, from our equator to that of Neptune.{73} And the world, in its unconscious obedience to the Laws of God, only rendered justice to itself and dedicated itself to *DEATH* on the day when it was written: '*Woe betide those who dream*!' "

And she murmured the words–senselessly, in every respect–of Lactantius,{74} in his *De Morte Persecutorum*, so very quietly, this time, that I divined rather than heard them: "*Pulcher hymnus Dei homo immortalis*!"

She leaned on her elbows, her chin in the palm of her lovely hand, as if she had forgotten that we were there.

The compliment was undoubtedly exaggerated; I am far from being as beautiful a soul as she desired–so I poured myself an ample glass of Château Margaux brought back from the Indies {75} and, to tell the truth, felt little compassion for that futile farrago.

"Dear Madame," I replied, courteously, "I have always partaken of those sentiments that you have broadcast, the inverse of those which seem to me to be worthy–and it is even in my nature to render service, almost unconsciously, as you say, to the good natures that I encounter on my way."

"Really, Doctor?" she said.

"Yes, really," I replied. "And, to be sure, it happens, sometimes, that I make the acquaintance of young men who go through life full of enthusiasm, with laughter on their lips, joy and generosity in their hearts. Ah, these poets, these gentle children–what services I have done for them!"

I stopped for a moment to savor my memories.

"Well?" Claire murmured, looking at me.

"Well," I added, in a paternal tone, "I don't know how it happens, but I've established that, in my experience, they gradually lose the habit of laughing–even of smiling."

It seemed to me, as I completed this sentence, that Claire experienced a thrill–that nervous thrill, a sign of health after a meal, which stupid people call the *little death*.

Lenoir interrupted his work momentarily, lifted his head, and looked at me with a bizarre seriousness; then, without saying a word, he plunged back into his dinner.

"Finally, dear Madame Lenoir," I went on, "by way of conclusion, I've always liked good writers–and just as the daisy-chain of modern children is

nothing but the atrophied crown of Melchisedech,[{76}] so the Moralist of the Chinchas is one of them.

Claire lowered her head silently; she was beaten. I understood that her ignorance had crushed her. I took an innocent delight in her blush, but–not wanting to take the lesson too far–I turned to Césaire to talk about things more serious than “Literature” and “Music.”

Chapter Eight

Spiritism

When men dine, they tend to talk about immortality over dessert.
E. & J. de Goncourt {77}

However, Césaire's intellect–the sum of his soul's faculties, in fact–appeared to me, for the moment, to be entirely absorbed by a plateful of *olives* of veal. The dish was his favorite, whose taste sensations he valued above all others. I felt sure, as I watched him, that they had stifled any notion of justice, human or divine. I judged it prudent to let the storm pass, as they say–and even to do my best to follow the excellent example of his stoical conduct.

In consequence, I thought that it was about time I brought into play the heroic apparatus of the masticatory and crotaphitic musculature, with which Mother Nature, in her foresight, had provided me. A moment later, our two sets of jaws entered into a silent competition with one another, with all due rapidity, efficiency and vigor, united in the trickery of discernment.

Suddenly, in the midst of the intelligent silence that held sway over our distracted foreheads, Claire complained that the candlelight was too bright. It was, therefore, in discreet lamplight that Césaire, having decided that he was full, sank back into his chair in a classical pose. He thumped the table with both hands and the servants brought coffee and liqueurs. Raising his eyebrows, he rolled his wild and satisfied eyes, and looked dazedly at Madame Lenoir and myself. Then he savored the aroma of the fresh coffee, took a swig, put down his cup, twiddled his thumbs and looked at the ceiling.

"Perfect!" he said, letting the word fall in a guttural voice that was thick and hoarse with satiation.

His mouth, splayed like a policeman's helmet, attempted to sketch out a smile, and immediately launched into a *philosophical* discussion.

The thesis selected by the excellent Amphitryon [{78}] was none other than this:

“Is this life the prelude to a further chain of existences, or is it definitive? Does the sum of our thoughts and actions constitute a new interior being soluble in Death?” In other words: “Does our miserable quotient immediately merit, after the dissolution of the organism and the disaggregation of its material form, the honor of being Unmodifiable?”

I leave it to the Reader’s imagination to judge the effect that this topic–which would have confounded the patients in a lunatic asylum–produced in me. But the imperturbable Césaire gathered himself together and I saw to my horror that he was ready to set out, with all the complacency in the world, all the superstitions that had infected his mind.

Perhaps I should say now, so that the Reader is forewarned, that Césaire Lenoir was a haunter of solitary places, a man of dark theories and a vindictive temperament. Something rudimentary had gone astray in his fundamental nature. He pretended, laughing under his South Sea Islander’s nose, that he had something in him of the *hairy vampire*.[{79}] He was excessively fond of making jokes about cannibalism. It all seemed to be submerged within bourgeois innocence, but whenever he was carried away by his favorite themes–the form that the nervous fluid of a dead person might take; the physical and temporal power of the spirits of the dead over the living–his eyes burned with the flames of superstition. This savage spoke in a terrified manner of the great Devil of the inferno, and he had often succeeded in disquieting minds that were not as strong as mine, and making them ill with his bizarre and opinionated eloquence.

I have known him to keep me on tenterhooks until morning with the tale of the captain of a certain Russian ship, taken prisoner by the islanders of the Malay Archipelago–a horrific story!–during the telling of which his face took on an expression of which I would not have thought it naturally capable. His true nature, his inner being, was possessed by a *ferocity* that subverted all his civilization.

As for what he called his *theological* ideas, they were for me the most ample source of hilarious gibes–unspoken, of course, but understood. Faithful to the prescriptions of the excellent authors that I had the honor of citing at the beginning of this memorandum, it is not my policy to censure people overtly. Lenoir, therefore, had no idea, when I expressed lofty and smiling approval of his stupid and fatuous theories, that I was privately

nursing a disdainful, blind and almost sanguinary hatred for them. There was even something of that (ha ha!) in the way I had so pitilessly married him off some time before–for I always have a motive for doing what I do, and I alone, like Aeschylus' Jupiter, know what I am thinking.

Now, it was in that year, or thereabouts–according to those who knew him well–that faith in the doctrines of Magic, Spiritism, Animal Magnetism and, most of all, Hypnotism had attained their maximum intensity in my poor friend's mind. The suggestions that he claimed to be able to inculcate in passers-by were alarming and frightening. He backed up his theories with such aplomb as to raise gooseflesh by the utter monstrosity of their expression.

He took delight in the writings of Eliphas Lévi,{80} Raymond Lulle,{81} Mesmer {82} and Guillaume Postel, the gentle monk of Black Magic.{83} He quoted the astrologer priest Trithemius.{84} He swore by none but Aureolus Theophrastus Bombast, whom he called the *divine* Paracelsus,{85} Gaffarel {86} and the popular Swedenborg {87} threw him into delirious ecstasy, and he alleged that the Hell of purification, as analyzed by Reynaud, was more than rational.

The moderns–Mirville, Crookes {88} and Allan Kar-dec{89}–plunged him into profound reveries. He believed in the risen dead of Ireland, in Wallachian vampires, in the evil eye; he quoted passages from the third volume of the mystic Görres {90} to me in support of his propositions.

What was even more abracadabra-ish was that Lenoir was a zealous and far-reaching Hegelian. How had that come about? "Go on then, find an atom of good sense in the contradictions of men drunk on *thought*!"–when it is proven that all of that leads nowhere, since one can never convince oneself.

As regards Animal Magnetism, he had boundless confidence in the very curious experiments of Dupotet and Regazzoni.{91} On this matter, I was not so very far from sharing his opinions–although, it must be understood, in a more sedate and enlightened manner.

The old rascal was a firm believer in blows struck at a distance, in passions abruptly excited solely by the will of the magnetizer, in artificial wealth, in the pains of phantom pregnancy, in flowers poisoned by a glance and, finally, in condemnation by the formulaic signs of priestly Esotericism.

In his room, he had a pentagram of virgin gold and the apparatus necessary for the evocation of demons and the making of pacts. He understood the he-goat of Baphomet, the emblem lent, as everyone knows, to the ancient Templars.{92} He spoke readily about the *Key of Solomon* {93} and he believed in the *sidereal body* {94} enclosed in everyone. And in support of these nonsensicalities, cool as a Greenlander, he quoted texts which, rather surprisingly, appeared at first to be perfectly rational, logical, scientific and irrefutable–but which obviously could not be anything, at bottom, but the mischievous fruits of ignorance and charlatanry.

Such was the Good Doctor; and now he had posed the question–if it even qualifies as a question–that I have already mentioned. As we shall see, it led to an exceedingly strange discussion, which it is necessary for me to describe in full, to illuminate the even stranger events that followed it.

Chapter Nine

The Incredible Blunders, Indiscretions and Stupidities of My Poor Friend

Philosophy commands; it does not obey.

Aristotle [{95}]

We lit our cigars and went into the drawing-room. In order to be better able to enjoy the view through the open window of the distant shining waves, Claire turned the lamplight down.

The night sky was a black chaos of horrid clouds, through which a few stars and a coppery crescent Moon were visible, but the briny odor of the sea impregnated our lungs.

“Here we are at the theatre,” murmured Madame Lenoir. “This evening’s performance is the grand opera *The Sea*, with music by God.”

“The fact is, if I dare put it in such terms,” I replied, smiling, “that the swell of the sea provides a *divine* bass-line to the harmony of our thoughts.”

I sank into the sofa. Madame Lenoir leaned on the balcony, turning her head to look out into the distance. The doctor installed himself in an armchair facing me, his singularly clear and bright eyes meeting mine with a profound and almost embarrassing fixity.

“My friend,” I said to him, “my oldest and only companion-in-arms, I need your urgent assistance to cast light on a point of physiology that intrigues me.”

“Spit it out, Bonhomet, spit it out!” Lenoir murmured, evidently flattered that a man like me should ask him to *cast light*.

“To put it succinctly: have the health officials who serve in lunatic asylums thought of measuring, approximately, the proportion of reality contained in the hallucinations of their clients?”

By means of that incongruous question I hoped to make him understand the ridiculousness and poor taste of his own question.

“Before answering you,” he said to me, emotionlessly, “I would be glad to know what you mean by the word *reality*.”

“It is that which I see, that which I sense, that which I touch,” I replied, with a pitying smile.

“No,” said Lenoir. “You know perfectly well that man is condemned, by the derisory inadequacy of his sense-organs, to perpetual error. The discovery of the microscope was sufficient to prove to us that our senses are deceptive and that *we cannot see things as they are*. Nature appears to us grandiose and poetic, does it not? But if we were able to see it as it really is, in its all-devouring actuality, it is probable that we would shiver more in horror than enthusiasm.”

“Of course!” I exclaimed. “We know that–but reality, for us, is relative, my friend; we must hold on to that which we can see.”

“If the real is, by definition, what we can see,” Lenoir said, “then I cannot understand why the hallucinations of a madman should not be reckoned realities.”

I felt that I had my back to the wall, but I am one of those who is not driven back with impunity, because I don’t like to be cornered.

“This is what I genuinely believe, my dear Lenoir,” I said, after a pause. Then I added, hypocritically, to break through all the metaphysics: “The best thing is to kneel down before the Creator without seeking to penetrate the insoluble mystery of things.”

“That depends,” said Lenoir.

“How does it depend?”

“I could ask for nothing better than to kneel down before my Creator, on condition that it is actually Him before whom I am kneeling and not merely the idea of Him that I have formed. To admire God is exactly what I am asking for, but I am anxious to avoid adoring myself under that name, without knowing it–and it is difficult to recognize myself therein.”

“But... your consciousness!” I exclaimed.

“If my consciousness has already deceived me once–as I have perceived with respect to my senses–who can tell me that it does not deceive me again in this matter? When I think of God, I project my mind as far in front of me as I can, embellishing Him with all the virtues of my human conscience, laboring in vain to extrapolate them infinitely, but it always remains my mind, not God. I cannot get out of my own being. It’s the story of Narcissus. I would like to be certain that it is actually God of whom I think when I pray, that’s all!”

“Sophistry!” I whispered, smiling. “The sifting facility of the brain is, I believe, called objectivity. One is not created in isolation!”

“Are you sure?” Lenoir said, in a professorial tone that set my teeth on edge.

“You wouldn’t deny, I hope, in the final analysis, that a God created us?”

“Lend me your ears. God? A mystery. Creation? Another mystery. To say that God created us is thus to affirm, simply, that our origin is mysterious: a point on which we are perfectly in accord, since it is precisely this mystery–or, to be more exact, this problem–that it is necessary to clarify, and which is only rendered more obscure by your personification. Now, every problem must have a solution. I can’t get away from the thought that its solution might be possible today.”

“Possible! God is good!” I exclaimed, putting my hands together. “With our poor limited minds?”

“Limited by what?” Claire asked, softly. “Can you conceive of a definite limit, when everything constitutes a *beyond*?”

A question like that, emerging from the mouth of a woman, would alarm people more prudish than me. I felt myself blush all the way to the whites of my eyes.

“Where do you see these *limits* in the mind?” said Lenoir. “I am ready to prove that human understanding, by analyzing itself, must discover, in and of itself, the strict necessity of its reason for being: the *LAW* that produces the appearance of things and the principle of all reality. I’m only speaking from the viewpoint of *this* world, mind, setting entirely aside–if there is another–that which my senses do not reveal to me.”

I confess that Césaire’s fatuity made my jaw drop. *Heaven above!* I thought. *Is there no end to this stupidity? He’s just showing off, because of his wife.* “But, my friend,” I said, aloud, “a simple Christian would ask you why humanity had to wait 6,000 years, until you came along, before knowing the Truth... your truth... supposing that you had it.”

“I would reply to the Christian: humanity had already waited 4,000 years before knowing yours! Truth is not measured in years. As for me, isn’t it necessary for me to *be* before I become a Christian? In order to be a Christian I must first be a man. I am, first and foremost, a man; a part of the human species; and when I am elevated by thought as far as the Human Spirit, I am the point at which the idea of Humanity-in-General {96} is expressing itself at that moment. I cease to be a particular self; I speak in

the name of the species that represents itself in me. Outside of the general idea, I would only be a madman experiencing the hallucination of the Earth and the sky, chattering at random, like all the rest, about some base interest of *practical* life."

I judged that the moment had come to lead Lenoir back to a better state of mind, and that it was necessary to bring him down to Earth.

"Let me tell you what Cabanis {97} said," I muttered. And I quoted him the passage in which the excellent officer of health lists examples of people bitten by rabid animals: wolves, dogs, pigs and cattle. " '*These persons*,' he states, '*hide under the furniture, bark, howl, grunt, moo and imitate in their attitudes the habits and instincts of the animal that has bitten them*.' " I added: "You must understand that the most perfect of human geniuses ought never to lose sight of the fact some such disaster might descend upon him, and that, in the face of the mere possibility of that humiliation, it is only with extreme and measured reluctance–and after mature consideration of the general point-of-view–that one ought to express such personal opinions.

"For me, Kant, Schopenhauer, Fichte and Baron Schelling {98} are merely persons infected with a kind of natural rabies virus {99} and ought to have been treated in the appropriate manner." To humiliate him further, I added: "And Hegel, whom you cited as your master, is no different from the rest of them in that respect. According to theology, when the Devil, in response to Michael's *Quis ut Deus?* replied *Non serviam!*–a stupidity that was punished by all the celestial Virtues{100}–he instructed us to beware of all precipitate enthusiasm." I smiled lightly. "Oh well, the werewolf Nebuchadnezzar gained little or nothing from the symbolic lesson addressed to his pride,{101} and Hegel seems to me to be the Nebuchadnezzar of Philosophy, that's all!"

To complete the distress of the Good Doctor, I used the facets of my diamond to reflect a spark into his eyes.

While listening to this grandiose speech, Lenoir opened his eyes very wide, and I took great pleasure, secretly, in the difficulty that he would experience in trying to tie my disconnected statements together.

"You're not presuming to imply, I suppose," he murmured eventually, "that any disease limits us, since the species survives the individual. If Cabanis is bitten, the Human Spirit does not relieve his fever: it establishes it, studies and names the phenomenon, discovers the remedy and moves on. What are you trying to say?"

“I’m trying to say,” I cried, “that if I place my thumb on a lobe of the brain, if I touch any part of the cerebral cortex, I instantaneously paralyze the will, the discernment, the memory or some other faculty of that which you call the soul. From which I conclude that the soul is nothing but a secretion of the brain, an item of essential phosphorus, and that the ideal is a disease of the organism, nothing more.”

Lenoir started laughing, very softly.

“Then the problem reduces itself to knowing what the brain *secretes* and what the *phosphorus* is that serves as a Sun for the examining sense, the reflection of the Universe in thought, and why it is necessary that these *secretions* exist, rather than not existing. It suits me well enough: as long as there is a question, the rest doesn’t bother me. Arguments between physiologists and metaphysicians are only a matter of different vocabularies: science has its nations and its languages, just like the Earth. But what do you think you are saying when you affirm that you can paralyze the *faculties* of the soul by touching the lobes of the brain? You are saying that you can paralyze the *apparatus*, the organs through which the faculties are exercised and externally displayed, not that you touch the faculties themselves, much less that you can annihilate them. It’s as if you cut a man’s legs off, saying: ‘I challenge you to walk’–nothing more.”

“A nice riposte,” I murmured, feigning confusion–as if I had not learned these lamentably hackneyed banalities at my mother’s knee. “Well, Lenoir, what conclusions do you draw?”

“I conclude that the Spirit makes the foundations and the functions of the universe. In the acorn of the tree, in the seed of the plant, one cannot say that the tree and the plant are contained in miniature: they have to be contained *ideally*. The true and the future plant are *virtual* in their seed, obscurely imagined therein. Through the medium of Exteriority, which is like the frame on which the eternally changing Cosmos is embroidered, the *IDEA* even denies itself, in order to prove itself, in the form of Nature, and I can reconstruct the process by employing the Hegelian dialectic. The Idea can only find itself in its own negation. Isn’t the dynamic embodied by the growth of trees and blades of grass the same as that which makes vibrations surge forth from suns, throwing rings of matter across the sky to form other suns? As the fruits fallen from the tree or the flowers of the grass-stalks produce other flowers and other trees, as the wind carries away the pollen over the fields and through the valleys, so centrifugal force disperses astral

pollen through the abysmal depths of space: that is the germination of the world, which Hegel–as you know–regards as a burgeoning plant.”

Chapter Ten

A Philosophical Hotchpotch

Satan is a good logician.

Dante {102}

The servant brought in the tea.

Claire offered me a cup containing a hot infusion of Chinese tea, sugared and perfumed by kirsch. Her spectacles lent a sinister suggestion to her soft smile.

“Lenoir,” I said, savoring a mouthful of the digestive liquor, “I ought to warn you that you are in contradiction with theologians and physiologists alike in stating that Idea and Matter are the same thing.”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“Don’t the theologians propose that God is pure Spirit, and that he has created the world? Matter can therefore emanate from Spirit, just as the theologians say–so the difference is only apparent. As for the physiologists, are they not forced to affirm that the *form* of the body is more essential than its *matter*? Do you see?”

The thick armor of my common sense was impervious to Lenoir’s sophistry; we were swimming in very different pools.

“Look here, my friend,” I said to him, “are you abusing your rights as a host to the point of wanting to insinuate that this piece of wood, for example, isn’t material?”

“Where do you see the *matter* in that piece of wood?” he replied.

I hid my face in my hands: the wreck of that intelligence made me feel ill. He wanted to play the fool with me. With me!

“You’re pretending that you can’t see the matter in this piece of wood!” I said to him, dazedly.

“But, after all, that’s elementary!” Lenoir exclaimed, who had finally become exasperated with the seeming ignorance of my words, and who was

looking at me sideways. “I see a union of the attributes of form, of color, of polarity, of weight. I call a certain aggregate of these qualities *wood*, but what is it that sustains these qualities, which these attributes cover with their veil: the substance, in sum? Between your eyebrows! Nowhere else! You see perfectly well that its *matter* is inaccessible to the senses, impenetrable and unrevealed, and that its *substance* is a purely intellectual entity, of which the phenomenal world is only a negative form, a reaction.”

“But, my poor friend, what is an *intellectual entity*, or the *reality of an idea*–a mere idea–compared with the evident reality, the *fact*, of this simple piece of wood, which you deny?” {103}

“I have only to put that piece of wood on the fire to remove it from existence: your bush would then have disappeared and become something other than itself. What sort of reality is that, which is erasable, which is and is not at the same time, dependent on the dictates of chance? Can we honestly call that *reality*? Go on! It is Becoming; it is Possibility, but it is not Reality, for what *might be* might just as well *not* be. Reality has to be something other than contingency, and we are therefore logically compelled to return to the question we posed to begin with: *what is reality?*”

“For myself,” I murmured, pained by the doctor’s paradoxical dialectic, “I insist, to the contrary, that whatever is solid and has weight cannot be merely an idea!”

“Recombine the idea of weight, since that dazzles you, with the idea of length, for example, and you will be better able to understand it all.”

“In words, that’s possible, but material facts do not lend themselves to such fusions and confusions as readily as ideas.”

“You’re joking, aren’t you?” Lenoir said, after a momentary pause. “How can you think that a fact can demolish a logical idea, when the logical idea is the very essence of the fact?”

“Prove it, then! Try, try to apply the theory physically.”

“But... it only requires me to slide a weight along the length of a bar of steel to enable the bar to lift a weight a thousand times greater. You must see that length and weight can be recombined with one another, in fact as well as in the realm of ideas.”

“Phraseology!” I muttered, angrily. “It’s specious. Fine! But in the final analysis, it’s all just words.”

“How else do you want me to reply?” Lenoir said, with a smile. “How else can you question me? You deny the value of the word *word* with the

word itself. Do you want talk to me in sign language? The wind blows, instinct howls, ideas express themselves."

"My dear Lenoir," I exclaimed, "let's get back to the question. I can conclude by affirming that as I can neither see nor touch ideas, I still prefer to apply the word *real* to things I can see and touch. And the entire human race would agree with me."

"No," said Lenoir.

"What do you mean, no?" I answered, for the third time, looking at the unfortunate Hegelian sadly.

"If things *are*, if the *appearance* of the Universe is produced, that can only be a matter of absolute necessity. There is a reason for it! Well, if that reason is the Idea, or something other than the Idea, it is preferable that the tangible entity should be in doubt, since all that it possesses of reality necessarily comes to it from that *reason-for-being*, from that Law-of-Creation–and that reason, that law, can only be grasped and understood by the Spirit. The Idea is, therefore, the highest form of Reality: it is Reality itself, since it participates in the nature of the ultimate laws and is intrinsic to the most elementary entities. From which it follows that if I study the logical consequences of the Idea I shall be studying the constitutive laws of nature, and my reasoning will coincide, if it is rigorous, with the very essence of things, since it will involve, in its contents, that *necessity* which is fundamental to everything.

"In a word, I am, when I think in this manner, the mirror, the *reflection* of the laws of the universe–or, as the theologians would put it, I am *made in the image of God*! Understanding is the reflection of creation."

I touched my forehead with a significant finger while looking at Madame Lenoir, who seemed to be listening silently, with profound attention, to the theories spouted by her pitiful spouse. I felt truly sorry for landing her with such a tub-thumper, so I poured myself another cup of tea.

"Ah, your God is not that of the theologians, my poor friend," I told him, with a heavy heart.

"That's beside the point," Lenoir said. "I'm talking Philosophy now, but–believing, as I do, only in the Black Sciences{104}–I only attribute a doubtful, and entirely relative, importance to the principles I'm upholding at present. But since you mention it, let's see what your theologians have to say about God. According to Malebranche,{105} God is the realm of the spirit, just as space is that of the body. According to Saint Augustine, God is the sum of

everything, containing all that exists. Tertullian {106} asks who could deny that God is body, just as he is spirit. Saint Thomas says that God is pure Action. The Nicene Creed says that God is the all-powerful Father. If I were to list all the so-called definitions of the Unconditional Being, whose conceptualization is inseparable from His existence, I would never get to the end! But the World-Spirit is not defined in that fashion. These glimmers and images are not so profound; the motto of Jacob Boehm,{107} '*God is the eternal silence*,' is no more convincing to me–and I am sure that it is the result of an attempt to set aside all ulterior motives, the result of desperately filling out, so to speak, the dark side of the saying that Abbé Clarke {108} never pronounced the name of God without suffering powerful physical symptoms of Terror and Deference.

"Anyway," Lenoir concluded, "I don't know whether the God of whom my spirit is conscious is essentially different, as a concept, from that of the theologians, but I do know one thing–and that is that I'm afraid of that dispenser of Absolute Justice."

I couldn't help laughing at this final sally.

"You've nothing to fear, Lenoir," I told him, "and certainly not that. Let's not exaggerate, or we'll make a mockery of common sense."

"That's true," said the Doctor. "Let us bow down before this divine Common Sense, which changes its mind every century, and whose chief attribute is an innate hatred of the very word soul. Let's salute the Common Sense of *enlightened* men, which insults the Spirit as it passes by, following the road that the Spirit has laid out for them and inspired them to run along. Fortunately, the Spirit takes no more heed of the insults of Common Sense than the Shepherd takes of the bleating of the sheep that he calmly steers towards the fold or the slaughterhouse."

Lenoir closed his eyes then, as if lost in a vision. "O Guiding Lights!" he murmured. "What would your glory be, after all, without the Darkness."

He smiled at me, and added: "It is a noxious Darkness which, incapable of enlightenment, extinguishes the Guiding Lights!"

After those words, I confess–yes, after that banal joke–the idea of losing my old friend seemed less frightful.

"All in all," I said, "what use are these fine speculations in the world of everyday experience?"

Lenoir looked at me gravely for a few moments, but made no reply.

Chapter Eleven

The Doctor, Madame Lenoir and Myself
Are Seized by a Fit of Jollity

> *And my heart was so joyful that I no longer recognized it as my own*
>
> Dante {109}

Thanks to the evasive slant, the pretence of dullness and the learned frivolity that I had so far incorporated into my questions, Lenoir's replies–since he was upstart enough to value the ingenuity of his intelligence–had only made his incapacity in matters transcendental more obvious. I had evidently drawn him into terrain where, despite his best efforts, I would now be able to dig a ditch at my leisure in which to bury his illusions once and for all.

Meanwhile, he was collecting himself, leaning on his elbow with his head in his hand, probably mulling over some new enormity unworthy of submission to my criticism. His meditative silence proved to me, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the vacuity of his soul. If he had had anything to say, he would have come right out with it, like anyone else, without any need for futile reflection–which is the definitive indication of impotence and desertion.

"I won't conceal from you, my friend–I can even say my best friend–that I am already quite convinced of the vanity of your arguments as regards the practical side of your bizarre theories," I said. "I repeat: what possible use are they?"

He opened his eyes again and said, after a pause: "For you and your kind, no use at all. For others, disdainful of Death and anxious for Eternity, they serve to fight gloriously for Justice, with the certainty of victory."

At these words I could not suppress a slight gasp of fear, and my features took on such a fearful expression that Lenoir's jaw dropped. I had sensed–with a quasi-divine prescience, in fact–that he was about to count the interminable rosary of his socially subversive ideas. Without that instinctive

gesture of reproach, he would undoubtedly have expounded at length on “the independence of the world” and would have given himself nightmares with the sound of his own voice. I saw that my gesture alone had laid waste to his resolutions and that he dared not persist in parading them before me.

Anyhow, what weight can the kinds of thoughts that are called grand, generous and enthusiastic have in the eyes of a serious man, when they only have to be reflected by my brain and dissected by my lips–shorn of all vain flourishes–to acquire an aridity capable of making the specters themselves yearn for the sarcophagus?

Lenoir stopped himself, and I took advantage of his silence.

“Yes,” I said, “I understand you. It’s a matter of peoples–of the people. You hope to make these dreams of liberty, dignity and justice accessible to them? But there’s no way to carry out amputations on gangrenous souls; there are irremediable conditions for which one searches in vain for a scientific cure. The people? To be sure, no one cherishes them more than I, but just as my function is to complain, theirs is to suffer. If it were established that Science could make them good, who among us would not devote his soul, his life and his love to them–I’d be the first in line! Unfortunately, the victim, once his bonds are untied, has scarcely any other desire but to shackle the neck of his liberator–for the position of the poor cannot remain vacant in this world. You cannot redeem a single one without substituting yourself for him, and the benefits gladly accrued to him will be paid for in ruination, slander and death. It is a painful realization, my friend, very painful indeed!”

I resumed my paternal tone, and went on: “Progress and Enlightenment can only instill in these formerly unconscious and inoffensive creatures–who excite our pity, at least–the instincts of jealousy, hatred, envy and treason. Believe me, Lenoir, I am competent to judge these matters! I say this: Woe betide the Benefactors if their actions can only have the result of making their victims disappear! A curse on future republics, on ideal societies where sensible men would no longer have to shed tender tears, as I do, for the fate of the people! At the mere idea that I might be deprived of that satisfaction, my dear friend, it seems to me that my veins are flooded with bile instead of blood!”

That outburst generated a certain amount of gaiety, Lenoir and his wife having taken their mental alienation far enough to imagine that I was joking.

Charmed by their error, I felt obliged to go one better. Had they known me better I doubt that they would have been so openly contemptuous in that respect. Indeed, I've noticed something rather bizarre, which sometimes puzzles me: that my pranks are always making me grow pale.

So I filled the room with one of those bursts of laughter whose repetition by nocturnal echoes, as I remember it, used to make dogs howl as I passed by. Since then, it is true, I have had to moderate their usage, because their hilarity even terrified me. I normally utilize their alarming manifestation in times of danger; they are my weapon when I am afraid, although my fear is contagious; they provide infallible protection against thieves and murderers, when I am in isolated spots. My laughter is better than prayers at putting phantoms themselves to flight–for I've never been able to contemplate the starry Heavens, myself, and the Spirits whose protection I invoke dwell in fainter astral bodies.

At any rate, it didn't take me long to perceive that what I had taken for a smile on Madame Lenoir's face was simply a trick of the light: a shadow that the lamp had thrown across her face. I recognized, too, that a certain nervous tic of the Doctor's, accompanied by a fit of coughing that I had taken for a burst of laughter, had caused me to make a similar mistake. He had merely breathed in the smoke of his cigar while listening to me.

And I realized that I had been the only one out of the three of us with sufficient party spirit to produce a fit of jollity.

Chapter Twelve

A Sentimental Debater

And Satan said: "Thoughts, whither have ye led me?"

Milton {110}

We filled our teacups again and, between two spoonfuls of kirsch, I said: "My friend, what's the good of occupying yourself with all these airy-fairy things when you could live here in perfect tranquility, without ambition or speculative puzzles?" At this point, I winked at him. "We'll never know the last word on all that."

I've said that Lenoir had a mania for philosophy, but I honestly never expected him to return to the insipid and idle discussion so enthusiastically and so suddenly.

"That's all very well," he said, "but it seems to me that we're part of *all that* whether we like it or not. In which case, we're bound to occupy ourselves with it–and everything seems to testify, to the contrary, that we can discover *the last word* on it. After all, note that the dialectic of Nature is the same as that of our brain: its works are its ideas. '*The tree grows by syllogisms*,' as Hegel said. Things are thoughts clothed with various exteriors, and Nature produces in the same way that we think. As soon as we recover the relations of a phenomenon by means of logic, we classify it, we only have to call it by the name of Science and from that moment on we are its masters.

"We are able to trust, to some degree, in the value of our Reason–even regarding that which touches the final solution of the riddle of the universe. Why not? As for... God... let's proceed and act as if... Someone... ought to understand us–and as if we don't need to die. What I call *fighting for justice* will still go on."

In response to these words, Claire murmured from her shadowed corner: "My friend, the definition of such a destiny is insufficient to the idea that we have of ourselves–and when I said just now that '*the Spirit of Man has*

no limits,' I was implying, as you know, '*if it is enlightened by the humble and divine Christian revelation*.' "

I confess that I shuddered at those words, almost taking them seriously. *I see what you're getting at*, I thought. *Here comes* Original Sin *and the* Vale of Tears*, looming up on the horizon, extending their consequences into politics, religion, monarchy and social economics; present Property based in future Charity; in history the Bollandists,*{111} *in Science, Joshua;*{112} *if not, my dear brother, I shall imprison you, torture you, kill you, and cause your supporters to engrave* HERE LIES A MARTYR *on your tombstone. A system of desserts for the use of women. Understood!*

I caught the ball on the bounce in order to spend a few moments sending Madame Lenoir a blistering return, Lenoir's rather careful paradoxes having passed me by–a humiliation that my wounded heart would never forgive. So, I performed a moral about-face; I changed tack without warning–which is to say that, without actually letting go of the idea of God, I set out to draw forth the consequences of atheism, in order to arrive at my own particular end: to shuffle the cards so thoroughly that we would all be arguing and shouting without knowing why.

"Allow me," I muttered. "Allow me–I believe there's a tautology here. Down here, Madame, we advance along a road that we cannot avoid. Why does this phenomenon occur? That is the question. Now, in order to explain this, many have started out by relying on Intuition–which is to say, Induction, with or without inspiration. But in order to be on top of a mountain it is necessary to have climbed the steps of which that elevation is the sum one by one, and there is no spontaneous intuition. If Revelation is brought in to enrich the Problem, arbitrarily, with a new complication"–here I stood up and spread my arms wide–"there is no longer any means of understanding it! We must give up on it! I want to believe that a God has created the world, but if that means admitting that he cares enough about us to *reveal* his intentions through some intermediary or other, how can anything be conclusively proven? I'm astonished that a mind like yours can still be soothed by such chimeras: they have had their day."

I believed that I had the right, as I sat down again, to savor the effect of my eloquence on my questioners, and my gaze wandered into the shadows, sliding towards Madame Lenoir. She had never left her impenetrable station by the window, and her silence began to disturb me slightly. I felt that her

penetrating and inquisitorial eyes were watching me, their evil expression cloaked by her spectacles.

“Well, Claire!” the Doctor murmured. “Have you no answer?”

“Oh, Monsieur,” the lovely Claire replied, smiling, “You know full well that the arguments which have sufficed thus far to confound the arguments of our friend are not absolute–and I don’t want to complete his sad defeat.”

Slyly, and with ill-concealed incomprehension, I studied the woman who was unafraid to aggravate my wounds to such a monstrous degree–but I could find no reply to her damnable words. I searched for a sally, a wounding epigram, an expedient; I appealed to bad faith; but all my brain’s efforts remained fruitless–and when that wounding proof of my impotence had been adequately displayed to me I was overcome by indignation, spite and blind hatred. My heart shook and tolled a knell within my breast: fury, thirst for vengeance, vague ideas of murder–all the vilest sentiments, in sum–rose up dreadfully into my throat, and were abruptly reflected in my face by a complacent and approving half-smile.

Meanwhile, my gestures and my attitude encouraged her to go on.

“The fact is,” I murmured, putting a brave face on it, “that Lenoir’s statements would make Monsieur de La Palice {113} jealous–if they did not make him blush.”

“But you made me sad,” Claire continued, in her lovely and mystical voice, “when you declared just now that Science is sufficient for us to clarify the enigma of the world and that walking in its borrowed light is also sufficient for a just man to obtain an acquittal from God.”

Lenoir lowered his eyes with a rather peculiar smile. I wanted to come to his aid, as I know how to do.

“You’re repeating yourself, my good friend,” I muttered. “You’re scolding without cutting through the difficulty. What right has *simple faith* to intervene in philosophy?”

“I know men who cannot be accused of repeating themselves, given that they have never said anything at all,” the gentle creature replied to me–and then, turning to Césaire, went on: “When I think of Light, my very humble mind turns to the One who enables all enlightenment to be produced: the Spirit in which every notion and every essence is dissolved; penetrating and penetrated; irreducible, homogeneous unity. And when I think of the concept of God, when my mind *reflects* that concept, I genuinely penetrate the essence of it, in my thought; I participate, in effect, in the very nature of

God, according to the degree to which he reveals his concept in me. God is the incarnation and ideal of all thought. And my Spirit, to the extent that I surrender my thoughts to God, is penetrated by God: an augmentation proportional to the *living concept* of God. The two terms, in the free expression of my desire to be good, are combined in that unity which is myself–and they are combined without ceasing to be distinct. Now, the Christian Revelation being the consequence and the application of this fundamental principle, I have not treated it as a 'chimera that has had its day' since it has the same nature as its principle–which is to say that it is eternal, unconditional and immutable."

"My dear Madame Lenoir," I replied, "I believe that you have made yourself too great an idea of God. If he is not only infinite but necessary, inconceivable and astounding, why is he always getting involved in conversations? Do you recall that Kant had an old servant named Lamb, who begged his master to reconstruct the proof of the existence of one God, which the great philosopher had utterly destroyed? We too have within us, every one of us, some old servant or other who asks for a God. Let us be more judicious than Kant: let us distrust our initial impulse; let us reply with a smile, albeit a melancholy one, and let us accept only such gifts as we may store to our benefit. The heritage of our first parents, to speak frankly, seems to me to warrant another expression entirely."

That was a drop of cold water.

Madame Lenoir, however, answered me placidly: "Why should we not ask Infinity even for a God? Must it not realize every thought–for what kind of Infinity could be so limited as to be impotent to realize a human thought? And as God, I assure you, is the most sublime thought we can conceive in our minds, it is an infinite insanity for us to set out to destroy it–and an impossibility besides."

I remained silent, unwilling to let them see what effect this had on me.

"That may be so!" Césaire replied. "But, my dear, no one nowadays can challenge the evidence of the evolution of man or refuse to take account of its seriousness. After all, Progress doesn't exclude Revelation: the initial punishment remains the same, although its intensity has diminished, thanks to the sweat of our brows–that's all. Revelation doesn't constrain us–myself, I see it everywhere!–you are quite free and very wise to confine yourself to it, but in the realm of metaphysics I myself am obliged to count only on Progress, achieved by man by means of Science."

“Ah!” she cried. “How can it be sufficient for you, and your Mankind, to evolve only through that series of relative expressions whose sum constitutes your Science? In that case, instead of being perfect animals, we are only improving animals, forever trapped by an indefinite law of proportional progress. Even if the thing were absolutely true, there would be no point in being proud of it, for in a thousand years, according to this theory, we would still be digging like moles; what would the splendor, the grandeur and the depth of the hole matter, if we knew that it would be our destined tomb? If we are consecrated to Death, to which we march ever more rapidly? The very heavens, according to the affirmations of positive science, will sooner or later be consumed by fire or death. We can scarcely examine a past of six thousand years, and our appearance therein is hardly more than a matter of hours–and we dare to found our supreme hopes on a grain of sand, when we are bound, without remission, to return to dust, to darkness, to the Void.”

“But the catastrophe of which you speak will not happen within a lapse of time so vast that it is almost absurd to think about it!” I exclaimed. “Let us first win our independence from Nature, and later, we shall see. Besides: ‘*Après nous, le Déluge*!’{114} Let’s take what petty pleasure we can... that’s my faith.”

“But we shall always be dependent,” she replied, “if only because we are forced to think. It is necessary to believe in Thought–even to deny it would be a thought. And that is why there is not a single action, not a single idea, nor a process of reasoning that is not based in Faith. We believe in our senses, in our doubt, in our progress, in our annihilation, although all of it is doubtful, strictly speaking, since nothing can prove itself. The most profound skepticism of all begins with an act of Faith.{115} Now, since it is necessary that we choose, we should make the best choice we can! And since Belief is the sole basis of all realities, we should prefer God! Science having explained to me, after its fashion, the laws of some phenomena, I want to go on, personally, to see in that phenomenon only what magnifies my soul and not what might diminish it. If the mystics are deluded, what use is a Universe inferior even to their idea? In Death, can the logic of two abstractions restore to me my lost Divine Infinity? No!

“No–so I shall shut my eyes to the world in which my spirit seems to be a foreigner. It does not matter to me whether the laws of stellar mechanics are discovered, since they can only apprise me of certain destruction! That

these stars might be extinguished is temptation! The *scientific* future is an illusion! The history of modern times is the history of a humankind entering its winter season. The cycle will complete its revolution soon enough. As the sages of olden days have set me the sacred example, I shall not hesitate, as a Christian and a sinner, between your *century of light* and the light of the centuries.”

Chapter Thirteen

The Singular Remarks of Doctor Lenoir

Ecclesiastes has said: “A living dog is worth more
Than a dead lion.” Save for eating and drinking, to be sure,
All is naught but shadow and smoke, and the world is very old,
And the annihilation of life fills the black tomb.

Leconte de Lisle {116}

The furious spite that took hold of me during the course of this diatribe was so stifling that I had to adjust the knot of my cravat. Not knowing how to express my contempt for such doctrines in a sufficiently copious fashion, I contented myself with pronouncing the single word “Brava!” in a reedy voice eight times in succession, feigning enthusiasm.

One thing pleased me: the Doctor had silently wilted under the withering glare.

I rubbed my hands. Their opinions differed–that much was certain. The particular point of dispute was of no importance; their convictions seemed equally absurd to me. The essential thing was to excite them against one another, in order that I might pose as a judge and have the final word. In the meantime, I left them to their quibbling while I devoted myself to my own thoughts with an air of profound concentration.

I nursed the fond hope that, if I were careful, this model household would soon come more or less to hand, and that they would hold their horses regarding the *immortality of the soul*. I got ready to close in like a vulture on some choice carrion.

In this situation, I decided to take Lenoir’s side–whatever it proved to be!–because his wife’s theories had a unique propensity for irritating my brain until I almost lost all sense of myself. Also, the ever-tactful Reader will doubtless be expecting–as I was–some collision of the tiresome kind that spouses always have. Imagine my surprise, therefore–I might almost say disappointment–when I heard Lenoir murmur these strange words:

“Claire’s intelligence is a profound and limpid mirror, where nothing is reflected but sublime verities, and I am proud to love her admirable being–forever.”

On hearing these words, I looked at Claire; it seemed to me that she had turned pale.

Césaire had risen to his feet. He took a step towards his wife and suddenly bowed down to kiss her hand, silently and for a long time, with a passion whose pent-up savagery and concentrated fervor astonished me in a man of 46.

Then he came back to sit on my right.

A few seconds went by during which I could hear nothing but the indistinct swell of the sea. I tried to use them profitably by gathering my scattered thoughts.

“Yes, the Ideal!” Lenoir said, abruptly turning traitor to the principles whose banal champion he had so far been. “Yes, invincible Hope. Faith. What could be more positive, after all?

“Wasn’t it Swedenborg who said: ‘*Belief is as far above thought as thought is above instinct*.’{117} Believe, then; it’s enough. And when I insist on proclaiming the autocracy of some commonplace philosophy, of which there are as many as there are individuals–when I lash my tail in defense of the quibbles of Science, so proud in its troubling appearances and so vain in its real results–I agree, yes, I agree that I am always seized by an irresistible desire to laugh.”

He turned towards me and went on: “If you only knew how surprising and terrible the living force of the Idea is in the realm of Faith! The power of an imagination, a dream, a vision, sometimes overcomes the laws of nature. Fear, for example. The idea of superstitious Fear alone, without any external motivation, can strike a man down like an electric shock. The things seen by a visionary are, in the final analysis, as solidly material to him as, say, the Sun itself–the mysterious lamp of this whole phantasmagoria of creation, disappearance and transformation! Have you ever thought about those monstrous humans with tiger-striped fur or grotesquely swollen heads,{118} about conjoined twins and all the other horrible mistakes of nature produced by some sensation, some caprice, some sight experienced by a mother during pregnancy? Have you considered the infantile explanations offered on that subject by Physiology?

“If I were to open any medical journal, I would find facts like these, suggestive of the almost tangible reality of the Idea. I can quote the exact text: ‘*A woman whose husband had been stabbed to death gave birth, five months later, to a daughter who, at seven years of age, fell victim to fits of hallucination, in which the child cried:* Save me! Men with knives are coming to kill me! *That little girl died during one of these fits, and blue-black marks were found on her body like those of congealed blood, whose placement close to the heart corresponded, in spite of the sexual differences, to the wounds her father had received seven years before–while she was still unborn.*’

“Call that what you like: I want to know exactly how the shadow, the idea, differs decisively from that which you call *tangible reality*, if the mere reflection of an alien sensation has the power to infiltrate and instill itself, fatally, in the essence of our bodily being. A shadow–which is nothing but a shadow–can kill us in spite of being no more than a shadow. Let’s think about that!

“Now open the works of the Physiologists. Béclard defines life as the organism in action and death as the organism at rest. Bichat’s starting-point is this: Life is the sum of the functions that resist death. Consult the finest treatises produced since Harvey; reread Broussais’ research on blood, and you will see that a physiologist as great as he was able to exclaim: ‘*Without phosphorus, thought is impossible*!’{119}

“The majority, especially the most recent–who are the most rational–admit neither the idea of Life, nor the idea of Death, nor even that of the Organism. Now, returning from the divergent and contentious principles of Physiology, simply consider the fact–one of a thousand I could cite–of the phenomena produced by the deliria of the dying. It is then that visions begin to be a little more real–how shall I put it?–to be the only things meriting the title of reality. Death is impersonal; it is the reality of that which is now only vision. So far as I am concerned, it is certain that our actions then achieve a second incorporation, and that the Past is reaffirmed in Death as in the flesh.

“The Past is a shadow, and we sense instinctively that Death is the realm of shadows. Death and Life are nothing but the rigorous consequences of the eternal dialectic; by virtue of the fact that they are necessities, constituting the twin facets of Existence, their essence–like all the rest–is to be found in the Spirit. ‘*Thought being a given, Death is a given too*,’ as the

Titan of the Human Spirit says, and it is that alone which can prove Immortality. ‘*Suppress Thought and the substances that remain might still be* eternal, *but cannot be* immortal, *for Death does not begin until Thought is extinguished and disappears. Death, created–like Life–by the Spirit, uplifts the Spirit.*’

“And that which we call Death is, in fact, no more than the median term–or, if you prefer, the necessary negation–posited by the Idea in order to develop through Thought into Spirit.

“I might even go so far as to say that we can catch–even now, on this side of Becoming–a few frightening glimpses of what awaits us, which our own pasts have put in store for us. Recall the thousands of individuals who, having been drowned or hanged, have been saved at the very last moment of their suffocation and brought back to life. All of them have affirmed that they had seen, on the point of death, all their previous actions and thoughts, including those long forgotten, pass before them, in a manner inexpressible in the language of living men. The real question is not whether or not *the soul is immortal*, since no item of evidence is worth more than any other as proof of it. The thing we need to know is what kind of immortality we might have, and whether we can exert any influence upon it from our present situation.”

Utterly bewildered by this incoherent and preposterous flood of words, I said: “Then you believe”–I felt myself blushing as I pronounced the sentence–“you really do believe that the soul is somehow material?”

“I believe, at least,” Lenoir replied, “setting aside all vain dialectical sophistry, that, for example, the force of Suggestion that a vengeful dead man might exert, from the utmost depths of Darkness, on a living being familiar to him–to whom, in consequence, he is attached by thousands of invisible mysterious threads–yes, I tell you, I believe that the force of Suggestion exerted on that person could become, over an indeterminate period of time, oppressive, irresistible, murderous and, in sum, material. For there are individuals so hardy that Death itself cannot entirely abolish their sentiments and passions.”

I saw that it was necessary to put an end to these pranks, whose horror was beginning to make an impression on me.

“My friend,” I said to him, “allow me to quote Voltaire, a man of spirit like yourself. ‘*When that which is said is no longer comprehensible, and*

when that which is heard is no longer conversational, this is what we call metaphysics.' "{120}

Lenoir looked at me silently.

"That's true," said Claire, coming towards us. "But the same person also said, somewhere, in the tale of the Phoenix: '*Resurrection is an entirely natural idea; it is no more astonishing to be born twice than once*.' "

"Oh, resurrection," I said. "Voltaire was making a joke, you see. A clear thinker, he let nothing escape his mockery."

"Good!" said Claire, smiling. "If you call into question the persistence of the personality after death, I shall be able to show you that your argument is a futile waste of time. First of all, I should like to know whether it cannot be called into question even in life. When is the self really itself? At what time of life? Is your self of this evening the same as it will be tomorrow? Or at the age of 50? No. We are the playthings of perpetual illusion, I tell you. And the Universe really and truly is a dream... a dream!... a dream!"

"A bad dream, even!" Lenoir added, thoughtfully. "Because–I can only repeat it dazedly–nothing that I have learned from philosophy has modified the disturbing and *wild* element of my nature, and I am afraid of becoming, once and for all, in some other visionary system, that which I am.

"Oh, if only I had Claire's trampoline of Faith to bounce me out of these dismal thoughts whose haggard prisoner I am! But there it is: I am too bound up in a world in which–I don't know exactly how to put it–two and two might be able to make something other than four. And yet...."

Chapter Fourteen

The Sidereal Body

“Words! Words! Words!”

Shakespeare, *Hamlet.* {121}

Lenoir pronounced these words in a tone that froze the smile on my lips. I was struck by the sudden impression that while we were talking, Night had approached in person, and had taken the opportunity to mingle her own arguments with ours. The fact is that the mundane night outside, where cold winds whipped the waves into breakers, was now extending its starless void beneath thick clouds. The exchange of impressions was so swift that I thought I was experiencing a hallucination. It seemed to me that we were becoming very pale; the curtains stirred; we were under the influence of Midnight.

I felt my hereditary disorder awaken in the depths of my nature then. Unable to endure the sight of that desolate space, I leapt to my feet and shut the window, trembling with the sick apprehension that is, for me, the harbinger of hellish anguish.

Oh, that malady! How does it come about? Isn’t it frightful?

Nevertheless, I concealed my sensations as best I could, and tried to seem indifferent as I replied to Lenoir.

“Are you daring to imply that you have another person within you, in addition to yourself, Doctor? Damn it! That would be disconcerting, I confess–particularly for your peace of mind.”

“But can you yourself, Bonhomet,” Lenoir replied, after a pause, fixing his sparkling eyes upon me, “can you assure me that the external appearance that you present to us, manifest to our senses, is really the being that you know yourself to be?”

That unexpected question pricked my conscience. I looked at the Doctor without making any response.

“And,” he continued, “is not this exterior being–the only one accessible and perceptible–always accompanied within you by its spectator, its contradictor, its judge?”

“Yes,” I said. “That’s a theory the ancients held: *Homo duplex*. What are you trying to prove?”

“That this interior companion–this occult being–is the only real one, and that it is what constitutes the personality. The apparent body is no more than a reaction to the other; it’s a veil which thickens or lightens according to the translucidity with which it is regarded, and the occult being only allows itself to be detected and recognized by the expression of features of its mortal mask. The organism, in the final analysis, is nothing but a pretext of the luminous body that suffuses it. One never thinks of one’s body when one is alone–except, perhaps, to maintain its life. Think about this: if two men are bound together by some sentiment, they gradually forget the details of their appearance; they no longer see one another; they relate to one another in a more profound way, and it is the moral being that they perceive in one another; they know what really lies beneath the palpable simulacrum.”

“This is specious,” I murmured, feeling obliged to say something.

“And this is what provides the key to a wealth of mysterious contradictions,” the Doctor added. “The apparent body is so scarcely real that, very often, it is not a man which inhabits the human form.”

“Oh!” I exclaimed, with a nervous twitch–as if a crocodile had shivered inside me.

“What? Haven’t you ever seen a human face taken over by some type of animal–or several animals at the same time? Well, carefully observe the habitual movements, the instincts, the tendencies of an individual who is predominantly bear-like, for instance, or tigerish, and you will come to see that there is something in him like a wild beast strayed into an alien envelope. How many men and women do you think there are, on Earth, who conform to their own concept of themselves? Man is merely a divine animal, differentiated from the others by the Ideal–and he in whom the preoccupation with eternal things is not ceaselessly alert in the depths of his consciousness is still part-animal, not wholly emerged from the shadows; he isn’t *Man*, in reality, and the expression on his face betrays him continually, in spite of his apparent form. Similarly, the Woman who conforms to her concept of herself is she who, reflecting sublime hopes like a profound and

clear mirror, elevates love and hope beyond Death. Do you think that such beings are numerous in our species? We must accept that towns are much like forests, and that it's not difficult to find ferocious beasts in them."

"You believe that the majority of living men..." I put in.

"Are still moved like puppets by the strings of base instinct," the Doctor said, with a laugh that displayed two rows of teeth worthy of the jaws of a Carib Indian. "They are invisible beasts, transfigured by their disguises, if you like, but they are actual beasts."{122}

He went on: "And their facial features, through which the luminous essence of their true organism shines, offers superabundant proof of their innate hatred of Thought; of their deep-seated, insatiable, organic thirst to bring down, profane and annihilate every noble and pure inclination; and of their grotesque contempt for all sublime art, all disinterested charity, and everything else that is not as base and impure as their own preoccupations, actions and works! Whence comes their habit of demonstrating the justice of their opinions with violence and blood, and the impossibility of their ever understanding true Humanity, born of the Highest! Yes, I tell you–and you had better believe it–that apparent body is not the real one; its constituent atoms change with every passing moment and it renews itself entirely in a cycle of six or seven months; properly speaking, it does not exist. It is only a process of becoming within the greater Becoming. It is its form, its idea, its impalpable unity that actually exists, and on which appearance is merely superimposed. And one of the physical proofs of this is that faces become bestial or light up at the approach of Death, in a striking manner, according to what the eyes can see there!"

"But you're just trying to talk about the soul, my friend," I put in. "which would, I suppose, require us to speak of *Homo triplex*!"

Lenoir's only response was a slight shrug of the shoulders.

"And me!" he suddenly exclaimed. "Myself. Do you ever think about that? I sense predatory instincts within me! I experience black moods and furious passions, the hatred of a Savage, a wild insatiate thirst for blood. It's as if I were haunted by a cannibal! Yes, it's insane, but that's the way it is–and I know plenty of learned alienists who would be able to confess such things themselves if they weren't constrained to tranquility, dissimulation and silence by the need to earn their daily crust. And whenever I quit the realm of the Spirit, I can clearly distinguish that infernal nature within me! It's the truth! And all the metaphysical speculations appear to me then like

so many threads of sparkling nonsense, incapable not only of redeeming me from that horrible–almost diabolical–intellectual form but of giving me a single instant of reliable hope! That's why I dread this cloakroom that we call Death. That's why I can find no peace, I tell you! No, I know that I'll be this way forever!"

The clock struck one. I rose to my feet; I had recovered somewhat from my attack of nerves. Lenoir had gone way over the top this time–having overstepped the mark, so to speak, by force of exaggeration. His superficial whimsies were definitely becoming more and more inept. "We'll talk about this another time," I said, smiling.

"Yes," he said, preoccupied and still rather somber. He took a portable edition of the Bible from his pocket as he terminated his peroration by crying: "We should both pay attention to this book!" And he tapped the cover as if it were a snuff-box. He opened it, mechanically, as if at random. His eyes fell upon the passage in the Ten Commandments dealing with adultery and its punishment. Once he had read it out, he blew his nose, with a noise that I found rather alarming. There was a silence, during which he examined me as if to see what effect the quotation had had on me.

The only thing I had noticed was that as he pronounced the word *adultery*, Madame Lenoir had shivered silently from top to toe in her armchair. But that was doubtless only a nervous tic awakened by the memory of some old love affair, inspired by the chill of the evening and the sea. The green thickets of Paphos always have their mysteries, and the malign petty god knows well enough what he is about–at least, that's my opinion.

As for the Lieutenant, Sir Henry Clifton, the idea never even crossed my mind!

Lenoir closed the Bible abruptly, and added a low voice, as if to himself: "How to forgive adultery, indeed? O rage! I confess that the very idea makes me mad... Yes, I sense that I shall slake my lust for vengeance, even in the domain of Death–and that the loss of Paradise shall not stop me–if..."

And he turned his gaze towards his wife, as if to break himself upon her colored lenses and her leaden face.

Claire got up, and picked up a lighted candle.

"You're being inconsiderate," she said. "Our friend needs to rest." And she handed me the candlestick, smiling.

A minute later, I was in bed, falling asleep while laughing at that fantastic couple until the tears ran down my face.

Chapter Fifteen

My Friend Gets a Chance to Offer a Conclusive Verification of His Mortifying Theories

> *Death is a woman faithfully wedded to the human race: where is the man she has deceived?*
>
> Honoré de Balzac {123}

I shall pass swiftly over the charming and retiring existence that the three of us led for the next 12 days–after which my poor friend lay lifeless in his room with a shroud over his face, with a candle to either side of him.

Alas, he had been suddenly carried off by an overwhelming attack of apoplexy, caused by his immoderate over-indulgence in snuff. I had warned him many times about the dangers of that terrible herb, and the risks he ran, so to speak, in playing with it, but my pleas had fallen on deaf ears. Disdainful of the remonstrations of his loving wife, who threw herself at his feet more than once, begging him, in the name of the most sacred sentiments, to renounce his unclean passion, he did not even reduce the doses of the powder that he introduced into his nostrils, which agglomerated there until his sinuses were clogged with nicotine. The poison did not take long to spread from there to his entire body, bringing him to the point of delirium, and sometimes–let us whisper it–to furious madness.

As soon as I had arrived, having noticed his mania, I had resolved to save him and to cure him. In order to divert and diversify the demon of his habit, I had tried filling his snuff-box with various substitutes: silver nitrate, mercuric chloroborate, charcoal, calcium phosphate, the scrapings of old shoes, caustic soda, gunpowder and a thousand other inoffensive substances.{124} In brief, I had looked after him as solicitously as his own mother. My efforts were useless: he took it all, his nose indifferent and its cartilages blinded. Nevertheless, I was determined not to be beaten. Deciding that I would cure him by applying homeopathic theory–the only one taken seriously by those whose good sense has not been obliterated–I shut myself up in my chemical laboratory.

I slipped into his snuff-box the most powerful sternutatory and revulsive compounds that human ingenuity could invent.{125} It was necessary that he should be forced into submission or cured. I had decided to use explosives to bring his illness to an end. There is, I am content to hope, no ingredient known to any branch of medical knowledge with which I did not cleverly stuff his cavities. Putting my own life at risk, I heated crucibles where I pulverized concoctions of the deadliest plants, so useful in medicine when their doses are properly calculated. It seemed to me that the hand of God was at work in all that. I had temporarily neglected my dear *infusoria*; amity alone was my guide–and often, at night, when I awoke with a start from some nightmare, I perceived that my window panes were aglow with the reflections of the laboratory where my alembics, retorts and test-tubes were boiling night and day. I took heartfelt delight in the thought that all that was accomplished there, under the protection of the good genius of true Science, would be deposited the following day in the olfactory apparatus of my unfortunate friend.

At the very moment when my treatment and care seemed about to be crowned by an unexpected recompense–I seem to recall that he had begun to look at his snuff-box, occasionally, with an indefinable expression–one Saturday evening about ten days after my arrival in the house, after a most enjoyable dinner, he suddenly turned pale during dessert. His eyes closed, his lips moved–and he was dead!

I had the presence of mind, during the general panic of Claire and the servants, to put my ear close to his mouth to hear what he was trying to whisper, and I distinctly made out the same bizarre phrase that I quoted above.

“How to forgive adultery, indeed?” he murmured. “I sense at this moment–at this very moment–that I shall undoubtedly incorporate the sentiment that I have always had within me–yes, I sense that, from the depths of external darkness, I shall slake my lust for vengeance–if...”

Those were his last words. You can imagine the grief and consternation into which we were plunged. How can one find words to express it? I give up. In any case, it would hardly be fitting to allow the public to intrude upon private pain.

Chapter Sixteen

What One Might Call a Warm Alarm {126}

> *The cry of the outcast is but the translation of this thought: "Had I only known then what I know now!"*
>
> *Commentary on Theology*

Ho ho! I too know how to be *poetic* when circumstances require it, when an event can be framed by a single word. Lyricism is not entirely useless; there are occasions to which it is suited, when it is forgivable. I could evoke it, when required, like almost everyone else in the world, if I deigned to lower myself to commit my ideas to print.

Yes, even I should have passed for a *poet*, had I lived in an era when such *a feather in the cap* could procure a fortune.{127} Honestly, I know a good number of pen-pushers who, if the trade brought in neither money nor women, would immediately cease to exploit the imbecility of others with their monkey-tricks and would get back to being just as normal as me–and who would, moreover, have better things to do, if it ever came to that.

Now, the Lenoir incident was, admittedly, of a kind to inspire me if not to epic prose, at least to *poetic* ideas and phrases.

The room where the dead man lay was situated on the third floor and had a high ceiling. A few drops of holy water, shining like funereal diamonds in the candlelight, lay on his waxy frozen face. Madame Lenoir was kneeling beside the bed, her head on the coverlet. I was kneeling there too, but further away, resting on my heels with my hands joined and my head lowered, staring at a red dot on the carpet in a dark corner at the back of the room, behind a chest of drawers. We were alone. The priest and the doctor had gone away an hour before, talking to one another in hushed voices, shutting the door behind them.

A large ivory crucifix hung between the curtains seemed to be pacifying the darkness.

Angrily, I berated the pitiless nature that had deprived me of my friend. I might almost have doubted Science, if I had not exempted it from my

despair.

Suddenly, I don’t know exactly what happened, but–to tell the exact truth–I felt something whose analysis, or even distinct enunciation, seemed to me to be beyond the terminology at the disposal of human vocabulary. It was, to put it simply, a thrill of cold in the eyes, the heart and the temples.

At that very moment, as I was asking myself what had happened to me, the young widow rose abruptly to her feet, her hair standing on end, candle-flames reflected in the lenses of her spectacles, her arms raised. She let out into the profound silence a terrifying cry, so deeply impregnated and saturated with mad horror that I felt myself flooded from top to toe with fear–fear unalloyed with any other sensation.

That fear inundated me, so to speak, quite unexpectedly. It paralyzed the play of my faculties for an appreciable interval. All I could do was blink my eyes.

Eventually, I managed to steal a glance at Madame Lenoir. Her attitude was not calculated to reassure a poor old man! It was devastating.

The result of this contemplation was a momentary shudder, and the instantaneous disappearance of my moral sense. And I began, without otherwise moving, still on my knees in that obscure corner, to emit long, slow and loud howls, progressing along a musical scale, whose volume increased proportionately as it descended towards the lowest notes in my baritone register.

At the third howl, I felt my fright shading into delirium, and I relieved my soul with a little laugh, scarcely distinguishable–which had the immediate effect of increasing the terror of the young woman to the point that she ran towards the door, seized it in panic and ran down the stairs.

I followed her immediately, taking the stairs four at a time–without, as they say, wasting any time in idle commentary.

We only took two seconds to cross the landings and the flights of stairs to the garden door. In our simultaneous haste to get that execrable door open, we neutralized one another’s efforts. In my distress, I let out a stifled grunt, whose sound caused me to fall into a faint in the poor woman’s arms; her knees bumped into one another and we fell half-dead upon the floor.

Then there were shouts and lights and hurrying footsteps. The frightened servants came running; Madame Lenoir replied quietly to a question from an old valet. We were carried to our own rooms.

An hour later, feeling that I had regained possession of myself, I jumped out of bed, threw everything that I had into my suitcase, pell-mell, and set myself to flee by way of the garden–silently escorted, as far as the door, by the basset-hound. I ran, breathlessly, to the coach-stop and jumped into the first one that came along. As the wheels began to turn and the coachmen cracked their whips to get the rig moving, I experienced an immense pleasure. I felt that I was getting away from the Lenoir house–in which I promised myself, secretly, never to set foot again so long as I might live.

Oh yes, I resumed the course of my great discoveries; I saw new lands; I can even say that I made giant strides in the cause of Science! But the important thing is to complete this story. That which I have to tell is a thing so terrible that I have been deliberately prolix. I did not dare! I was putting off the fatal moment! But... tonight I have drunk excellent wines which have excited my brain, and I shall reveal all.

Chapter Seventeen

The Ottysor {128}

There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*.{129}

A year later, I found myself in the South of France. I had been exploring in the Alps; I stopped at Digne. In accordance with my solitary habit, I took a room in a small hotel. I spent my days in the country, carrying my scientific instruments with me.

One night, fatigued by my research, I came back very late. I asked the bellboy to send a fillet of fish, some pears and two liters of coffee to my room, to see me through the night. The waiter put on a show of regret. “Does Monsieur not know that it is a public holiday? Except for one old lady ill in bed, there’s not so much as a cat in the house–no one at all in the kitchen! Everyone’s gone off to see the fireworks. Monsieur will find some restaurants open if he cares to go along the road to the town center–and there is a letter for you.”

I took the voluminous letter from him silently, and read it by the light of the candle he was holding close to my face.

The letter was from England. One of my correspondents in London, a rather eccentric man–as all Englishmen tend to be–told me that he had won a lawsuit relating to his house, as he had hoped, said that he was quite pleased and that I should rejoice with him. A postscript added that “by the way,” a young Englishman of my acquaintance, a naval officer, had perished in a most tragic fashion in the course of an exploratory mission to the remote regions of the Pacific. The steamship to which he was assigned was at 14 degrees south latitude and 134 degrees longitude, sailing south from the Marquesas to the sinister archipelago of Tuamotu. A boat was manned, under the command of the said officer to investigate places to land on one of a host of small volcanic islands: a black laval block rising to a

prodigious altitude, balancing the storminess of the great equinoctial ocean with the vast green intensity of its forests.

“These latitudes are, in a manner of speaking, the most remote in the world,” my correspondent wrote. “From the viewpoint of civilized nations, no potential commerce justifies the risk of sending ships through the innumerable reefs which bristle about the shores of these islets, lost in the flux of immeasurable waves, which thus remain totally unknown. This archipelago contains more than 700 of them, of which only a few are coralline.

“The frightful storms, the basaltic quicksands whose particles are like anthracite dust and the sudden falls of stagnant mist make these regions mortally hazardous to navigators, who have named these waters the Dangerous Sea. So many ships flying all kinds of colors have been lost there, that there has been a tacit decision not to stray into it. However, a band of Polynesian pirates, the Ottysors, scavengers of shipwrecks, take refuge there on stormy nights, some squatting in caves while others wander across the rocks, awaiting their prey.

“Now, when it happened, the little detachment of explorers was making its way, as dusk fell, along the perilous sands at the foot of the island’s cliffs. As they reached the water’s edge, the young officer, who was perhaps 50 paces ahead of his escort, was attacked without warning as he rounded a rock. A huge black native–doubtless one of the piratical Ottysors–had already severed his head and was brandishing it horribly at arm’s length before any defensive movement could be made or any gun fired. He had not even had time to cry out. As the squad rushed forward murderously, the native was seen to venture, with slow steps, into the deadly sands. A continuous salvo of shots was sent after him, lighting up the dusk, while the fantastic indigene, consecrating himself to death, was sucked down little by little into the fatal sands, before the eyes of his hesitant pursuers. He disappeared, choking to death, while his uplifted right fist still clutched the bloody head by the hair, as if displaying it triumphantly to the stars. Our unfortunate friend was none other than Sir Henry Clifton, who was serving on the vessel as a lieutenant, and with whom I believe you once traveled from Jersey to Saint-Malo.”

I abstained, for the moment, from any reflection on Sir Henry Clifton as I digested this annoying news. I had heard talk of these extremely rare Ottysors, as black as jet, who lie in wait for shipwrecks. Norwegian and

Dutch mariners also called these negroes the Demons of the Quicksands. These ferocious cannibals are shrouded in as-yet-unsolved mystery. Sometimes, on the reefs, they can be heard howling their somber war cries by night. They are veritable shades. Not one of them has ever been captured, and despite the many volleys discharged at them, no one has ever seen them fall or flee. "*No one knows what they do with their dead*, if they do die," the Danish geographer Bjorn Zachnussën {130} said, rather enigmatically.

I resolved to banish this adventure from my memory, because it appeared to me to be of the kind that might trouble my sleep.

"Didn't you say something about an old woman ill in bed?" I said to the bellboy as I put the letter in my pocket. "Has she had supper?"

The bellboy, who was watching my face to see what effect the letter had, took some time to reply. "No," he said, eventually. "Her supper's there."

"Good," I said. "As she's ill, I'll have her supper. It'll serve her right."

And I laughed at this quip as I went up the echoing stairway.

I had got no more than two-thirds of the way through the habitual and regular duration of my laughter when the sound of my name, pronounced in an agonized voice, reached me from the nearest door on the landing that I was crossing.

I stopped short, feeling ill at ease.

"Who's that?" I said to the bellboy.

"What?" he said. "It's the old woman. I suppose she must know you."

"What's this woman's name?"

"Madame Lenoir."

"Madame Lenoir!" I whispered, after a pause. "What! The charming and incomparable Madame Lenoir, the widow of my poor friend?"

Then I asked myself: "But how does she come to be here?"

The bellboy put his tongue against his teeth and made a rude noise to display his indifference. "I don't know," he said, pretentiously.

I greeted this neatly turned phrase with one of my most gracious smiles, accompanied by an involuntary but vigorous kick up the young Mercury's backside. The candlestick fell to the floor. The bellboy, seized by an alarm for which I still search in vain for an explanation, took it upon himself to refamiliarize himself with the staircase in the manner of Hippomenes and Atalanta.{131} I picked the candlestick up, and discreetly rapped the knuckle

of my Saturnian finger three times upon the disquieting door while I held it in my other hand, together with my portmanteau.

“Come in,” said a vaguely familiar voice.

I lifted the latch. A powerful odor of paint was the first sensation that assailed me, painfully.

The walls, recently redecorated, were silvery white, absolutely uniform and glossy. They instantly put me in mind of those reflective metal plates which serve to augment the daylight in the studios of the worthy emulators of Daguerre.{132}

In the bed, covered by white sheets and propped up on the pillow, was a woman. Her face was yellow and drawn, like parchment. She was dressed in mourning. An enormous pair of blue-tinted spectacles hid her eyes. Two or three flasks with pharmacist’s labels stood on the mantelpiece, reflecting the light of the smoky candle on the nightstand.

“I recognized your voice, Doctor, in spite of the passage of time and my distress,” the supine woman said, without moving. “Sit down by the bed; I have something to tell you. I have never lost track of you since Geneva, but this morning, as soon as I arrived... then I was sure of seeing you before dying.”

I went towards the specter, compassionately. I could hardly recognize the beautiful Claire Lenoir as I studied her face, which had evidently been ravaged by some mysterious anguish. It was as if she had suddenly grown old.

I said all these things to her, delicately. She looked hard at me from behind her spectacles. The silence was profound.

“Yes,” murmured Claire Lenoir, in a level tone, “you are a horrid old man!”

And she lapsed into pensiveness.

For the first time in my life, I understood certain tricks employed in farces on the Parisian stage; I cast my eyes around me, not knowing who she was talking to. No one was concealed there; we were alone.

I took her arm and felt her pulse; it was irregular as well as faint. I took pity on her madness and sat down at the head of the bed.

Chapter Eighteen

The Anniversary

In which rejoice the swarm of evil angels,
Swimming in the folds of curtains.

Charles Baudelaire {133}

“Tell me... tell me what Sir Henry Clifton confided to you,” said Claire Lenoir, in a horribly low voice.

“Oh? Ah! Nothing,” I replied.

“You know what happened while my husband, Monsieur Lenoir, was away. You do know!”

“I know nothing at all about it,” I said.

“Oh, all right!” Madame Lenoir went on. “I won’t tell you the outrageous circumstances of my miserable fall from grace. Just: I was beloved! I’m guilty!”

Infamous creature, I thought. Aloud, I said: “Oh well, what harm is there in that?”

“I know that a sin cannot redeem itself... but, after that, I remained faithful to Monsieur Lenoir until death–faithful even in thought.”

“I’m not a priest, Madame.”

“The priest has gone–and I’m dying, I tell you,” Claire replied, in a preoccupied manner.

“Oh, my dear Madame Lenoir, can that be true? You’re exaggerating! Your complexion isn’t terminally bad, your voice isn’t whistling at all, and–save for the kind of attack that any one of us might suffer–you seem to me to be in relatively good condition.”

“What about this, Doctor?” she said, lifting up her spectacles.

I leaned forward.

“That?” I said, after a cursory examination. “Damnation! There are, indeed, certain symptoms of....”

“Of what?” she said, in a voice that set my nerves jangling.

“Of a malady that it would be absurd not to treat immediately,” I added. “It’s nothing much.” Privately, I thought: *One thing’s certain–it’s too late*.

“Out with it, then!” she cried. “Do you imagine that I’m afraid?”

She shivered–more, I ought to say, because of a certain nervous wastage than fear of the imminent death of which she was evidently conscious.

“All right,” I said. “Listen closely: apoplexy is a little rupture in the brain; I see now that the veins in your eyelids, your temples and your whole face are congested in a quite extraordinary manner. It’s as if they were about to burst.”

I rose to my feet in order to consult the labels on the flasks. “I’ll go and find what’s necessary,” I told her.

“It’s useless! Stay! Death is one thing for which I’ve long been prepared. I know where I am–in a few minutes, at ten o’clock, it will all be over. So stay where you are! And trust that I’m still in possession of the last glimmerings of my reason. I’ve told you: I have something remarkable to tell you.”

What remarkable thing could she have to tell me? Nothing, obviously. And yet I didn’t want to hear it.

“My word!” I exclaimed, heartily. “My dear Madame Lenoir, I confess that I am lost in admiration! The fact is that you are very ill–and that you might be forced to part company with me at any moment! But I admire bravery, myself–I love the brave! To the devil with cowards! Speak, then–but quickly, for your voice is fading.”

“Oh, shut up! Shut up!” she said, brokenly.

I was shocked and mortified; negligently, I took a toothpick and fell silent.

“Lean over so that I can talk to you,” she said.

I obeyed, reluctantly.

“Alive,” she went on, “he knew nothing! Nothing! Not ever! But understand this: I believe that he knows now. This is the evening of our anniversary–when ten o’clock chimes... yes, I believe that he will come to take me–by the eyes!” She pronounced the word with sudden force. “How can I resist him? My flesh was bound to his by an oath sworn at the sacred feet of God!”

Ah, what a truly bizarre thing! What mysteries the human organism contains! In spite of the place, the hour and the memory, I did not flinch. *It’s delirium*, I thought, *nothing more*. Never had I borne up so well, internally.

Beneath the saddened appearance that the situation required, I felt brisk, alert, cheerful! I slyly popped a praline into my mouth and let it melt there, utterly delighted by my peace of mind. What had I to fear, anyway? Her husband could have counted himself lucky, at that moment, that he was dead.

“Don’t be afraid–I’m here,” I told her, to calm her down. “It’s not every day that I have panics like the one that made me flee on the first night of your widowhood! That nervous excitement was, I confess, quite irrational in a man like me.”

“Oh, you miserable wretch, I tell you that was the only unconscious glimmer of Reason–of true Reason–that you have had since the day of your birth,” Claire said, still propping herself up. “Let’s talk, and above all think, about that.”

She had a kind of diabolical gurgle; her throat was choked with blood.

“Oh, the bleak breath of the outcast!” she said. “Do you remember the room? Your eyes were lowered. You were kneeling down! You saw nothing. As for me, I was slumped upon the bed, in my distress. I couldn’t see anything either. But I shall tell you now what passed above our heads! Monsieur Lenoir reopened his eyes! He suddenly threw back the shroud and sat up, silently, his fists clenched and raised over me! He had the face of damnation! He ground his teeth–soundlessly, for us! Ah! Balefully, with two hellish gleams beneath his eyebrows, he cursed me as part of himself, in the name of the Godless night for which so many are bound. And we did not see him, because it was necessary that our heads were lowered at that particular moment!

“Then he lay down again, drew back the shroud with both hands and closed his eyes again; his face again took on that insensible mask that we shall all wear–that I shall soon wear myself. It was then that, without knowing what had happened, I got up and kissed him tenderly on his dead forehead, one last time, with tears in my eyes.”

She fell silent; she looked at me fixedly.

“How... how do you know that’s what happened?” I asked.

“I saw the scene played out the following night, in a dream, in a large mirror into which I was looking.”

“Demons can indeed lurk in the depths of mirrors!” I told her, compassionately. Then, studying her with leaden eyes and scratching the end of my nose, I added: “But in real life... demons like that are not

admitted into real life. How were you able to recognize me, in that mirror's reflection? My features must have been vague therein; I suppose it must have been the moral beauty exhaled, so to speak, by the sum of my features, that enable you to recognize me–isn't that so?" I paused. "A dream?" I repeated, almost to myself. "But, Madame, in that case, why did you cry out, in the room, since you knew nothing of this, since you had seen nothing at all!"

"Once I had risen to my feet," Claire Lenoir replied, "as soon as I had embraced him, I put my ear to his mouth again and heard a dull laugh–a yelp which emerged from those furious lips! That was when I cried out, because I was overwhelmed by a boundless terror, a dreadful fear! And my cry came from so deep within my bowels that you understood its significance, as if by electricity."

This, I must confess, made me grow pale in my turn. The fact is that the deserted hotel, the candles threatened with imminent extinction, the idea of that anniversary and, above all, that bespectacled moribund woman in mourning-dress, were beginning to obliterate the soundness of my judgment. The malady of which I have spoken was invading me, moreover, little by little. I felt it rumbling inside me, like a vast distant ocean! Go on! Go on! Spit it out! My teeth began to chatter madly, sweat ran down my brow; I became nauseous, my eyes protruding and rolling in their orbits; a frightful oppression weighed heavily upon my breast–and I cast off the mask.

"Vision and madness!" I howled, wildly, as I got to my feet.

Chapter Nineteen

Teterrima Facies Daemonum[{134}]

> *As the priest turned towards the cadaver to read him the mass for the dead, on the words* Responde mihi! *the dead bishop was seen to sit up on the bier and cry in a frightful voice:* Comparui! Judicatus sum! Justo judicio Dei, damnatus! *And he lay down again in the coffin.*[{135}]
>
> *The History of Saint Bruno*

"I have seen him again! Always in a dream!" said Claire Lenoir in the same hoarse and dull voice, without addressing herself directly to me. "three-and-a-half months, or thereabouts, after his death. Except that, probably owing to the chance element in dreams, the external appearance which he then presented to me was different. It was definitely him. Oh, it was *him*!"

And the unhealthy smile of the insane came to hover upon her lips like a will-o'-the-wisp over a tomb.

"You will pity my feeble mind because of these dreams," she went on, "but he had exactly the same bodily form, stature and color of those obscure beings mentioned–as you know–in the accounts of the explorers of the Pacific."

I thought of the letter; I jumped nervously, unable to believe my ears. I tried in vain to connect the two ideas: a lightning-flash, of a kind that is beyond the logic of human explanation, blinded my understanding utterly. I felt a cry of horror raise into my throat, hideously stifling.

"Yes," the dying woman went on, with a preternatural solemnly, "he was exactly like one of those monsters that haunt desert shores and evil seas. His body, wild and hairy, stood upright, smoked more deeply than ebony. The feathers of seabirds supplied his loincloth and other vestments. Emptiness extended all around him, populated with Terrors and the infinity of the imagination. This apparition was tattooed with fiery serpents; his hair, long and grey, fell in clumps about his shoulders. Oh, by what train of thought, by means of what ancient impression, was I able to come to

transfigure him thus: to dream him thus, so crude, so different! He was standing alone among unknown rocks, looking into the distance, over the sea, as if he were waiting for someone. By his impenetrable manner, I felt rather than recognized that this was the dead man. He was furtively sharpening, behind him, a huge stone cutlass... his nocturnal eyes made my soul shudder with an anguish redolent with blood, the inferno and the agony of death; I woke up with a start, with a loud cry, steeped in cold sweat...

“Never have I succeeded in forgetting that dream.”

She fell silent.

How can I describe–are there word to express the frightful thoughts, which are, after all, born of funereal possibility–that which paralyzed me from top to toe while I listened to these infernal sentences? I was knocked head over heels. The sentiments seething in my mind were unnamable.

Nevertheless, even though the sound of my own voice made me tremble, I spoke without taking account of the truth of my words. “No one! No one, fortunately–do you hear?–can determine the precise point at which the objective reality commences.” And I added, with a forced laugh that made my scalp crawl: “The lunatic asylums have not thought of it! Do you recall the lively discussion we had with that quibbler Lenoir?”

“Oh well, think that if you must,” said the patient, with a mirthless smile, “and pray. Prayers, launched beyond Nature by the will, escape Destruction. I, who have never been ashamed to pray, even when my husband uttered his outrageous doubts–the cancer of our sad days–while feigning respect for my faith by love for my unhappy body; I, who wish to repent of having committed a forbidden act–for it is not reason that can grant me absolution; I hope and I am sure that after an instant of agony, God will not exclude me from all forgiveness.”

Then, seizing her spectacles with both hands, she tore them from her face. She twisted the frame convulsively, and the lenses broke in her bloodied hands.

“I no longer need glasses to see it now!” she said. She spoke in a tremulous voice, but with a sort of smile redolent of truly infinite hope, by which her courage seemed to steel itself for some terrifying ordeal, imminent and supreme, after which her soul would be *saved*.

The clock chimed ten.

There was a moment of silence, during which Madame Lenoir, having thrown back both halves of the long black shawl in which she had been

wrapped, lay down exhaustedly on her back. Her head was slightly raised by the pillow and her staring eyes were wide open. She seemed to be studying, to be going gradually deeper, in spite of herself, into the blinding whiteness of the candlelit wall.

At that moment, we heard the sound of the first fireworks, bursting in the distance; the national holiday was in full swing. Vague hurrahs were audible as the serious folk of the town took satisfaction in the sight of lovely rockets soaring skywards and exploding merrily in mid-air.

“Ah!” she cried, with a start. “Well, it’s just as I said. *THERE HE IS!* Look! There! There! The monster of my evil dreams! There he is–just as he, Monsieur Lenoir, also dreamed! Must one, then, be a son of Ham {136} to be *REALIZED* thus, in Death? Why has he been sharpening that knife for so long, and so coldly, while looking out on the frightful sea? Ah! Vampire! Demon! Assassin! Get away from that wall! Let my poor eyes be!” The unfortunate woman was raving.

Her hands stiffened suddenly in an atrocious clench and her mysterious eyes grew wider still. Whatever she saw became, without any doubt, so dreadful that she could no longer muster breath enough to scream. She struggled, then fell back with a kind of strangled sob, rigid. She was still staring at the wall.

She had undoubtedly given up the ghost–but I wasn’t certain of it.

I threw myself on my portmanteau in order to take out a bundle of lancets; I rummaged around desperately; there was nothing but glass slides, instruments, collections of infusoria, lenses; I leapt across the room, without knowing where I was going! And I returned towards the bed, mechanically taking in hand a large magnifying-glass that I had found.

Then I took the candle and brought it nearer to the face of the dead woman. Trembling nervously, I studied the face through the magnifying glass.

Finally, it’s over, I thought, with a sigh of relief. *She’s definitely dead*.

Suddenly–I can’t explain why–her stagnant eyes attracted my attention.

A most unusual idea suddenly came into my mind. Curiosity entered into my heart and swept all apprehension therefrom. I braced myself, shivering slightly; I wanted to examine the irises that had re-covered each of those dark pupils and plunge into the depths of the remaining disc!. A demon took hold of my arms, leaned over my old head, applied the powerful magnifying glass to my eye, directing almost forcibly towards the dead

woman’s eyes and the soul within. A whisper in my ear deadened my anguish:

“Look!”

From that moment on, I became calmer; I felt that the old Science had taken hold of me again.

I moved my magnifying glass back and forth over her pupils.

The eyes presented no easily appreciable peculiarity, except for their extraordinary vitreousness. I was about to abandon my tentative examination when I observed that each pupil contained a point resembling a dark pinprick.

I immediately went to turn the key that locked the door, then I came back to the bed and crossed my arms, thinking about a means of experimentation.

I had an induction coil in one of my large pockets. *If I could excite the ciliary nerve*, I thought–but I quickly rejected the idea as useless–futile, even. I took a little flak from my bag. *One drop of this alkaloid*, I thought, *might distend the pupil*. But I rejected that idea too: the solution in question could not be fruitfully applied to a cadaver.

Suddenly, my eyes fell upon my ophthalmoscope.

“Aha!” I exclaimed. “There’s the very thing!”

Grinding my teeth slightly, I took the corpse in my arms–a long nightgown served as a shroud–and stood it up against the wall, underneath a large nail. I was going to pass a cord under her armpits and knot the ends together to suspend her from the nail, but a thought stopped me in my tracks. Whatever might remain within those eyes would appear to me to be inverted, from top to bottom, the cavity behind the iris forming a *camera obscura*.

There was a means to obviate that difficulty, but I hesitated before having recourse to it. My colleagues will probably think the scruple puerile, but I was reluctant to dispose Madame Lenoir against the wall upside-down. They would say, I know, that it displayed an untimely sentimentality at the moment of a serious experiment, when no one should think about anything but scientific rigor. After all, many other people, even more famous than me, were practicing at every hour of every day, throughout Europe, upon at least 50 or 60,000 female cadavers–drawn from the needy classes, of course–in amphitheaters, morgues, hospitals and so on. I would reply that it was only because I had always been on good terms, socially, with Madame Lenoir that the act seemed to me to be slightly sacrilegious.

It goes without saying that if the dear woman had, to the best of my knowledge, never been anything but poor and needy–my God, if she had been a laborer–the idea of hesitation would not have crossed my mind. At least, if some such silly scruple had momentarily crossed my mind, I would have stifled it with a blush, in order that I should not merit the derision of my colleagues. But I had, of course, always known Madame Lenoir as an honorable woman of means–and I confess that the knowledge instilled in me a certain respect even for her mortal remains. For this reason, I took up the body again, holding it at arm's length, and was wandering around the room, not knowing quite what to do, when I was struck by the perfect solution. It was so simple that I was truly astonished that I had not thought of it before.

This is what I did. I simply replaced Madame Lenoir on her death-bed, with all due precaution, but I placed her the wrong way round, with her head and neck projecting over the edge of the bed, as if suspended above the floor. The waves of her chestnut-colored hair, already silvered, flowed over the foot of the bed. The face was thus presented to me upside-down, with the eyes at knee-height. They were still wide open, and I still could not help finding their solemnity slightly disconcerting. There was no doubt now that if there were something within her pupils, I would be able to see the image in its normal orientation.

After that, I took one of the candles, whose dying flame was flickering, and placed it between the two of us.

I adjusted the large lens in the frame in front of the reflector and readied myself to direct the beam of light into the depths of Madame Lenoir's eyes.

As I shot my first glance into those eyes via the hole of the ophthalmoscope, however, I recoiled, without knowing why. I didn't want to know what it was that I had glimpsed!

I remained still for a moment. I cannot believe that Hell itself has ever reflected more hair-raising horrors than the ideas that drifted into my head in that interval.

Just then, the windows were colored by a distant skyburst: one of the fireworks with which the exultant multitude of the men and women of the town was celebrating the national holiday. It made me shiver.

The candle was guttering out, though; I would soon be in darkness.

"No!" I exclaimed, flexing my knee. "I have to see! I have to see!"

And I brought my eye to bear on the luminous opening.

It seemed to me that, alone among the living, I would be the first to look into infinity *through the keyhole*.

Chapter Twenty

The King of Terrors {137}

The abyss cried out; the deep lifted its hands

Habbakuk 3:10.{138}

Then: oh! fright of my life! oh! vision that has changed the world into a sepulchre for me, and installed Madness in my soul!

On examining the eyes of the dead woman the first thing I saw, distinctly outlined, as if it were a frame, was the strip of violet paper which ran around the top of the wall. And within this frame, like some kind of echo, I saw a picture which is beyond the expression of any language under the Sun and the Moon, alive or dead–and I say that without a single instant's hesitation.

Oh, how to describe it? What imagination could heap up the derisory inanity of the words that I am writing?

The paroxysm of ardent disquiet that seized me made the ophthalmoscope shake in my hands, and the beam of light danced in the eyes of the cadaver: in those huge inverted eyes, so vitreous, fixed, exorbitant and wide open.

And this is fairly close to what I saw:

Yes! The sky! Distant waves, a huge rock, the fall of a starry night! And upright on the rock, larger than life, stood a man like an inhabitant of the archipelagos of the Dangerous Sea! Was it a man, this phantom? In one hand, lifted towards the abyss, he held a bloody head by the hair! With a howl that I could not hear, but whose horror I divined in the volcanic distension of the wide-open mouth, he seemed to offer it as a sacrifice to the darkness and the void! In his other hand, dangling down, he held a stone cutlass, bloody and loathsome. Around him, the horizon seemed boundless, the solitude eternally accursed! And, beneath the expression of supernatural fury, beneath the concentration of vengeance, ceremonious wrath and hatred, I suddenly recognized in the face of the *Ottysor-vampire* {139} an uncanny resemblance to poor Monsieur Lenoir immediately before his

death–and, in the severed head, the direly shadowed features of the young man of yesteryear, the lost lieutenant, Sir Henry Clifton.

Tottering unsteadily, like a little child, I extended my arms as I recoiled.

My reason fled; hideous, confused conjectures, maddened my stupefaction. I was no more than a seething chaos of anguish, a human rag, a brain as desiccated as chalk, pulverized beneath the menacing immensity! And Science, the smiling old woman with clear eyes, whose logic and fraternal embrace are a little too disinterested, whispered derisively in my ear that she too is no more than bait for the Unknown that lies in wait for us, patiently.

Suddenly, I hurled myself at the wall and held myself tightly against it, my hands–whose fingers were splayed by a nameless fear–flat upon the stonework.

“But... but...” I grunted, with a sidelong glance at the dead woman, “it must have been the case that in spite of the ancient lies of Extension and Duration... which all the available evidence proves to be lies... it must have been the case that the apparition was objectively real, to such a ponderable degree, perhaps within the living fluid, as to be projected in this way on your voyant pupils!” {140}

I paused, and then concluded, in a low voice, with my hair standing on end and my fists clenched: “But...in that case... where are we?”

And as I leaned over the body–with the frantic rage of a sacrilegious tub-thumper–to re-examine the execrable but fascinating spectacle, the ophthalmoscope slipped from my hands at the sight of the dead woman’s expression. As she suddenly lifted up her head, I shivered, chilled to the bone; I saw two tears well up and run slowly and heavily down her livid cheeks.

And Death, veiling the Impenetrable, began to roll her profound shadows over *those eyes*.

The Swan-Killer

To Monsieur Jean Marras {141}

Swans understand signs.

Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables* {142}

As a result of perusing volumes of natural history, our illustrious friend Doctor Tribulat Bonhomet had learned that *swans sing well before dying*.

In fact–as he recently admitted to us–that music alone, ever since he had heard it, helped him to support the deceptions of life; any other seemed to him no more than a Wagneresque racket.

How had he obtained that art-lover's delight?

This is how it came about.

One fine day, in the vicinity of the ancient fortified town in which he lived, the practical old fellow discovered an old sacred pool shadowed by tall trees in a centuries-old abandoned park. Between 12 and 15 birds were calmly gliding over the dark mirror of its surface. He carefully studied the surroundings and measured the relevant distances for a while, taking particular notice of the black swan who served as their night-watchman–who was asleep now, lost in a ray of sunlight.

Every night, the black swan kept his eyes wide open, a polished stone in its long pink beak. If the least warning signal threatened danger to those he guarded, an abrupt movement of his neck would hurl the stone into the water in the midst of the circle of sleepers, to wake them up. At that signal, the flock, again taking their lead from him, would fly off into the profound darkness of the avenues, towards a distant lawn, or a fountain where grey statues were reflected, or some other familiar shelter.

Bonhomet contemplated the birds for a long time, silently smiling at them. Had he, the perfect dilettante, not dreamed of his ears drinking their fill of the last song of such as these?

Sometimes, he had.

So, as midnight chimed on a moonless autumn night when he was troubled by insomnia, Bonhomet suddenly got up. He put on clothes suited to the concert that he was ambitious to hear. The burly and bony doctor, having buried his legs in huge iron-trimmed rubber boots, which met up seamlessly with a well-padded waterproof coat, slid his hands into a pair of steel gauntlets borrowed from a Medieval suit of armor. (He had been fortunate enough to acquire these gauntlets, on a whim, from a traveling salesman, for a price of 38 *sous*.) This done, he put on his large modern hat, blew out his lamp and went downstairs. With his house-key in his pocket like the good bourgeois he was, he walked off in the direction of the abandoned park.

He reached it soon enough, making his way by dark paths towards the retreat of his favorite birds–to the pond whose water was nowhere more than waist-deep, according to his careful soundings. Passing under the arches of the foliage that overhung its banks, he muffled his paces, feeling his way over dead branches.

Having reached the side of the pool, he slowly–very slowly, without making any noise–slid one boot in, and then the other. He waded through the water, taking such extraordinary precautions that he hardly dared breathe. The imminence of the long-awaited *cavatina* brought him to a state of melomania–with result that it took him between two and two-and-a-half hours to complete the 20 paces that separated him from his dear virtuosos, for fear of alarming the subtle vigilance of the black night-watchman. The wind sighed plaintively in the high branches set against the starless sky in the shadows around the pond. Bonhomet, without allowing himself to be distracted by the mysterious murmur, continued his single-minded advance.

Eventually, at about three o’clock in the morning, he found himself, undetected, within half a step of the black swan, without that individual having the least inkling of his presence. Then the Good Doctor, smiling in the shadows, extended the tip of his Medieval index-finger and gently brushed the hidden surface of the pool in front of the watcher–so gently that he hardly touched it. He brushed it so lightly that the swan, although surprised, was unable to deem the vague alarm important enough to warrant throwing the stone. It listened.

At length, its instinct being obscurely possessed by the idea of danger, its heart–oh, that poor ingenuous heart!–began to beat faster, fearfully. That filled Bonhomet with jubilation.

And so it was that the beautiful swans, troubled by the noise in the depths of their slumber, stretched their undulant necks to put their heads beneath their pale silver wings. Under the weight of Bonhomet's shadow, they were drawn little by little into anguish, having who known what confused consciousness of the mortal peril they were in. But in their infinite delicacy, they suffered in silence, like the watcher, being unable to flee because the stone had not been thrown! And the hearts of all those white exiles began to beat with agonizing throbs–whose muffled percussion was distinct and intelligible to the enraptured ear of the excellent Doctor... who, knowing full well that the sole cause of their distress was his proximity, took an incomparable prurient delight in the terrific sensation which his motionlessness forced them to undergo.

How sweet it is to encourage artists! he said to himself, under his breath.

That ecstasy, which he would not have bartered for a kingdom, lasted for about three-quarters of an hour. Then, suddenly, the light of the morning star slid through the branches, unexpectedly illuminating Bonhomet, the black water and the swans with dream-filled eyes!

The watcher, madly terrified by what he saw, threw the stone... too late!

Bonhomet, with a loud and horrible cry, in which his syrupy smile seemed to be unmasked, hurled himself into the ranks of the sacred birds, his arms extended and his fingers splayed like claws. The iron fingers of the modern knight made haste to embrace them, and the snow-white necks of two or three singers were severed or broken before the other bird-poets took radiant flight.

Then, forgetful of the Good Doctor, the souls of the expiring swans exhaled their song of immortal hope, deliverance and love, towards the unknown Heavens.

The rational Doctor smiled at that sentimentality–of which, as a serious connoisseur, he deigned to savor but one element: the tune. He did not absorb, musically, anything but the singular sweetness of the tune of those symbolic voices, which were vocalizing Death as a melody.

Bonhomet, his eyes closed, breathed the harmonious vibrations into his heart. Then, as if seized by a spasm, he stumbled unsteadily towards the bank and stretched himself out on the grass, lying on his back in his nice, warm, impermeable clothes.

And there, this Maecenas {143} of our times, lost in a voluptuous torpor, savored once again, in the utmost depths of his being, the memory of the

delightful song of his dear artists–even though it was sullied by a sublimity that seemed to him a trifle out-of-fashion.

Reabsorbed in his comatose ecstasy, he ruminated over this exquisite impression, in his bourgeois manner, until the Sun came up.

The Eventualists' Banquet {144}

To Madame Méry Laurent {145}

A little coffee after dinner enhances one's self-esteem.
Luc de Clapiers,
Marquis de Vauvenargues {146}

The annual Eventualists' banquet, held under the presidency of Doctor Tribulat Bonhomet, concluded with amicable toasts. This was the delightful moment when they drank, while smiling at one another, to *ideas*–of which they deigned to believe themselves the principal, if not the sole, Earthly trustees. When urgent bio-sociological questions came to be debated, it goes without saying that the names of John Stuart Mill, Alexander Bain, Adam Smith and Herbert Spencer {147} added luster to the soft banalities attributed to them by their careless name-droppers, having streaked across the epochs of history like lightning-bolts in the night.

The great minds–nonchalantly relaxing, now–followed the course of these courteous controversies, with which people of taste are wont to stimulate their enlightened digestions.

Suddenly, however, the general but nevertheless intimate chatter became unaccountably alarmist. By the time the coffee appeared, the word on everyone's lips, albeit softly pronounced, was–O horror!–*dynamite*!

"The condition of the Parisian poor is getting worse, and more conclusive," said a guest. "Production exceeds demand, and bellicose noises are not sufficient to restore confidence in the currency. Nothing seems settled any longer. Even the most lucid and learned explanations of the present crisis are beginning to seem scant nourishment for the interested parties.

"The agitators of the radical press are ceaselessly pricking the popular bull, to the extent that a veritable concert of explosives–new and terrible explosives–can soon be expected to trouble the public peace. Recent trials, in which the accused, supported by a menacing audience, have spoken of blowing up everything–even daring to allege, in open court, that the presiding judge and the jury are *trembling at the knees*–demonstrate the

irritation of the needy. In the suburban clubs, they are already dreaming of nothing but dynamiting, or even *panclastitating* and *melinitating*[{148}]–as a mere distraction, *to see what comes of it*–the Legislative Assembly, the Senate, the Prefecture of Police, the Elysée Palace, etc, etc. They talk about mining the synagogues, the Jews seeming to be the people most at ease, and therefore the most guilty. The idea, at first broached in jest, soon progresses–unconsciously, it must be admitted–to the status of an actual project! Lists of potential massacres are being drawn up; anarchist children are already reciting the names as they say their prayers at night. In brief, a sudden cold snap, at the end of the month perhaps, could precipitate a sedition even more serious than that of 1871. The enemy is no longer encircling the capital..."

"In truth, gentlemen, I have searched in vain for an adequate euphemism with which to inform you that you are reasoning in this matter like cheeses!" cried Doctor Tribulat Bonhomet, employing his most unctuous smile to diminish the possibility that the tone of his remark might be construed as undiplomatic. "You are forgetting that the profundity, the prudence and the wiliness of our energetic government have neutralized, in advance, all possibility of any sort of insurrection, thanks to a certain preventive measure–prophylactic, if you prefer–of a truly inspired simplicity, whose pacificatory results are literally magical."

"What measure is that?" exclaimed the wide-eyed guests.

"Oh, you haven't noticed it?" the president continued. "Well, I am happy to bring it to your attention. If, at first, it seems anodyne to superficial minds–that is its greatest strength–I declare unhesitatingly that you will be positively mummified with admiration if you will only take the trouble to observe its consequences. It consists, simply, of the decree–already antiquated–that authorizes the capital's thousands of drinking-dens, cabarets, cafes and taverns not to put up their shutters until two o'clock in the morning."

"Well? What of it?" murmured the Eventualists, astonished by the solemn intonation of the eminent physician.

"What of it?" he replied. "I beg you to follow this reasoning, whose miraculous banality can only seem paradoxical to common mortals. You will be able, finally, to get to grips with the verity, which no one bothers to remember, that *there are only 24 hours in a day*. This principle is our point of departure.

“Now, when a man goes to bed before midnight, and gets up at seven o’clock in the morning, that man has clear sight, an alert mind and a strong, well-rested body. He can, in all seriousness, interest himself in his country’s current affairs while still attending fruitfully to his own.

“If, on the contrary, that man acquires the habit of not going to bed until three o’clock in the morning–to what kind of sleep?–it has the same effect, you see, as dining at too late an hour! Such a man wakes up dull-eyed and yawning, propping up his eyebrows. The hour passes; the day is lost. Anxieties, augmented by the worse-than-useless consumption of liquids, become more pressing. In brief, any project, if it requires alertness, is postponed for a week, which is to say: *in-de-fi-ni-te-ly*.{149}

“In five years, one obtains by this means an exemplary population of hollow-dreamers, whose moral and physical strength is diluted, every evening, for two-thirds of the night, in the midst of a nicotine fog, in vague discussions, idle professions of faith, chimerical resolutions and the sterile clenching of fists. Purpose is coughed up alongside glasses of beer or spirits, and flies away–resulting, for a capital city, after 15 years, in an exceedingly harmless population of some 300,000 rheumy-eyed, more-or-less ataxic, individuals with empty brains and worn-out hearts, the majority of whom will surrender their revolver or explosives for a shot of absinthe, just as a Chinaman will sell his wife for a pipe of opium.

“There you have it, gentlemen. This measure is a political one, so efficacious that it consolidates the duration of a government whatever sins it may commit–all the more powerfully (and this is the actual case) when it commits none. All sedition is paralyzed in advance, without bloodshed and in a thoroughly bourgeois manner. Why, if a similar ukase were promulgated in St Petersburg, I am inclined to believe that Nihilism itself would not be able to resist its effects for half a year! And I can only wonder that an idea as simple and as practical as this one appears to have escaped the proverbial sagacity of the Muscovite cabinet, thus far.

“So, gentlemen, we representatives of an elite people, who are fundamentally prepared–as our name indicates–to salute all unexpected occurrences, knowing how to take every precaution against them, are sounding vain alarms at our own banquet! Let us raise our thoughts, our hearts–and, above all, our glasses–to those whose measured vigilance has kept us sheltered by this means, for a long time, from all the exaggerated claims of the Proletariat, with whose afflictions we can, alas, only

sympathize. Let’s pour ourselves a finger of champagne, and let’s drink, with all due gratitude, to the cloudless prosperity of those whose perspicacious initiative has assured–without any fuss and without the bewitched troublemakers even being aware of it–the security of our leisure.”

Unanimous compliance acclaimed the orator at this point; reassured hands came together in loud applause–and the annual Eventualists’ banquet went on, the probable future of Humanity being the life and soul of the conversation, until that auspicious and invariably welcome hour when these fine examples of life’s chosen people felt that their bodies were well-fed, their minds eclectic, their hearts free, their convictions eventual, and their consciences vacant... *forever*.

Doctor Tribulat Bonhomet's
Motion Regarding the Utilization of Earthquakes {150}

To Monsieur Gustave Guiches {151}

When Pharamond {152} put the crown around his head, France was nothing but a vast extended swamp, more appropriate to the frolics of wild ducks than the regulated play of constitutional Institutions.

“Are we looking out upon a fantastic land, whose monastic map-makers we shall be?

“What is going on? As we come to celebrate, once again, a naive tradition of our fathers’ time–those golden days that filled our youth with ecstasy–and at the very moment when we take ourselves off to sleep in our most prestigious hotels, we capital-dwellers find ourselves invaded by improperly-dressed hordes (some women having being terrified to the point of immodesty) brought by every arriving night-train. The majordomos, thinking themselves victims of morbid hallucination, if not some kind of suburban costume ball, can only stare with mouths agape at the spectacle. Flocks of peace-officers–who are dearer to us than anything except life itself–are summoned in such haste that they assume in advance that it is all some new anarchist jape, silently stroking their Napoleonic beards as they listen distractedly to the tremulous tales of woe confided to them by all these travelers, while eyeing them obliquely and suspiciously. Truly, had we not been convinced by reading the evidence of these dispatches from the south, delivered by electricity, we would hardly have known what to think. We might have been back in the Middle Ages!

“How can such melodramatic phenomena still be produced in the midst of our constitutional and highly-regulated civilization? Is it not repugnant to Common Sense? Is there any rhyme or reason to the continued existence of these cataclysms, whose time is past? No! They are, to put it simply, an affront to all received ideas, and they require prompt repression. Can it be that in our enlightened century, 6,000 people–decent people, for the most part–cannot innocently take the air without being exposed to the danger of being crushed by some altogether unexpected trepidation of the ground? There is a vague odor of obscurantism about it, in my opinion.

“How can these shakings and shatterings be subjected to wise regimentation? How can they be *muzzled*, so to speak, and ingeniously placed under a proper administrative regime? Without any undue beating around the bush, that it what it must come down to. Otherwise, Science, which is everything–absolutely everything–will finish up by seeming no more than a decoy, likening us to mere playthings of Celestial Mechanics... and that is unacceptable.

“It is true that the subterranean strata, in certain volcanic regions, still present appreciable, if temporary, difficulties of investigation–but must we therefore remain permanently at the mercy of the long-term graciousness of a sulphur-spring, dependent upon it from day to day? Would it not be better to resign ourselves, as practical savants have proposed, to the task of emptying out this Vesuvius as soon as possible, thereby lancing an excessively swollen boil on the planet’s surface? That is beyond question!

“The most revolting aspect of this adventure is that many people who are tolerated in our great cities, under some doubtful title (that of *artist*, I believe), have the audacity to make fun of Progress by suggesting that these calamitous japes of our star, these blind oscillations of the Italian terrestrial strata, demonstrate the interference in our affairs of secret, mischievous and hurtful Powers. Oh yes! It is this misconceived idea (and no other) that is concealed by all those transparent insinuations–reticences, even–of certain newspapers, and we see them coming! Oh yes, we see them coming–for these cheap wordsmiths are always behind the times in their opinions on matters: their ulterior motive is to bring back idle kings, baronial rights and the Inquisition; they are a disease within the social body. To be sure, I don’t deny it, we decorate them, cover them with gold, satiate them with admiring and warmly sympathetic demonstrations–but, at bottom, we know perfectly well that we hate and despise them like the mud on our shoes. Were it not for the spirit of moderation that is the guiding principle of our existence and our epoch, we would have clubbed them all to death a long time ago–but that might be a trifle excessive.

“It is, therefore, necessary for us to prepare a hideous death for them, of which we shall be able, ostensibly, to wash our hands. I believe I am under the protection of a universal vow of secrecy in taking it upon myself to declare it. Oh well, the idea has occurred to me that they ought to be committed to Mother Nature, since they are of the opinion that she exists. So this is my proposal:

“Monsieur Eve del Rio {153} having been kind enough to communicate to us his forecasts–which have, alas, been proven all-too-justified, in the light of the events of the second of this month–we should exploit his amiability again by asking him to be kind enough to tell us precisely where, in his view, the most difficult and the most suspect terrain is located, with regard to some future earthquake: the most imminent possible.

“Once the predictions of this modern Jonah have been obtained, I propose that an enormous granite-roofed building should be erected on the most endangered spot, in preparation for the useful event. Once that is done, I propose that with all the persuasive and honeyed wheedlings of which we are, thank God, past masters, we should invite and there establish the entire inspired swarm of these alleged Dreamers–whom Plato wished, were he able to arrange it, to be crowned with roses and thrown out of the gates of the Republic. The contingent nature of the catastrophe will absolve us, in the eyes of the Law, from all responsibility for their annihilation.

“In brief, we shall offer them comfortable lodgings–sumptuous, even–with good views, sun-loungers, horizons, stars, cliffs, myrtles, fine wines, novels, flowers, birds–in sum, the surroundings in which these gentlemen are best able to perceive their insipid phantasmagorias. And since they obstinately insist, in spite of all the evidence, in continuing to believe in the Mysterious, they will thus be delivered to the Mysterious! With the result that at the moment when they least expect it:

krrraaaak!

“And we are disencumbered! And we will rub our hands gleefully at that news, while wishing them bon voyage to Pluto’s realm.

“In this fashion, these periodic interventions of the Absurd, these somersaults of the last blind forces of Nature, will be utilized and rationalized... *Simila similibus.*[{154}]

“When all the calculations are done, it will be economical. The material we shall replace on the surface of the globe, from time to time, will renew this process of social purgation.

“And the final proof that I am in the right in putting forward, after mature consideration, this proposal, is this: if we had had the choice of exchanging the 6,000 honorable persons crushed in the recent catastrophe for 6,000 soilers of paper, who among us would have hesitated, even for a second?”

Epilogue:

The Marvelous Visions of

Doctor Tribulat Bonhomet

To Monsieur Emile Pierre [{155}]

I will not contend forever, said the Eternal.
Isaiah chapter 57: verse 12.[{156}]

The French newspapers have–without due consideration, as usual–broadcast the news (happily false, at present) of the sudden death of our illustrious friend Doctor Bonhomet, whose recent theses, notably those entitled *On the Influence of* Cantharides *on the Clergy of Chandernagor,*[{157}] *On the Rehabilitation of St Vincent de Paul* [{158}] and–most of all–*On the Secularization of the Supreme Pontiff* have provoked such scandalous polemics in the last six months.

Here, restored to their true proportions, are the facts.

Although more than 20 years have elapsed since the frightful seizure that Madame Claire Lenoir caused him *with her eyes looking into infinity after death*, that hallucination–as to whose exact nature one can scarcely express an opinion–had increased the Doctor's organic neurosis to the point of hypochondria. The spasmodic attacks were becoming chronic–so much so that having moved the entire Faculty of Paris with his woes, one of our leading men prescribed *human milk* as a palliative, if not a sedative, to put a stop to his episodes.

The idea of this medication, which he presumed to be anodyne, brought a singular smile to Doctor Bonhomet's face. Having taken himself off, therefore, to the office of the most fashionable agency for the provision of wet-nurses, his eventual choice, after long and careful consideration, was fixed on a strong and luxuriant Cauchois [{159}] with an immense head of red hair of the *follow me, young man* sort, long enough to reach the ground. He immediately took her home in his coach, at a rapid trot. There, he guided her silently through an interminable labyrinth of vast, deserted and dimly lit rooms, whose lamps were perpetually enveloped in veils of gauze and whose furniture was hidden beneath dusty sheets.

When they arrived at the third drawing-room, the nurse took fright and asked, in an anxious voice: "Where's the child?"

With his eyes on the ceiling, and letting his eyebrows fall into a plaintive triangle, the taciturn Doctor assumed an unnaturally high voice and hoarsely squeaked these two unexpected words: “It’s m-m-m-meee!”

Stunned by this reply, the nurse fell back on to the huge sofa which had been put at her disposal–and the Doctor, profiting from this fortuitous circumstance, flung himself upon her and took a copious dose of medicine. Eventually, to reassure the nurse and make her understand that he was a home-loving and orderly man, he muttered, while rolling his eyes: “Look at that! You can’t get *that* in a restaurant!”

The remedy having had no effect on his condition, however, Monsieur Bonhomet felt compelled to give it up after three weeks of dutiful trial. It then became necessary for him to find an energetic means to put a stop to the flow of Fructuence’s milk as soon as possible (Fructuence {160} was the nurse’s name). After mature deliberation, Bonhomet, repudiating drugs, potions and herbs, decided upon the impressionist method, and simply gave her a fright which all-but-loosened her reason. Eventually, the Cauchois’ spirits having rallied again, Fructuence remained in Bonhomet’s employ, intending–thanks to the Doctor’s careful little attentions–to devote her life to him. In the fullness of time, she became his housekeeper.

Resolved thereafter to confine himself to drastics, hydragogues and minoratives,{161} the Doctor abruptly left Paris and took himself off to a country house that he owned, in order to treat himself at leisure. It was situated in the heart of a rather disreputable forest in the vicinity of the town of Digne,{162} which his friends believed to be his birthplace. He took his faithful Fructuence with him.

Certain earthquakes which occurred at that time–already forgotten, with good reason–and the cyclones that followed them, aggravated the neurotic depression from which he suffered, thanks to his innate sensitivity. Judging that his condition had worsened, he had to stay in bed on the second of this month–to the extent that at about midnight on the third or fourth, while powerful gusts of wind and rain moaned around his house, his desolate Fructuence hastened, in a flood of tears, to respond to his summons.

“Open the window!” ordered Bonhomet.

The poor woman having obeyed, Bonhomet cast a glance at the sky.

“Always stars!” he muttered bad-temperedly, turning towards the wall. “They never end!”

Once the window was closed again, and while Fructuence was still crying, Bonhomet said: “Calm down, Fructuence! Nothing consoles us. I too have had friends–very dear friends! I don’t know how it came about, but various breaches of trust to which they fell victim plunged them into proverbial destitution and our relations became tepid, soon cooling off entirely and finally turning to hostility: a hostility which obliged me, albeit regretfully, to submit them to a series of strange catastrophes in which they lost, if not honor, at least life. We should never love too much, my good Fructuence! Wipe your eyes... and, above all, don’t forget, in the depths of your grief, to slide a bottle of old cognac into my coffin!”

“Why?” moaned Fructuence, hesitantly.

“To kill the worm!”{163}

At that, the terrified Fructuence left the room, crying uncontrollably.

Left alone, Monsieur Bonhomet felt the need to set things right with God, to whom he had so long displayed such wise antagonism. (It goes without saying that, everyone having only the God in whom he condescends to believe, the God of Doctor Bonhomet probably differs in numerous respects from the God of Isaiah, Saint Paul, Saint Laurent, Saint Blandine, Christopher Columbus, Saint Louis, Saint Bernard, Blaise Pascal and many other superficial souls seemingly deprived of the enlightenment of that dear Good Sense of which we others, spoiled children of the Ages, have obtained through our discoveries–without fear of contradiction–the exclusive monopoly.)

“Lord!” called the prudent Doctor, interlacing his fingers. “As a child, I loved you; lately, I have run you down; actually, I forgive you.”

So saying, he shut his eyes–and his remarkable self, his most intimate sensation, lost no time in plunging into a coma–whose unusually lethargic character caused the local reporters to err. We were urgently summoned to Digne by Fructuence, in order to assist at the Doctor’s funeral rites–and it was upon his sudden reawakening that we received the following revelations.

However inconceivable it may seem, it appears that, after he fell into a coma, visions–yes, *visions*–were ignited in the depths of the ordinarily-less-eruptive brain of the author of *On the Tadpole*, and that it was during the denouement of one of them that he re-entered into society, still hallucinating.

Here, without commentary, is what he told us he had seen and heard.

Transported in spirit to the limits of Space, it seemed to him that he bathed in that which he had stigmatized throughout his life with the nickname of *the Blue*.

Suddenly, he believed that he perceived, woven in cloud, the silhouette of an Old Man of the most decorous appearance.

"Is it to *le bon Dieu* himself, or only to Boieldieu {164} that I have the honor of speaking?" he queried rubbing the fingers of imaginary gloves as he accosted the apparition.

"No, Monsieur," the denizen of the sky replied, with exquisite courtesy. "It's to Tardieu."{165}

"Better *tardy* than never, my dear colleague!" Bonhomet exclaimed, risking this innocent play on words, which some recent reading of one of our fashionable chroniclers had doubtless suggested to him.

The pun having dissipated–so to speak–his grave colleague, Bonhomet had no sooner found himself alone again on the mystical threshold of the boundless Firmament than a powerful whisper boomed in his ear. Although it did not deafen our sympathetic physician, this Voice resonated in him and all around him with such force of identity that Bonhomet wondered momentarily whether Death might be using him as a ventriloquist's dummy.

Was it, in fact, the voice of God that the doctor, an enlightened man, declared to be, at that moment, neither bass, nor baritone, nor trial, nor laruettes, but–being more elevated in tone–a Tyrolean yodel?{166}

"You did not remember me while you were alive," said the Voice.

"Excuse me, Lord," Bonhomet protested–having no doubt, this time, as to the quality of his interlocutor–"but... I have a terrible memory for names."

"You have tormented the poor, solely because the sight of their misery offended your indolence."

"Lord, did you not say that it is necessary to return good for evil? That did not seem to me to be sufficient; the poor, by their bad education, tested my delicacy on many occasions, and I returned *the best* for evil. Unfortunately, the best is sometimes the enemy of the good."

"You allowed those who squandered their favors upon you to die of hunger."

"Lord," Bonhomet murmured, "I never give money to women, for fear that in their babbling with third parties, they might cite the money I would have given them to deny the real love proven by my kindnesses."

“You have soiled the immortality of your soul, in impurities where indifference wallows.”

“I did not believe in that vestige, I confess,” Bonhomet replied.

“What did you believe yourself to be?”

“A modern *after*thought.”{167}

“When will you set the mask aside?”

“After you, Lord,” the educated therapist replied, with the perfect smile of a man of the world.

“Always the joker,” observed the saddened Voice. “Oh well, return to the other jokers, then, so that your numerous population might inspire another of those pages of fire, shame and vomit that my Earthly soldiers spit out, century after century, before your kind.”

And it was at this Word, whose outmoded severity confounded the conciliatory play of the jolly repartee, that we were able to reopen the eyes of our illustrious friend–whose best, we feel sure, is yet to come.

A New Profession

The following facts were recently recorded in the local news section of the *Nouvelle de la Province*, in the equivocal, mocking, sometimes macaronic, and rather trivial style that excessively-advanced radicals–it must be admitted–often affect: a style which, while wishing to seem amiable, actually gives evidence of a sort of regression towards animality.

Recently united with the brilliant and already legendary Vicomte Hilaire de Rotybal, the worthy scion of a family of the most illustrious squireens of Angoumois, the delightful, young and melancholy Herminie, Vicomtesse (alas!) de Rotybal, née Bonhomet, was taking a walk in the park yesterday, at a rather late hour, her arm languidly supported by that of a well-known sublieutenant of cavalry, her cousin. Their way was lit by the stars of the balmiest of summer nights. Suddenly–emerging, it is believed from the crown of a certain large and distant tree–there came the sound of a detonation, similar to that of a rifle-shot. The exquisite young woman released a cry, and fainted into the arms of her shining knight.

Servants ran from the manor to assist her. Once she had been transported to her room, it was perceived that the chatelaine was dying; her lovely head had been half-shattered by a projectile, which her doctors, summoned in great haste, have not yet been able to extract, because of the abundant bloody tresses coagulated over the gaping wound.

This morning, at about ten minute to six, after a long, spasmodic and painful coma, the Vicomtesse gave up the ghost. An encephalic autopsy will be carried out in due course, after which the projectile will be placed in the hands of the proper authorities.

Grave suspicions are directed towards her husband, whose jealousy–if one can believe what is said–could have been aroused for some time, and with good reason. The overwhelming expectation is that he will be charged. One particular circumstance deserves mention: 20 minutes after the event, while everyone was searching high and low for the Vicomte, our agents happened upon him at the railway station, at the very moment when he was about to leap on to the Paris express, suitcase in hand.

Having been conducted to the abode of the examining magistrate–who was absent owing to the necessity of recording five other crimes–Monsieur

de Rotybal was obliged to spend the night in jail. During the journey there, he only deigned to speak to the Commissioner of Police about a certain Society of Divorcers *(?) in Paris, to which he desired (vainly) to send a telegraph message that would, he said, instruct them to* suspend an important command. *Is he already feigning madness? It is presumed that by the time these lines appear he will have undergone his initial interrogation. A confession is eagerly awaited by the local populace; emotions are running high.*

Our readers may reassure themselves on one point. This time, in spite of the title *owned by the accused, the clergy will not be able to cover up the affair. Heaven no longer has any role to play in the petty affairs of our courts–thank God!* {168}

Here, according to the account rendered by the Clerk of the Court, is the strange conversation–by which even the most skeptical will be revolted–that took place the following morning in the office of the Examining Magistrate: the office to which the Vicomte de Rotybal was brought at the first opportunity, following his night of preventive detention.

The venerable Magistrate was, at first, slightly surprised by the appearance of the young man, whose distinguished face and manners made him seem incapable of having committed the odious crime in which popular rumor had implicated him. Very anxious, nevertheless, about a confrontation with the mortal remains of she to whom everyone was already referring as *his victim*, the young gentleman interrupted his interlocutor with the smile of a man of the world who never left it, adjusted his lorgnette with perfect calmness and said:

“I ought to warn you, Monsieur, that you are making a terrible mistake. One of the greatest displeasures that this enigmatic misadventure has caused me is that of being charged with a ridiculous act. But that’s the way the crowd is, with all its vain gossip! I ask you, would someone like me lie in wait in a tree, in order to shoot my own charming wife, as if she were a mere quail? And for reasons of *jealousy*? Ah, I would be twice as bad as Tamberlick if I sang my *Othellos* to the extreme of that C sharp.{169} If I am supposed even to be capable of playing such a fantastic part, would I not have been clever enough, at least, not to be caught red-handed? Let’s leave it at that. Besides, all these shadows of suspicion can be dissipated with a

single word. The profession that I follow is quite incompatible with these melodramas of another age: I am a *divorcer*.”[{170}]

“I beg your pardon?”

“A *divorcer*... provides grounds acceptable to the Senate. Because it is my duty to be expansive here, I shall explain.

“I should tell you, Monsieur, that after six months of marriage–as is generally the case, according to my estimate–the Vicomtesse and I, having recovered from our initial infatuation, were no longer bound by anything but the kind of affectionate esteem that renders mutual confidences so tender. In our world, you see, we do not accord any excessive importance to the prohibition of any new inclinations that one may develop over time. In order to familiarize you with the true situation of our household in a few words, I will briefly explain the conditions in which we agreed and contracted the alliance.

“Long before the marriage, my inheritance having been rapidly volatilized in the crucibles of gambling, feasting and womanizing, I had been obliged to recognize that my time would, as they say, have been up if a friend had not advanced me 500 *louis* in my darkest hour. How, then, could I continue to live in a dignified manner? *Noblesse oblige*, after all! Having asked myself that question repeatedly, while I remained idle, I finally decided to found the *Society of Divorcers*, of which I am the President.

“You shall see how simple the idea is. It is Christopher Columbus and the egg all over again.[{171}] I must add, though, that it is a secret–and the mysterious incident that has made me, so absurdly, your prisoner is the only thing that could draw the revelation from me. But why should I care? I am retiring: *après moi, le déluge*!”[{172}]

“Go on, go on,” said the Magistrate, opening his eyes wide.

“Here it is then.” At this point, the Vicomte adopted a confidential tone, delivering the following discourse with extreme rapidity: “As soon as we are forewarned by our emissaries–who are fine bloodhounds!–that some young person of an honorable family, *has a little too much to tell*,[{173}] I fall incontinently, as if from the sky, into the relevant province. My expenses are met by the Society, at 15 per cent interest. It is easy to arrange for me to be introduced to the distressed family. There, after casually letting my name drop, I allow it be understood–by means of the most discreet phraseology, of course–that I am ready to put the de Rotybal escutcheon (which, between ourselves, would rather stay at home) at the disposal of the frail creature

who has already been summoned to our elevated sphere–in the course of a traditional tour of Italy, for example. But, as the poet of *L'Honneur et l'Argent* {174} puts it so excellently, *business is business*, a jolly 100,000 francs, all in, is my price, payable upon the provisional contract of the marriage.

"Ah, you see! I am moving with the times. With my system, the whole world is happy. In brief, I am of those on whose tombstone *Transiit benefaciendo* {175} will be inscribed. To complete the transaction, I know how to insinuate to my bride, by means of a thousand poetic circumlocutions, that Nature–more enlightened than the customs in force when I was born–has endowed me with a definite *myopia*. Six months afterwards, in concert with the Vicomtesse, I do what I must, to establish an incompatibility of temperament, with ill-treatments, dissipations and, if necessary, concubinage, with the aid of diverse members of our Society–all of which is reciprocal, as unity makes for strength. I admit all the wrongs, I feign the most furious opposition... and bang! I divorce, leaving a name and a title to *my* son, a true Rotybal reclad in all the vestments of respectability. And there, you see, is our 100,000 francs.

"The following semester, acting on new advice, I go on to a virgin department. My economic circumstances having been strengthened by my earlier ventures, who could possibly mistrust me? I play the same game. Six months afterwards, bang! I divorce. And so on. My fortune grows like a snowball. The secret of success? A matter of lateral thinking. You see how simple it is. I repeat: it is the egg of Christopher Columbus."

On hearing these words, the Examining Magistrate stared silently at the young conqueror for rather a long time, then said: "The ignoble cynicism with which..."

"Permit me," Monsieur de Rotybal interrupted, still smiling, in the same flutelike voice. "I would have finished off the series–a full half-dozen–with my last alliance. One needs to know when to stop. My fortune is now restored, in any case, to the beautiful million of my dreams–which owes nothing to anyone, having been legally acquired. I was therefore just about to retire from business, allowing my sixth Vicomtesse to contemplate pleasantly, with her very dear cousin, the three antique pearls of the Rotybal crest that had done them so much good. Our divorce, the financial arrangements having been agreed in advance, is already in process. I was, as I say, finally on my way to make a fresh start in Paris–in a more

experienced and durable manner, this time–on the dear and delightful life of a playboy, the only one that a truly modern gentleman can and ought to prefer, when your myrmidons asked me to follow them and told me, on the way, about the tragic events of yesterday evening. Oh well–a bad night is soon passed.

"So here we are, today. You are and must be a serious man. Think about it. How believable is it that I, with these principles and this character–who cares as much for conjugal love as one of those dark-colored cherries the common people call *bad luck*–and with these positive, practical and precise tastes, encouraged by the Law, would commit such an insane and excessively scandalous act? It's a joke! Exterminate my wife! How can you think such a thing? It's damnable! No, Monsieur, I am too honest to kill my wife! In brief, I have chosen the status of model husband–and I stick to it."

"In a word," said the Magistrate, "in order to rebuild your fortune, you have made yourself into an entrepreneur of legal polygamy? You make a profession of marrying off your legitimate wives?"

"Would it seem preferable to you if I had made myself into a writer?"

"Before having recourse to this new extremity, could you not have solicited some honorable post?"

"Thank you! To make me pitiable? Or to obtain, by means of patronage, some such job as lubricator of railways–the kind of godsend whose diploma nearly always arrives after the decease of the beggar, like the remission granted to the four sergeants of La Rochelle?{176} I leave that to others! You know very well, serious man that you are, that a so-called clever man would always be better employed in courageously ruining his wife, installing in his own home some facile child, adroitly and elegantly pushing his stake into the kitty. As for the rest: mere trifles, excused or forgotten within a week. Believe me, it's best not to hurl stones at the opinion of the world. What good does it do to invite the smiling benevolence of the upper classes? Let us praise, by propriety and by duty, the morality of dreams that no one practices–all well and good!–but let us conform to the actual state of affairs. The debris of the lances broken by the Knight of the Doleful Countenance {177} has fallen into dust, retired long ago to the junk shops. I pity the reckless and incorrigible stick-in-the-muds who would refuse me their esteem–for which I do not care, in any case, having weighed it.

"On that note, Monsieur, as I am quite astonished to find myself a widower–a bizarre circumstance that I never anticipated–and as this would

be a bad time to question me further, will you permit me to go, in order to pay my belated last respects to her who is no more? I believe that her desolate cousin and *fiancé*, the Baron de Z***, has already gone into mourning; a longer delay on my part would be indecorous. As regards the inquest, you will conduct proceedings there more seriously than here, won't you? Let's go our separate ways, then. My tilbury must be waiting for me downstairs; my home is a 20 minute drive from here."

So saying, and while the Examining Magistrate was still listening with his mouth agape, the Vicomte de Rotybal got up from his chair, seized his hat and stood aside to allow the Magistrate to leave the room first.

At this point in the conversation, the Commissioner of Police for the town of *** entered precipitately, having returned from the Castle. After giving a sealed letter to the Examining Magistrate and proffering a deep bow to the young gentleman, he said: "Here is the report of the autopsy, drawn up in my presence by the Doctors of the Faculty."

Having glanced through the official document, it was with a new kind of stupor that the Magistrate read out the following report (drafted in the same radically flowery style, recommended for such purposes, that we observed at the beginning of this recital):

Monsieur the Examining Magistrate,

We hasten to bring to your attention the results of our examination. This morning, at eight o'clock, we had the honor of extracting from the cerebral pulp of Madame la Vicomtesse de Rotybal the projectile that was the cause of her death. We do not doubt that your astonishment will, if it is at all possible, surpass ours when we came to apprehend that this projectile is a very curious specimen of the mineral variety and not a leaden bullet at all. Here is the explanation, which is both simple and extremely bizarre, of its presence within the encephalic tissue of the corpse in question.

The Examining Magistrate will do well to remember, firstly, that in France, during our beautiful summer nights, in the epoch when Nature collects herself, so to speak, in the universal sentiment of Love, it is by the thousands and tens of thousands that one may count (as the most elementary Science informs us) those brilliant meteors, those moonstones, which trail through our atmosphere, sometimes bursting like the detonation of a firearm.

Now, the most singular thing! It happens that, after mature analysis, we are obliged to recognize, and cannot doubt, that this is a deadly danger, and it is to this kind of phenomenon (which is, fortunately, very rare) that the much-mourned chatelaine has been an innocent victim. Alas, purely by chance, the explosion of a bolide at the height attained by the tallest trees in the park forcefully projected this aerolith, as mortal as a shell, in a quasi-perpendicular manner, upon the head of the young dreamer! It is, therefore, to our satellite–in a word, it is to the Moon*–that it is necessary for us to attribute responsibility.*

Our dean, the Professor of Natural History, has the honor of asking Monsieur le Vicomte de Rotybal for authorization to deposit this deadly specimen of the heavens in the town museum.

To all of which we swear, on this day of June 1885.

*Signed: Drs. L*** and K****

"Well, well!" exclaimed Monsieur de Rotybal, calmly, at the end of this reading. "A miracle! And as for that newspaper jester who proclaimed that *heaven no longer has any role to play in our petty affairs*..."

After a moment of profound silence, the Examining Magistrate declared: "Monsieur le Vicomte, you are free to go!"

Monsieur de Rotybal, not without a grave smile, bowed.

A few moments afterwards, down below in the plaza, in the midst of a crowd that greeted his reappearance with joyous cries, the Vicomte lit a cigarette. Always scrupulous, he scribbled a few hasty words notifying the *Society of Divorcers* to suspend their proceedings, which were to be dispatched by his groom from the local telegraph office. Then, taking the reins of his tilbury in hand once again, the Vicomte disappeared at a trot towards his ancestral home.

The Golden Candlestick Agency {178}

To Monsieur Emile Pierre {179}

Chastity is wheat; marriage, corn;
fornication, dung.

Saint Jerôme {180}

A recent law, passed by the two Chambers of the Senate, specifies, in one of its additional clauses, that “a legitimate wife, whose inconstancy is discovered *in flagrante delicto*, shall not be able to marry her accomplice.”{181}

This powerful spiritual corrective, which has put a distinct damper on the enthusiasm with which a great number of model households would have welcomed such an unexpected discovery, has darkened many a charming face. Their gazes, silences and stifled sighs–their entire attitudes, in sum seem to say: “In that case, what’s the good of...?”

Forgetful beauties! This is Paris! Is not the city that surrounds us, ablaze with the fire of perpetual artifice and strange surprise, a capital to disconcert the imagination of a Scheherazade? In a city of a thousand-and-one marvels the realization of the extraordinary is mere child’s play.

The day after the senatorial *ukase* was issued, an actualist with a flowing mane, an innovator of genius, Major Hilarion des Nénuphars, had discovered the practical expedient so desirable to our dear malcontents. He will dissipate the pouts and bring back the smiles that have recently disappeared, for some days, from the delightful visages of our sentimentalists. Thanks to his enlightened practicality, the Golden Candlestick Agency has been established. Since its opening, it has been a triumph, the talk of elegant Parisian society; recourse to its services, for the *mondaines*, will be the ultimate in *pizzazz* this autumn.

The Agency undertakes to locate illusory Romeos: seeming-seducers. Those commissioned, in consideration of a few petty banknotes, will allow themselves to be caught *in flagrante delicto* in fictitious adultery, with individuals who will then be able to espouse their real lovers, calmly, after a decent interval following the scandal.

The service is confidential, and fully guaranteed. It furnishes people with the raw material of divorce, in carefully controlled conditions. A legal and properly regulated institution, it addresses itself to women who, disillusioned with a less-than-ideal marriage, are nevertheless anxious to be tempted into a new and honest attempt.

As regards security, the Major has thought of everything! Considering that his mission in modern society is almost sacerdotal, the sympathetic entrepreneur of adultery approaches his work methodically, and with the utmost delicacy. He always takes measures, 24 hours in advance of each *session*, to ensure that his acolyte can respond effectively to his client's needs. He requires each officially-appointed Lovelace {182} to ingest a certain concoction–an elixir whose sovereign properties are academically approved–whose beneficial property (*noblesse oblige*!) is to render his followers from that point onwards inoffensive, incorruptible and temporarily incapable of the most innocent effervescence. After assimilating this compound, these hirelings would be able, if necessary, to double for Saint Anthony {183} without any conspicuous disadvantage; it is a sort of home-made Lethe {184} that can reduce the quicksilver of the most fervent African caprices to polar temperatures! For this reason, no abuse of circumstances remains within the bounds of possibility. It is a point of honor of the Establishment. Even the most sensitive lover, having urgently confided his beloved to one of these de-thirsted Tantaluses,{185} need not suffer any loss of sleep. Convention being safeguarded by this ingenious formality, the world will now permit the intervention of these inconsequential third parties in all divorces of distinction.

All women who are thus enabled to marry again and again, indefinitely, at the behest of their successive inclinations, are offered henceforth to the public by the Golden Candlestick Agency. A few of our most amiable freethinkers have even taken out a subscription, for simplicity's sake.

From the very outset of his enterprise, Major Hilarion des Nénuphars understood that, for the sake of his enterprise's future, he must surround himself with a company of representatives worthy of the scabrous ministry in which he proposed to invest them. His eye immediately fell upon that brilliant elite of young men who, after leading *princely* trains in the good old days of the General Union,{186} embracing the delicate and facile amours offered by famous seaside resorts and enjoying the full flower of brightly-lit

feasting, woke up one fine morning to find their fortunes radically tarnished by the sudden squall of the Crash.

Since that psychological moment, the sagacious Major, moved by some presentiment of his destiny, had never lost sight of the principal victims of that ruination in the ranks of Parisian youth, who remained outwardly elegant even while inwardly harassed by pangs of hunger. They, it now appeared to him, were fundamentally best-qualified to undertake the role of official sycophants legitimated by the restrictions of the law. It was, therefore, on the very same evening that the agency was founded that he gathered these disillusioned gentlemen together, in a conference-hall hired for that purpose. The austere Hall of the Geographical Society closed its indiscreet doors upon them. There, without circumlocution or preamble, the ardent innovator boldly set his utilitarian and productive concept before them, while brandishing his glass of sugared water and telling them that they would be heroes.

His reception was tumultuous! The enterprise appeared to them as a verdant isle to survivors of a shipwreck. Here was their fortune, their future! They would be seen again in the Bois de Boulogne, at *premières*, shoving gold across the cloths in the casinos, passing by at the gallop in the sunlit dust of the evening, entering houses of mirrors with stars on their arms! Hurrah! The Major was the object of such an ovation that he had to cut it short–and had, for safety's sake, immediately to announce the *moral guarantee* (the formality of the home-made Lethe)–which, pronounced in the interval between two heartbeats, cooled the ardor of the most enthusiastic as if by magic.

Many of them hesitated–but thanks to the orator's eloquence, even the most stubborn soon gave in to the evident necessity of that guarantee. An element of seeming to be in perfectly good taste, in the circumstances, it was agreed that the cup of Forgetfulness would be drained in symbolic honor of Saint-Touch-me-Not. It is the Gallic way to be undeterred by such obstacles. An hour afterwards, the Golden Candlestick Agency was duly established, and they went their separate ways full of hope. Today, Paris is infatuated with it! The Office is open all hours; its services are selling at a premium–and the highest feminine influences are already making plans to obtain the Prix Montyon {187} for its seraphic founder.

If it is necessary to reveal all, the truth is that Major des Nénuphars had done things in an aristocratic manner, neglecting no measure that might

reassure and satisfy his innumerable clientele! Thus, special premises are set aside for the supreme rendezvous: agreements made with various fashionable hotels will assure, henceforth, that outraged spouses (who are abundant) will have easy, comfortable and convenient access to the illicit chamber. Pavilions, easy to encircle, decorated inside with the rarest gifts of Flora, are put at the disposal of the *divorceuses*. The husband arrives unexpectedly, in response to an anonymous letter drafted in such a way as to make the most complacent leap to his feet. To avoid unnecessary danger, the police commissioners of the quarters where the Agency has branches are always forewarned in good time, by telephone, and arrive as if by chance to offer their assistance, at the thresholds of the pavilions, to husbands who have lost control of themselves. The divorce follows almost as a matter of course.

There are, in consequence, no more precipitate flights across the rooftops, no more ridiculous performances on balconies, no more protracted cold spells and no more outmoded pistol-shots. Everything proceeds with perfect distinction–which constitutes real progress, a satisfactory supersession of the barbarisms of former days.

While awaiting the conjugal apparition, our heroes read their female clients choice morsels from our best authors, or tell them stories.

Hairdressers of the finest quality set the hair of the two *guilty parties* in advance, or arrange them in an artful disorder, according to the character of the spouse.

By a subtle sentiment of convention, in which the exquisite delicacy of the Major is recognizable yet again, an electrically operated phonograph is hidden in the wall. This interjects various impassioned phrases, spasmodic and incoherent, while the husband is hammering on the door with the statutory indignation and making his notes.

Finally, in order to put divorce within the reach of all incomes, there are first, second and third-class *Flagrante Delictos*, just as there are first, second and third-class burials: the *funeral rites of honor*![{188}]

The head office of the Agency is installed, naturally, in the Rue de Regard; the portal is surmounted by an emblematic bust of Plato;[{189}] the agents of the House of the Golden Candlestick have assumed, as a proud motto, the celebrated diplomatic adage:

Non possumus [{190}]

Such is the institution’s cachet: Professional standards of secrecy; discretion as a matter of honor; branches all over Paris; fixed prices. Accept no substitutes!

To sum up, this intelligent enterprise–whose authenticity we have taken great pains to determine–will be inevitable in the near future, thanks to the manner in which the restriction of the Law of Divorce has been worded.

Is not its aim–to regularize the awkward situation in which soulmates so often find themselves, in society–legitimate?

As regards the large number of its employees, since it feeds and occupies them, is it not a derivative of and a safety valve for the social steam of those negligible minorities whose starveling idleness would, sooner or later, have become a threat?

Now, from the moral viewpoint, since the ancient sacred vows of marriage can only, in the wake of the law, be conditional in France, is it not perfectly logical, after all, that the old perjuries of adultery should become fictitious? Comedians on one side, puppets on the other.

Today, in France, the ideal is to be free–which goes to prove, yet again, that wisdom is here independent of any onerous fidelity.

But here is another strange thing! In spite of the minute precautions taken by Major Hilarion des Nénuphars, prudery is shocked, not by the principle but by the form of artificial *Flagrante Delictos*! In brief, certain piquant brunettes of the highest birth, have alleged, with conviction, that the ceremony of the home-made Lethe only offers them partial reassurance.

To forestall any inconvenience that might be caused by the excessive anxieties of all these fearful clients, the Major–this time cutting the Gordian knot in the manner of Alexander–will create an annex of his Agency: the Oriental Office. He will bring, with all due haste, from Constantinople, a company–the cream of the crop, as they say–of ex-guardians of the seraglio, who have been redundant since the tragic death of the old sultan.{191}

These Orientals–of a type carefully reviewed, as everyone knows, by Coptic entrepreneurs–are white, handsome, intrepid and athletic, but naturally timid; they will make perfect substitutes for their existing colleagues because a moral particularity which they all hold in common dispenses with the need for the formality of the Elixir of Forgetfulness. Mustapha-ben-Ismail, seduced by the Turkish invention of the idea, has

already agreed to cede to us, you may be assured, the two superb specimens that the press has recently lionized–although, by a scruple of conscience, the Agency has refused to acquire them *because of their dark color*.

Now that the news of this Annex has been broadcast, the joy of high society is unalloyed: our elegant ladies are already doting on their future *patitos* {192} and the *actions* (note the irony!) of ruined young men are somewhat in decline.

The last word in good taste will be, for these women, to place themselves in the care of their illusory *cicisbeos*,{193} so full of charming attention, and to shower them with trinkets, sweets and the thousand delicate compensations that the enchanting sex, unrivalled in questions of tact, is so well able to imagine. Even now, a delegation of young inconstants, provided with symbolic bouquets, is waiting on the beach at Nice, in the shade of lush orange-trees, for the vessel that is bringing us these courageous and underappreciated individuals. Exquisite madness will provide their ovation! Here, at its finest, is the infatuation of French women for everything that is new! They want to do their utmost to make these spoiled children forget the *fatherland*.

Um! That will be difficult.

Everyone, of course, loves the soil that has given birth to him: the country which nourished his childhood, where his eyes, opening to the light of day, perceived friendly smiling expressions around his cradle. Yes, certain impressions of infancy are ineradicable.

In any case, if they are to be naturalized, here are the electors who will demand the necessary constitutional amendments with peacock cries: “Allah! Allah! oh, Allah!”

This will reinforce the senatorial majority. The left already pretends that this will be the swan song of Opportunism. Astonishingly, after a certain number of noisy legal proceedings, each of these Byzantine gentlemen will have been able to acquire, without any effort, a natural renown to eclipse the glory of Don Juan! That is how History is made.

And what a thunderous success they have already had! Fearful of being unable to fulfill his orders this winter, the Major telegraphs Asia every evening, so as to be ready for any eventuality.

Let’s go, gentlemen! Extend your hands to the women! Collect your tickets at the Golden Candlestick Agency. And since the Senate permits it, let’s all go out singing!

The Disquietor

To Monsieur René d'Hubert {194}

> *And I saw that everything is but a vanity of vanities, and that even that word is but one more vanity.*
>
> Ecclesiastes {195}

In the spring of 1887, a veritable epidemic of sensibility {196} descended upon the capital, desolating it until the dog-days.{197} A sort of current of elegiac neuroticism penetrated the thickest temperaments, running rife with unprecedented intensity through the homes of fiancés, lovers–even husbands–subjected to the severance of sudden death. Crazed scenes of absolute *despair* unworthy of modern people were manifested daily in the course of many funerals–sometimes going so far as to disrupt the work of the gravediggers in the cemeteries, who were engaged in hand-to-hand fights with a considerable number of inconsolable individuals. The newspapers spoke only of lovers, but even husbands were reduced by emotion to the point at which they fell into the graves of their dear departeds, refusing to come out, embracing the coffins and demanding to be buried with them. These crises–these tragic arias, as the upholders of order and propriety called them, albeit in a low voice–had become so frequent that the undertakers' mutes literally did not know any longer which way to turn, causing those who followed in their train endless delays, traffic jams, confusions, etc. But how could one prohibit or punish seizures whose victims, no matter how irregular their behavior might be, were as helpless as they were respectable?

The problem of obviating these strange inconveniences, if it were possible to do so, eventually led to an enquiry being addressed to the famous *Liberal Academy of Inventors-to-Excess*. Its founder and president, the young and austere consultant engineer Monsieur Juste Romain{198}–a spirited partisan of progress, upstanding and devoid of prejudice, whose eulogy has not yet been written–was quick to respond by offering his advice. Alas, the imagination of these worthy gentlemen appeared, in this

case, singularly sluggish, sterile and bankrupt of ideas. As Fate does not wait, any and all measures had to be urgently taken, for want of the ideal.

For this reason, engines were put to work whose appearance seemed to be the only thing capable of calming and cooling down the excessively lyrical expansions of regret in grieving hearts: for example, those ingenious machines called funiculars–in action today in our principal cemeteries–thanks to which we are now interred mechanically, which is much more expeditious, more modern and perhaps more decent than being interred by hand. With three turns of a jack, a crane with a rope deposits you–together with your bier–in the hole, like a simple parcel. *Crack!* A dumper-truck tips muddy rubble. *Vrrroom!* The job is done. Look–you've disappeared! Then it rolls towards the next opening, to another coffin, and the process is repeated. Without this rapidity, it is obvious that the municipal employees would be overworked. Given the affluence and the ever-growing numbers of the population, the sinister personnel of Funeral Directors would be quite unable to cope, and the level of service would undoubtedly suffer.

This merely physical remedy was, however, evidence of an appreciable impuissance in the species. Various accidents having rendered the usage of the machines inopportune–at least in these exceptional circumstances–the search continued for *something else*. Rumors soon began to circulate that some unknown genius had found the necessary expedient.

Now, while all this was going on, the day came when–on a bright sunlit morning–a hearse pulled by two somber horses passed along the verdant tree-lined bank of the river. It was heaped with wreaths of violets, white heather, tea-roses and forget-me-nots. It was on its way to one of the suburban fields of rest.

The fringes of the mortuary draperies sparkled like silvery frost all around the ambulant floral harvest that transformed the morose hearse into a monstrous bouquet. And who should be walking behind it, bareheaded with a handkerchief applied to his face, three paces ahead of the long procession of pedestrians and carriages, but Monsieur Juste Romain himself. He was to be tested in his turn; in less than 24 hours, his wife–his delicate wife–had succumbed...

In the eyes of the world, it is decidedly improper to lead, in person, the procession of a much-beloved spouse, but Monsieur Juste Romain had not the slightest care for the world's opinion at that moment. After scarcely five months of conjugal bliss, alas, he had seen his only one, his better half, his

passionate partner in life, extinguished. Life no longer offered anything for him to savor–that conclusion was truly inescapable, was it not? Chagrin led him astray to the extent that even his work on society's behalf no longer seemed to him to merit anything but a bitter laugh! Of what importance to him now were bridges and roads? Nervous by nature, he felt a multitude of sharp shocks, caused by a thousand memories of joy forever lost. His regrets enlivened themselves and augmented themselves, reinflated by the ambient solemnity of the place of precedence that he had the honor to occupy, in being set aside from his peers, in a class of his own, immediately behind the sumptuous hearse–from which something of the majesty of Death seemed to gush out upon him and his dolor, *poeticizing* his plight. But the intimate simplicity of his sadness, which the theatrical sentiment served only to falsify, festered at each step, eventually becoming intolerable. A contradictory sensation of ridiculousness eventually corroded the stiffness of his vainglorious desolation.

In the meantime, he held himself together. Although emotion made his legs tremble, he had at various times during the journey refused–with an almost impatient "No! Let me be!"–all assistance offered in friendship. Now, though, the guests of the advance party, who were observing him closely were beginning to fear that certain details of the final ceremony–the grainy noise of the first spadeful of earth and rubble falling on the wood of the coffin, for example–might have a dangerous effect on him. Ahead of the processions, the long forms of burial vaults were already perceptible in silhouette... they were anxious.

Suddenly, a young man of about 20 left his place in the procession. Clad in elegant mourning-dress, he came forward, carrying a bouquet of red roses encircled by *immortelles*. His gilded hair, his graceful figure and his tearful eyes created a favorable impression. Passing the honorary president of the Inventors-to-Excess, he went on–doubtless no longer able to master his grief–to draw level with the flowery cart. Having inserted his bouquet among the others, at the exact spot where the dead woman's head might be presumed to lie, he seized one of the handles of the coffin, drawing himself towards it, and a sob escaped his breast.

The astonishment of seeing the intensity of his own pain shared with a stranger–whose fine bearing annoyed him rather than awakening his sympathy, although he did not know why–caused the engineer to tread more firmly all of a sudden. Elevating his eyebrows, he wiped his eyes, which

were no longer quite so moist. *Doubtless some relative whom Victurnienne had forgotten to mention to me!* he thought.

After a few steps more, while the groans of the young *relative* showed no sign of discontinuing–in contrast to his own, which had been calmed as if by magic–the bereaved husband added through clenched teeth: “It doesn’t matter! But it’s odd that I’ve never seen him in our home!” Approaching the handsome stranger, he asked in a low voice: “Is Monsieur not a cousin of... the deceased?”

“Alas, Monsieur, more than a brother!” muttered the young man, whose large blue eyes were staring. “We loved one another so! What charm! What abandon! What grace! And what a faithful heart! Oh, but for that unfortunate marriage of convenience, which kept us... but what am I saying? My thoughts are so disturbed...”

“I am her husband, Monsieur. Who are you?” said Monsieur Romain, without ceasing to muffle his voice, although he had become gradually aghast.

These simple words seemed to have an electric effect on the blond newcomer. He straightened up very quickly, chilled by surprise. Neither of them was crying now. “What? How? You are... it’s you who... Oh, accept my sincere apologies, Monsieur. I thought you would be at home, as is customary... and later, this evening, without fail I shall explain to you... I... a thousand pardons! But...”

A cab was just passing; the imprudent young man leapt into it, shouting at the coachman: “Go on! At the gallop! Straight ahead! A ten-franc tip!”

Dumbfounded, unable to quit his lugubrious post in order to pursue the already-distant sentimental Don Juan, the great Inventor Juste Romain was nevertheless able, thanks to the keenness of eye appropriate to touchy spouses, to remark and remember the number of the cab.

Once at the Field of Rest, the crowd around the flowery pit admired the firm and calm manner–for which even his friends had not dared to hope–in which Monsieur Romain expedited the last and most ominous formalities. Everyone was struck by the self-possession which he showed; the esteem that he enjoyed as a serious man was further increased, to the extent that several men with contracts to put out resolved to entrust their projects to him in future–and that the eternal *blunderer* present at all such assemblies, moved by his courage, thoughtlessly offered him an extremely ill-timed congratulation.

It goes without saying that, as soon as it became possible, the engineer slipped away from his entourage, ran to the entrance of the burial-ground, leapt into one of the carriages and hastily gave his address. Enclosed behind the raised windows, he crossed and recrossed his legs at least 20 times on the way.

When he arrived home, the first thing his wandering eyes perceived, lying on the hall table, was a large square envelope on which he could read, in block capitals: *URGENT COMMUNICATION*. To open it was the work of a moment. This is what it contained:

Paris, April 1, 1887.

Administration of Funeral Ceremonies

Office of the Director

Monsieur,

By virtue of the ministerial order dated February 31, 1887, it is our duty to inform you that–for the exercise of the current year–the administration has the assistance of a body, called disquietors *or* weepers*, designed to function in the course of burials whose ceremonies are entrusted to us. This quintessentially modern measure deserves the title of an entirely humanitarian innovation: it has been taken on the advice of the Faculty of Physiology, ratified by the legal practitioners of Paris, notified to us on the above-mentioned date.*

Given the establishment of the endemic Neurosis, rising towards Hysteria, which has recently descended on the population, and also with the object of avoiding in young widowers–who are notoriously prone to excessively sharp grief for their deceased wives and who are at risk of being overcome by sudden overwhelming urges to hurl themselves, contrary to custom, into graves during interments–it has been legally decreed that, on the recommendation of a Senior Doctor on official attachment to the obsequies, who judges that the surviving conjunct has overestimated his strength in this regard, and to spare the aforesaid conjunct nervous crises, cerebral shocks, fainting fits and eventual comas–in sum, all uselessly dramatic manifestations in whose train natural disorders are liable to follow, even to the extent of inhibiting the proper effectuation of the aforesaid interment–that one of our new employees, called Disquietors*, will be dispatched to the ceremony with the purpose of effectuating in him, according to his temperament, some moral diversion analogous to a revulsive or a cauterization in the physical realm. This diversion, by striking the imagination of the survivor and giving rise to unexpected sentiments, ought in effect, to give him the heart to face, coolly and distractedly, the sad necessities of the situation.*

Monsieur, the young blond man you met this morning is merely one of these employees; it is unnecessary to attest that he has never seen or known her whom you will henceforth be able to mourn, in your home, in complete liberty, without any subsequent inconvenience to public order.

Our clients are not indebted to us for any supplementary tax, the honoraria of the Disquietors being included in the general expenses of our department.

Yours, etc.

p.p. the Director
POISSON {199}

As soon as the swooning effect that this circular had caused in him wore off, that austere partisan of progress Juste Romain–without taking notice of the dates specified therein–unhesitatingly dispatched by registered letter his resignation as President of the Society of Inventors-to-Excess. His intention, as soon as his resignation came into effect, was to challenge Monsieur the Minister of the Interior to a duel to the death, and likewise Monsieur the Director of Funeral Celebrations, having previously strangled their young instrument.

However, time and reflection suffice to set all things in order, do they not?

Maître Pied

To Monsieur Guy de Maupassant [{200}]

Firmly resolved, this time, to make my fortune–with a view to becoming what the world calls a *down-to-earth* man–I felt in need of a Mentor. And what better choice was there, for advice of the most substantial and most subtle kind, than my family's old lawyer, Maître Pied,[{201}] who was reputed to be the most practical jurist in Normandy?

I remembered thinking about him on evenings of old, in the big provincial town where, my name having been entered for the study of law, I followed that course with such scant exactitude. I recalled to mind his cold face, his gold-rimmed spectacles, his expression of wise indifference, his jutting jaw, the matter-of-factness of his precise speech, his phlegmatic taciturnity, his pale receding brow–and the more I thought about him, the more I felt that he would be the best person to help me.

Nevertheless, I confess that one slightly annoying circumstance tempered the enthusiasm which urged me to seek him out and renew our familiar acquaintance: the newspapers of the last few months had informed me that he had been condemned to life imprisonment. Because my tempestuous character made me liable to hasty disillusionment, the gravity of this sudden disaster, and the enormity of the blunder thus implied, would, I believe, have considerably lessened the esteem I felt for Maître Pied–not to mention my near-blind faith in his superiority in practical matters–had it not been for two details of the case, which gave me pause for thought.

Firstly, there was the nature of his crime–which seemed to me to be inexplicable in a man of his kind.

Secondly, there was the fact that it had come out in the course of the assizes that the craftiest of our judiciary bloodhounds had ended up admitting to discovering in his illicit possession just one five franc piece–while he had been placing offshore, in a secret and secure fashion, the half-million that he was known to possess, as a widower who had been working for cash for less than half a year.

Ah, that *cause célèbre*! How, after reading the discussions, the indictment and the verdict, could I persist in considering myself awake? The court had,

in effect, been presented with the following enigmatic evidence.

On holiday in Brittany the previous April, Maître Pied had happened to find himself the guest, for a couple of days, of his old and dear friend Baron Gauds-d'Argental, one of his oldest clients. On the second evening, a discussion about desserts having arisen, Pied, habitually so reserved, had suddenly astonished his fellow guests by revealing himself as a great antagonist of priests and kings. Matters had become overheated as, momentarily, he had given his disconcerted listeners the impression of a Robespierre. Then, he had retired to his room after giving notice that he would be leaving the following morning–a departure that had become necessary.

Now, in truth, it is at this point that events took an improbable turn. In the middle of the night, waking up with a start, Pied–as if prey to some morbid crisis of perversity, rancorous frenzy and vindictive dementia absolutely inconceivable in the man whom everyone, until then, had known him to be–had made his way, while brandishing a torch, towards a barn not far from the house, in which animal feed was stored. The farm-workers had seen him set it on fire! Within minutes, the roof was ablaze. Fortunately, the proximity of a well reduced the catastrophe to a mere material loss. On the basis of eye-witness reports, the police who had been called out arrested the arsonist. On being charged, Maître Pied at first denied it, apparently bewildered, then offered the excuse that he was subject to fits of somnambulism. But the strangest thing of all was his attitude in court, where he ventured, cynically, to argue "that it was not, after all, a very great crime to have carried a torch into the pigeon-house of a senile aristocrat who was so far behind the times as to seek to impose on his century political and religious ideals that were already obsolete under Louis le Gros."{202}

This outburst won him a medical examination. The doctors having declared him fully responsible and level-headed, the legal process continued in its course. Everyone expected a sentence of three to five years. As the final deliberation was about to begin, the accused–doubtless suffering a relapse, and in flagrant contradiction not only with his entire past but also with the bewildered and skeptical expression on his face–suddenly began humming these lines:

Oui, je voudrais, sans Dieu ni maîtres,

Usant de légitimes droits,
Des boyaux du dernier des prêtres
Etrangler le dernier des rois {203}

This time, even the most composed of his close friends scowled. The dumbfounded advocate for the defense begged the indulgence of the court, in view of the obvious *indisposition* of his client. It was all in vain! The Breton jury, composed of right-thinking men, went out exasperated, only to return a minute later to conclude that a maximum sentence was in order–and it was all over.

Thanks to official influence in high places, whose repercussions were carefully veiled by his secret advocates, it was granted to him that for reasons of health, until further notice, he should undergo his punishment in a Central penitentiary where he was promptly received into the infirmary; for four months he had been waiting for the customary amnesty.

In spite of the chilling arrest that sanctioned this history, and fortified by the impression left in my mind by its disconcerting hero, I persisted in finding it rather mysterious. But what good would it do now to waste time in delving deeper? Pied was no longer anything but a *man overboard*.

The essential thing was to know whether he had recovered, in the calm of his captivity, his moral capital and clarity of sight. What did the rest matter? Detention had given him leisure; was that not the ideal moment to sound him out and to obtain from him, if possible, the infallible *Open Sesame*! of success in practical matters: the *magic words* to guide oneself to Fortune?

So, having been recommended to the Minister of Justice by a dancer of my acquaintance, I obtained from him a letter to the director of the prison of C***, bid a hasty farewell to my servant, and within three hours of getting up last Monday I arrived, suitcase in hand, at C***. Once across the threshold of the enormous prison, I handed in my letter. The director himself came, in an affable manner, to collect me. We went through the courtyards. In a corner of the yard, encircled by massive walls, there was a wooden shelter–a surveillance-post–surrounded by benches and warmed by a stove. The director led me to it and left me there alone, having asked me to wait for the detainee to be brought to me.

The ex-notary soon appeared, between two guards, dressed in the grey homespun of prisoners. Nothing had changed in his upstanding figure! Once we were alone we greeted one another. He pointed me towards one of

the benches; I sat down–and having followed suit, he offered me a Havana cigar, saying to me: “You are the only one who has come to visit me. What can I do for you?”

In response to such a greeting, headstrong in my extreme youth, I told him–without circumlocutions or detours, opening my heart–of my thirst to obtain a life of gilded leisure. I confessed the faith that the lucidity of his views on business had always instilled in me, and the considerable hope that, in spite of his misadventure, I had placed in his advice. Until that day, my intellectual tastes had drawn me towards the cult of letters; to write a good book still seemed to me a viable means of winning social influence for myself and attaining thereafter the dignity of bread for life–the only serious goal established in this century. Had I misled myself? Ought I to continue? And if so, along what lines?

“That depends,” he replied. “If your brain hides only conventional Good; if you are a born plagiarist, endowed with supple handwriting, of a distinguished mediocrity...have you actually published anything?”

I extracted from the pocket of my overcoat my only volume, a collection of poems entitled *Leisures of a Taxpayer*. He took it and, beneath the horrid daylight of the yard, began skimming through it. We smoked in silence. After five minutes, he looked at me with an unforgettable expression of disdainful sadness.

“The title made me hope for better,” he said, “and I deplore its irony. These pages divulge a constant solicitude for pure Beauty–and for disinterested quality. One senses simmering therein, beneath the veil of your 25 years, the *Mens divinior*,[{204}] the taste for the rare, the search for integrity of expression, the creative spark. Now, you are poor; this is, in consequence, your inevitable future: forced dilution of yourself in small obligatory productions; the impossibility of writing true and powerful work; the utter contempt of all, including yourself; premature and resourceless old age; dying without the admiration of your *colleagues*; a litter in the charity hospital or a cheap lodging-house on which to yield up your last sigh–and, unless a subscription can be raised for a sepulchre, the probable communal grave of all the Mozarts in the world. Later, perhaps, a statue in a square, where your bronze shadow, perpetually surrounded by child-minders, will seem to bless human flunkyism, whose half-smiles will pursue your memory and whose court jester you will have been.”

At these bitter words, I felt a glimmer of light pass before my eyes.

“The Devil!” I muttered. “But, if powerful Art, virile and visionary, leads to that dark end, and if the practical science of life leads to... where you are, what other choice is there?”

This time, Pied made a sudden start, and his frozen features were reanimated as if by surprise.

“What!” he exclaimed. “You have divined no more than anyone else regarding my case? And that notwithstanding, you have come here *instinctively*? My word, that merits a confidence–and anyway, nothing can harm me now.”

Looking at me with blank eyes, he continued in a much lower voice: “So you are magically endowed with the master faculty, the flair; you have been able to suppose that a man as well-balanced as I am could allow himself to fall prey to... absences? Ah, poet! In what year do you think we are living? In 1452? In 1865? But, we are consuming the century year by year, even as we speak, my dear innovator! And you are behind the times. Mark this well: in our day, being sent to prison, even for life, does not compromise one’s future; that can be more certainly achieved by having written a book imprinted with your kind of ideal Beauty. That, nothing can redeem; words forgive everything except the soul. Poet, I am here because I know what I can and will do–and having fixed upon a goal, I must adopt the best means of attaining it, quickly and infallibly. I am in prison because, everyone having his little weaknesses, I was thirsty for election to political office.

“There are, to be sure, other ways to obtain that–but I was obliged to choose the shortest and surest. Yes, because, in a word, I was thirsty for power. Your eyes grow wide? Look at it calmly; remember and compare. What was I, yesterday, socially speaking? I was Maître Pied, old notary, worth 30,000 francs a year. Certainly, that was already a good thing to be; my name opened many doors–it is brief, down-to-earth, evidence of a prudent race and gives offense to no one.{205} It is obvious therefore that such name–if made to stand out by an important act–could, in today’s world, lead me anywhere.

“But what act should I accomplish? That was the problem? By what entitlement should I solicit the 50 or 100,000 votes needed to propel a man to the Chamber–and, in consequence, if he knows his world, to the ministerial bench? Note well that it was necessary for the act in question to be banal–for I have a repugnance for the extraordinary–but of practical worth, beyond the competition of all precedents.

“Well, a scrupulously attentive examination of the electoral records of the last 15 years soon convinced me of the truth–Monsieur de la Palisse {206} himself would bow down before the evidence–that between the candidates duly elected and validated, those who restricted themselves to being worthy of the simple political titles–of which others are doubtless equally worthy–of *OLD CONVICT, ARSONIST AND PRISON-ESCAPER* (adding to the last, *under the fire of sentinels*). It is the last-named–who testify to the vigilance of the State, which never disappoints–who most frequently win popular enthusiasm and bundles of votes. (I have a list.)

“On making this discovery, I resolved to call myself Pied, very much as one might call oneself Pyat.{207}

“Indeed–if one does not stumble into one of these cases of infatuation, when a whole population votes for a man in whom the idea of the day is incarnate, there is nothing else to do. These titles, conferred by the legislature, are the most irresistible in the eyes of the radical masses–especially if they are backed up by descriptive phrases such as: *Martyr to the social cause, having defied and insulted the jury and given the judges the finger*.

I swear that no capacity can outweigh these titles, nor can any prevail against them. Being nevertheless scarce, this year, for lack of serious contenders, those who–like me–can renovate them, have an indisputable opportunity to assume the role of the awaited man. In brief, my escape, even if it costs me 50,000 francs, will be an excellent investment.

“Ah, it must be amusing to make the laws which will be applied by the very same judges who condemned one to forced labor. When I think of that dear Baron d’Argental! Has he taken me for the red menace? Me, who, if I ever surrendered to the childishness of parking myself in an opinion, would doubtless be a Jeromist!{208} One day, I will tell you how much it cost me to do the necessary under his worthy roof... but the instant my *Hurrah for Poland*!{209} had sounded, I had to sacrifice everything to the occasion. My plan required it–and I feel, this evening, that the goal is well in hand, and that entering the slippery lists–from which I shall easily achieve the portfolio–is merely a matter of developing the flower into the fruit.

“Let’s leave it at that. That’s enough talk of me–my future is magnificent, and fully laid-out. Let’s talk about yours. From now on, hand me gold, not words. No more ideal Beauty, no more soul, no more practical jokes!–or

beware the litter of straw, the rubbish dump and the child-minders under your bronze.

“Tomorrow, rent an office in Paris with three chairs, an armchair, two benches for the antechamber, a servant in neutral and severe livery, and nail a large copper plate on your door bearing the word: *BANKER*. That title is one so intrinsically prestigious it has now become magical, you see. If some beggar, some starveling tatterdemalion, dared to inscribe it on his placard, the passers-by who came to throw him two *sous* would probably confide their fortunes to him. The lesson taught by a recent bankruptcy of fifteen hundred millions is already forgotten, isn’t it? Has the two billions which evaporated between the two Americas {210} taught us anything? Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

“Digest that truth, and act accordingly–but deny it loudly if clients repeat it back to you! You have no money? Fake it! Money is like women–it comes quickly to those who are always occupied with it. As for ‘*artists*,’ get all thought of them out of your head. Avoid the humble and the sad, and the poor: they are the opposites of the gleam of gold.

“In brief, remember every morning what old Laffitte {211} said on his deathbed to his sons: ‘How did I make my millions? *BY NEVER KEEPING COMPANY WITH ANY BUT HAPPY MEN*!’ On that note, young man, good night! Once I am in the government, if I see that you have renounced dreams and followed my advice...well in return for your visit, on the eve of some conversion, I will give you a sign. That’s understood.”

So saying, Pied bade me farewell and went out.

The two guards waiting outside took him back into the prison. I fled.

This conversation made such a deep impression on me that I had to take to my bed for a few days at the hotel.

On returning to Paris, on January 27, 1889,{212} what did I see on every wall but the electoral posters of Citizen Pied! His escape from custody! Ah, how he would value his titles! What inspired French faults! His triumph is assured. That image in which he sails in a boat, under the fire of the batteries of a distant fort, towards the Sun rising on the waves of the horizon, with two women in white tunics behind him, one crowned with ears of corn and the other holding a sword! I am running as fast as I can to the ballot-box to vote for him–followed closely, I hope, by the more enlightened of my readers. Has not Maître Pied the immense superiority,

over all the honorable gentlemen that he has truly equalled, of having at least known what he was doing?

This is my dream!–provided, of course, that this model candidate does not suddenly run up against one of those infatuations of the crowd for a passing stranger: a mysterious infatuation before which foresights, calculations and sentences become smoke before a squall, of the sort which seem suddenly to catch fire in the faces of the crowd, like the light of destiny.{213}

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FRENCH HORROR COLLECTION

14 Cyprien Bérard. *The Vampire Lord Ruthwen* Aloysius Bertrand. *Gaspard de la Nuit*
André Caroff. *The Terror of Madame Atomos*
André Caroff. *Miss Atomos*
André Caroff. *The Return of Madame Atomos*
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12 Alexandre Dumas. *The Return of Lord Ruthven* 18 Renée Dunan. *Baal*
09 Paul Feval. *Anne of the Isles*
07 Paul Feval. *Knightshade*
08 Paul Feval. *Revenants*
05 Paul Feval. *Vampire City*
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20 Villiers de l'Isle-Adam. *The Vampire Soul* Philippe Ward. *Artahe*
Philippe Ward & Sylvie Miller. *The Song of Montségur*

Acknowledgements: I am indebted to the London Library, from which I borrowed the various primary and secondary texts used in these translations, and to Bill Russell for his assistance in compiling the notes. I should also like to thank David McDonnell for proofreading the typescript.

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ISBN 1-932983-02-3. First Printing. July 2004. Published by Black Coat Press, an imprint of Hollywood Comics.com, LLC, P.O. Box 17270, Encino, CA 91416.

Notes

[1] Villiers' dedication actually reads *Aux chers indifférents* but if one inserts the word *dear* between *To the* and *Apathetic* it sounds silly, so I have taken some slight liberty in trying to reproduce the sentiment of the original–as I have done throughout this translation whenever it seemed appropriate. The dedication was preceded in the 1887 edition by a brief note of *Advice to the Reader* which I have not reproduced, partly because I have changed the order of the stories and partly because its concluding promises were never fulfilled. (Villiers, a man who lived in the future rather than the past, was always announcing new works that he hoped and intended to complete, but very rarely did.) It read: *"In order to initiate the public as to the character of Doctor Bonhomet, we offer, firstly, three short stories which indicate, in broad strokes, the intimate nature of this individual. After that, the Doctor himself speaks directly to us, telling us the very strange tale of Claire Lenoir–the heavy responsibility for which we leave entirely to him. Then there is an epilogue.*

"If, as we are entitled to dread, this Character (which he indubitably is!) achieves a measure of fashionability, we shall soon publish, not without regrets, a series of Anecdotes of which he is the hero and Aphorisms of which he is the author."

[2] A. W. Raitt, *The Life of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981.

[3] Raitt, op. cit., p. 68.

[4] Quoted in Raitt, op. cit., p. 76.

[5] Arthur Symons (1865-1945) wrote a laudatory chapter on Villiers in his crusading account of *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), and one might have expected him to do a decent job for the 1925 Boni edition of *Claire Lenoir*, but it is the worst case of literary butchery I have ever encountered.

[6] Quoted in Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Paris: Gallimard, 2 vols. 1986, vol. II p. 1139.

[7] Raitt, op. cit., p. 315.

[8] Léon Bloy (1846-1917) was a leading light of a Catholic Revival who used his fiction and journalism as a means of promoting the faith and made every effort to recruit Villiers to his cause after the two men became closely acquainted in 1884. Like many outspoken zealots, Bloy was a convert, whose conversion had been wrought in 1869 by the writer Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly (1808-1889). Although Barbey, an extraordinarily colorful character in his own right, was deeply unimpressed by Villiers, their work has a good deal in common; Barbey's famous collection *Les Diaboliques* (1874) provided an anticipatory batch of *contes cruels*. Oddly enough, the most obvious literary victim of the revivalist spirit promoted by Bloy was one of the *feuilletonists* that Villiers affected to despise, Paul Féval.

[9] *Swan-Killer*, translated by Andrew Mangravite, *The Book of Masks*, ed. Andrew Mangravite, London: Atlas Press, 1994.

{10} The Latin version of the seventh commandment–i.e. “Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery.” Villiers only married on his deathbed, in order to legitimize the son his illiterate landlady had borne him, but letters written to his first serious mistress, Louise Dyonnet, in 1864 offer extravagant proof of his vulnerability to sexual jealousy. *Claire Lenoir* (*The Vampire Soul*) picks up themes that Villiers had intended to develop in *Samuèle*, the second part of his three-decker novel *Isis* (whose first part–the only one completed–had appeared in an edition of 100 copies in 1862), but substitutes a casual, satirical and melodramatic treatment for the earnest philosophical synthesis he had originally hoped to produce; his bitter disenchantment with Louise Dyonnet presumably assisted this process of remolding.

{11} The notes in the *Oeuvres Complètes* suggest that Villiers reproduced this quotation and the one at the head of Chapter 2 from the account of Thomas de Quincey’s work contained in Baudelaire’s *Les Paradis Artificiels* (*Artificial Paradises*) never having read the original.

{12} The reference to a *second epoch* makes it clear that the primary reference of this description is to the Comte de Buffon’s catastrophist account *Epoques de la Nature* (*Epochs of Nature*) (1778), in which the *Saturnian period* was that before the upheaval which allegedly produced the contemporary distribution of the continents. What Bonhomet means, therefore, is that he is a member of a generation destined to bring about a dramatic transformation of human thought. Given that French literature already contained a famous example of an inhabitant of the planet Saturn in Voltaire’s *Micromegas*, however–and that Villiers refers explicitly to that story later in the chapter–he must have been aware of the second meaning. The Saturnian in Voltaire’s *conte philosophique* is a skeptical giant adopted as a traveling companion by an even larger visitor from Sirius.

This particular play on words extends through several more Saturnian metaphors, providing a cardinal example of Villiers’ predilection for such games. In the terminology of the alchemists, Saturn signified lead, so a saturnine temperament is dull and heavy. The mythological and astrological Saturn became identified with all-devouring time in late Roman times, owing to a confusion of Cronos, the name of the Greek equivalent of Saturn, with Chronos, the Greek word for time; this symbolism was further extrapolated by palmists, whose references to the mound of Saturn and the Saturnian finger are exploited in the following paragraphs. The notes in the *Oeuvres Complètes* observe that Villiers’ friend Paul Verlaine had published his *Poèmes Saturniens* (*Saturnian Poems*) in 1866, shortly before the serialization of *The Vampire Soul* and that both poets probably obtained their understanding of the Saturnian character from the work of the palmist Adolphe Desbarolles, author of *Chiromancie Nouvelle* (1859), which seems to be the source (albeit somewhat garbled in the borrowing) of Bonhomet’s analysis of his palm.

{13} There is an untranslatable double pun here; the French *tablatures* and *projets* refer to physical forms–slabs and projections–as well as to *knowing* and *scheming*.

{14} This has a much better ring in French: *Tempes creuses, creusets!*

{15} This Saturn is better known in English as *Father Time* but I have translated Villiers' reference literally because it is part of a series.

{16} It is unlikely that the elaborate wordplay of this description bears any closer relation to contemporary cheiromancy than that in the preceding paragraph bears to contemporary phrenology, although it obviously draws upon its terminology and fundamental assumptions. The reference to Venus and Apollo is, of course, to their role as symbols of Love and Art, Bonhomet being somewhat lacking in both areas of sensitivity. Although there is an obvious sexual pun in the reference to Amour Bonhomet's lack of success "in the Mines," Villiers must also have been mindful of the fact that he was the only son of a lunatic who wasted his life and fortune in the fruitless excavation of imagined buried treasures. This emphasizes Bonhomet's status as Villiers' contradictory alter-ego.

{17} I have reproduced Villiers' spelling of the name Souwaroff, although it is usually given in French as Souvarov. The reference is to the Russian general Alexandre Souvarov, who had a reputation for eccentricity as well as memorable boots.

{18} Ahasuerus was the Wandering Jew of legend, who was cursed to remain forever on the move.

{19} Villiers puts the word *archetype* in capital letters to stress its importance, although he had been content with *le type* in the serial version. Villiers was, of course, writing long before Carl Jung introduced the "archetypes of the collective unconscious" so the principal implications he would have attached to the term are Plato's notion of an *archetype* as a *transcendental idea* of which all existent members of a category are mere echoes, John Locke's notion of an *archetype* as a *thing in itself*, to which our idea of it approximately conforms and the commonplace meaning of an original model or proof of which subsequent products are copies.

{20} This visiting card, and much else in Bonhomet's self-introduction, recalls that of one of his two major predecessors as a bourgeois type specimen, the protagonist of Henri Monnier's *Mémoires de Joseph Prudhomme* (1857). The notes in the *Oeuvres Complètes* suggest that the address *Europe* is an ironic reflection of the address Victor Hugo put on letters written during his exile, which read, simply: *Océan*.

{21} *Infusoria* was the general term given to all microscopic organisms in the mid-19th century, because they were most conveniently found in infusions of decaying organic matter. Bonhomet's dedication to them is, therefore, as much a preoccupation with death and decay as with the invisibly minute. The Italian naturalist Lazaro Spallanzani (1729-1799) was one of the great pioneers of microscopy.

{22} Villiers became obsessed for many years with the genealogy of his family, because he was dismissively told when he objected publicly to the portrayal of one of his supposed ancestors in a popular play that he had no real cause for complaint because his claim to be descended from the famous Villiers de l'Isle-Adams of old was fictitious. Although he knew that he could not win a case for libel, he was desperate to have his day in court so that he could prove that he really was a Villiers

de l'Isle-Adam–although it is not entirely clear that the 18th-century Villiers from whom he was unambiguously descended had really been entitled to reclaim the aristocratic suffix.

{23} *Non est hic locus* means "This is not the place..."

{24} Beetles of the genus *Tenebrio* are known in English common parlance as darkling beetles; in French, the word *tenebrio* can also refer to a kind of goblin, so there is another untranslatable double meaning here.

{25} Villiers capitalizes the equivalent metaphorical phrase (*JE FAIS LA BÊTE*), perhaps to emphasize the further significance implicit in the literal meaning: "I act like a beast." The serial version, however, had *idiot* instead of *bête*.

{26} *Chiragre*–which I have translated as *fleck*–is a very uncommon term in French, referring to a kind of spot found on the hand.

{27} *Mort* (*Death*) and *Naissance* (*Birth*) are both feminine nouns in French–hence their representation as "sad sisters."

{28} Unlike Bonhomet's other references to Classical Gods, this one has no astrological implications because the planet Pluto had not yet been discovered. The God of the Underworld is here being credited with deciding the estate into which each human soul is born.

{29} This Aeon is not a period of time but a kind of spirit.

{30} Charles-André Pozzo di Borgo (1764-1842) was an Italian diplomat who became a privy councilor to Tsar Alexander I and played a key role in the downfall of Napoleon, thus earning himself a reputation–at least in France–as a Machiavellian manipulator.

{31} Again, there is a perverse echo of Villiers' own preoccupations in this habit of Bonhomet's. Villiers sought on several occasions to alleviate his family's financial difficulties by marrying for money, employing a professional matchmaker on at least one occasion, but he never succeeded. To make matters worse, his great friend and steadfast rival Catulle Mendès was much more successful with women than he was. On the one occasion Villiers attempted to marry for other reasons (in 1866 he wanted to propose to Théophile Gautier's younger daughter, Estelle, shortly after Mendès had married the elder, Judith), his family put a stop to it, considering her insufficiently well born.

{32} In the serial version, Clifton's first name was Cellan (although it changed to Celian in later chapters). Villiers probably changed it because he had subsequently used Celian as the first name of the protagonist of *The Future Eve*.

{33} As before, this citation is taken from Baudelaire rather than direct from De Quincey, although Villiers added the *me* which I have translated as a prefatory *To me*. Symons, presumably following De Quincey's original, gives the quotation as "*The city represented the Earth, with its sorrows and its graves left behind, yet not out of sight, nor wholly forgotten.*"

{34} *Saumures* usually refers to pickling brine, so the phrase I have rendered literally as "*experimenting with old brine*" could be rendered metaphorically as "*getting pickled*"–i.e. drunk.

{35} Villiers was fascinated by the legend of Faust; *The Future Eve* was explicitly Faustian in its two serial versions and Villiers may have intended to cast Bonhomet in a more explicitly Mephistophelean role when he wrote the original version of this chapter some time before the serial version.

{36} The French *filer*, which I have translated as *casting off* usually has that meaning in a nautical context, its specific reference being to the paying out of a cable for that purpose. Its metaphorical implications are more elaborate; it might, for instance, also be translated as "*stringing along*."

{37} Villiers capitalizes *Constance*, which I have translated here as *Perseverance*. In the last line of the chapter he capitalizes it again in the phrase I have translated as "*persistent wine*." There is a double meaning in each case, Constance being a kind of wine–complimented by both Baudelaire and Gautier in literary works that Villiers must have read–as well as being definable as constancy or perseverance. Villiers is emphasizing the fact that both men–in spite of Bonhomet's conviction as to his own sobriety–are very drunk.

{38} Lysiane d'Aubelleyne was the eponymous heroine of an oft-revised story by Villiers, which eventually saw print as *L'Amour Suprême* (*Supreme Love*). This quotation does not figure in the published version and may relate to one of the earlier drafts. Lysiane appears to have been a ghost in the earliest versions, but in the published version she is a mere mortal who becomes a nun.

{39} This particular play on words, invisible in English translation, is crucial to the plot of the story. *Luchon* is phonetically identical to *louchon*, meaning cross-eyed, while *le noir*, in the phrase "*mettre dans le noir*" means "(to hit the) bull's-eye." Claire's eyes bear the main burden of this kind of wordplay throughout the story, although the entire subtext is obsessed with literal and metaphorical meanings of *sight* and *enlightenment*. Bonhomet, as a model of bourgeois vulgarity and complacency, is blind to everything Villiers considered worthwhile even when he is not *blind drunk* (as he often is). Claire, on the other hand–as her name implies–sees more clearly despite the inherent weakness of her eyes.

{40} The English equivalent would be something like *Sickly Street* or *Bad Tears*. The annotator of the *Oeuvres Complètes* takes the trouble to point out that there is no such street in Saint-Malo.

{41} Its appearance in *Claire Lenoir* is the sole justification for the reproduction of this quatrain in Paul Verlaine's *Oeuvres Complètes*, the assumption being that Villiers quoted it from memory rather than merely inventing it.

{42} Chateaubriand was, of course, also a very famous writer–and is credited in the serial version of *Claire Lenoir* as a *poète célèbre*, although Villiers injected an extra measure of irony by omitting that phrase from the second version. Chateaubriand was one of the pillars of French Romanticism, the author of *Atala–A Romance of the Primeval Forest* (1801) which is presumably what Bonhomet mistakes for an ethnographic treatise–and *René* (1805). He had served as the French Ambassador to London and as Minister of Foreign Affairs; when Villiers toyed with the idea of a political career, it

was to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that he applied, asking specifically for a post in the London Embassy.

{43} Joseph Bollery discovered in 1961 that this citation is a paraphrase of an article from the September 26, 1863 issue of the *Publicateur des Côtes-du-Nord*, which Villiers must have read in Saint-Brieuc (he contributed a poem to that periodical only two weeks later). The article in question cites the original source of the story as another provincial newspaper, *Le Salut Public* of Lyon; it appears to be one of those items invented by bored newspapermen during the *silly season*, many of whose American examples were collected in the early 20th century by Charles Fort.

{44} The slightly misrendered quotation is from Baudelaire's poem *Les Yeux de Berthe* (*Berthe's Eyes*), nowadays incorporated into *Flowers of Evil*. The poem actually begins with the words *Grand yeux* (large eyes) rather than *Beaux yeux* (lovely eyes).

{45} Villiers has "*un âne bâté, un oison bridé*"–literally, "*a beaten donkey, a trussed-up gosling*" (although Rabelais has a character called Bridoie, usually rendered Bridlegoose in translation) but *âne* and *oison* were both used metaphorically in 19th century France to mean a foolish person, much as *ass* and *goose*–routinely preceded by *silly*–could both be used in English to refer to people.

{46} Villiers inserts a footnote here: "*There is no need–is there?–to remind the reader that we are not answerable for the Doctor's way of seeing, even physically. He has his own way of describing things, which we have not permitted ourselves to rectify in any manner–even supposing that that there is any occasion for* rectification *in what he says.*" The reference–added in 1887–to which this note is appended is to hair supposedly worn in the style of Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, Marquise de Sévigné (1626-1696), a famous letter-writer. Nowadays we are used to hair-stylists reproducing the look of pop idols, movie stars and soccer players, but the notion of 19th century women modeling themselves on 17th century portraits probably seemed a trifle absurd to Villiers.

{47} The metaphorical implications of Villiers' "*glisser un madrigal*" are more-or-less adequately conveyed by "*sing her praises*," but it is worth noting that Villiers was an inveterate and artful improviser of songs, often singing poems by Baudelaire to his own piano accompaniment; such impromptu performances were a major element in his acquisition of a reputation for genius. Bonhomet, of course, is utterly incapable of doing any such thing.

{48} The quotation is from Leconte de Lisle's *Dernière Vision* (*Last Vision*) from *Poèmes Barbares* (*Poems on the Barbarian Races*) (1862). It was in Leconte de Lisle's salon that the early chapters of *The Vampire Soul* were first read in public in 1866.

{49} The Illimani is the highest peak in the Bolivian Andes.

{50} The silver mines of Poullaouën, in Brittany, had been famous for centuries, although they were virtually exhausted by the end of the 18th century.

{51} Juggernaut is a European rendering of the Hindu god *Jagganath*. The name is more often applied to an enormous wooden machine mounted on 16 wheels, supposed to contain a bride for the God,

which was dragged through the streets of Indian cities. People were rumored to be crushed under its wheels, some being accidentally thrown under the wheels by the pressure of the crowd, while others sacrificed themselves out of piety–on which pretext the British Raj attempted to suppress the custom.

{52} Sébastien Bottin (1764-1853) gave his name to an annual directory of commerce and industry.

{53} Niam-Niam was a name given by early anthropologists to the Azande, a group of tribes resident in the Uele and Ubangi basins of Central Africa. The suggestion that they have tails is, of course, spurious.

{54} See Note 46.

{55} As a typical French bourgeois of his era, Bonhomet would of course have disapproved very strongly of the music of Richard Wagner, who spent three unhappy years trying to establish himself in Paris in 1839-1842.

{56} *Lohengrin* (1850); the serial version had "*des légendes du Saint-Graal*," but Wagner had not yet written *Parsifal* in 1867, and Villiers had to alter it in the 1887 version to avoid confusion.

{57} *Der Fliegende Hollander* (*The Flying Dutchman*) (1841).

{58} Venus and Tannhauser, in *Tannhäuser* (1845).

{59} *Tout-Fou* could be translated as *completely mad* or *perfect fool*; the reference–added in 1887–is presumably to *Parsifal* (1882).

{60} This reference was also added in 1887; the four-part epic is obviously the Ring cycle (1869-76).

{61} Perhaps the so-called *Ride of the Valkyries*.

{62} Presumably the *Pilgrims' Chorus* from *Tannhäuser*; Villiers heard this and other works by Wagner performed at a festival put on by the Grand Duke of Saxe-Weimar in 1870, to which he was an invited guest–an excursion made even more memorable by the fact that the Franco-Prussian War broke out while he was still in Germany.

{63} Small Pacific islands off the coast of Peru, notable–as Bonhomet ingenuously observes–as a rich source of guano.

{64} *Gazer*, which I have translated as *veiling*, literally means *covering with gauze*, and the only nuance Villiers is likely to have had in mind is *glossing over* something. It may be worth noting, however, that the word acquired several more meanings after the French language was invaded by the *franglais* word *gaz*; *gazer* then became something nasty that happened to troops in the trenches of the Great War, and subsequently took on a train of colloquial expressions implying that their users were heading for trouble.

{65} Jean Chapelain (1595-1674) was a founding member of the Académie Française and a would-be epic poet of no great literary distinction, whose most notorious work, *La Pucelle* (*The Maid*) (1656), was savaged by the satirist Boileau.

{66} Villiers must have known, although Bonhomet obviously does not, that the Richmond with which Edgar Allan Poe was associated is in Virginia.

{67} The reference to *Rocambole*–added in 1887–informs the reader that Bonhomet has been talking about Pierre-Alexis Ponson du Terrail (1829-1871), a prolific *feuilletonist* who wrote a long series of picaresque novels about that character in the 1850s and 1860s. The notes in the *Oeuvres Complètes* suggest that readers of the 1867 text would have guessed that already because of the reference to the careless reintroduction into serials of characters who had earlier been killed. English and American readers might be surprised by the allegation that Ponson had a worldwide reputation, given that he was never translated into English, but he was very popular in Italy and Spain. The addition of Rocambole's name as another hint to readers of the 1887 version was necessary because the long-dead Ponson had been mostly forgotten by then. More information about *Rocambole* can be found in *Shadowmen: Heroes and Villains of French Pulp Fiction*, Black Coat Press, 2003.

{68} The French word for *pen* is, of course *plume*, so "*Plume-publique*," which I have translated as "*the public's own pen*" also carries the implication of *public plumage*.

{69} The work in question is obviously Victor Hugo's *La Légende des Siècles* (*The Legend of the Centuries*) (1859).

{70} Poe actually collected his stories as *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, and the first two collections in French were issued as *Histoires Extraordinaires* (1856) and *Nouvelles Histoires Extraordinaires*. Bonhomet's confusion may result, in part, from a dim memory of *The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall*. It is worth noting that Villiers spent considerable time and effort searching for an appropriate collective term for his own short fictions, trying out *Histoires Moroses* and *Histoires Mystérieuses* as well as *Contes Cruels* in advance of his first collection, and considered calling his third collection *Histoires Semi-Frivoles* before settling on *Histoires Insolites*.

{71} This passage invites the reader to wonder exactly which Poe titles caused Claire to shudder. The hot favorites must be *Le Cadavre Accusateur* (*Thou Art the Man*) and *Le Coeur Révélateur* (*The Tell-Tale Heart*).

{72} *The dead praise not the Lord, neither any that go down into silence*, is verse 17 of the 115th psalm.

{73} Neptune, discovered in 1846, was the most distant planet known when Villiers wrote *Claire Lenoir*. I have assumed that his *universes* means *solar systems* at this point, rather than any of the much grander meanings we attach to the word nowadays.

{74} Lactantius Firmianus was a Christian apologist active in Africa in the late third and early fourth centuries. The Latin title of the book attributed to him is translatable as *On the Death of the Persecutors*, and the passage quoted means "*immortal man is a beautiful hymn of God*."

{75} French wines brought back from distant parts of the world to which they had formerly been exported were supposed to age particularly well in the holds of the vessels that transported them.

{76} Melchisedech was the King of Salem, a High Priest and contemporary of Abraham (Genesis 14:18).

{77} Villiers had recently met Edmond and Jules Goncourt in 1867 and this dedication may have been entirely sincere, although the addition of an ennobling *de* seems more likely to be mischievous than mistaken. The Goncourts' famous *Journal* is a key source of information about the literary world of mid-19th century Paris, but it does not speak kindly of Villiers. Edmond Goncourt, a gloomy man by nature, seems to have been one of the few people in Paris who could find nothing admirable or worthwhile in Villiers' flamboyant performances; he seems to have thought that Villiers was mad, and that Nina de Villard–the hostess of Villiers' favorite salon, in the days before Mallarmé returned to Paris and instituted his celebrated mardis–was mad too. (How glad Goncourt must have been when her mother eventually had her put away in an asylum!) By a curious coincidence, the Goncourts anticipated an incident in Villiers' life in the plot of their novel *Renée Mauperin* (1864), in which a man who embellishes his name with what he believes to be an obsolete aristocratic suffix (Villacourt) and is challenged to a duel by an actual survivor–an uncouth barbarian who fervently nurses his aristocratic pride while living in squalor in the obscurity of the northern backwoods. If Villiers had read the book in 1867, he obviously did not identify with any of the characters, but eight years later, he became violently incensed when he discovered another Villiers had had the nerve to embellish his name with *de l'Isle-Adam*, and challenged him to a duel (although the two men settled their differences amicably, unlike the characters in *Renée Mauperin*).

{78} *Amphitryon* (1668) is a comedy by Molière in which Jupiter takes the form of the eponymous Theban general in order to seduce his wife Alcmene; Amphitryon became an ironic archetype of indulgent hosts.

{79} It is not immediately obvious why Césaire should *pretend* to have something of the "*vampire velu*" (*hairy vampire*) in him–or, indeed, how he promoted that odd impression. Literary vampires had no reputation for hairiness at the time, any more than they have now, so it is probable that Césaire and Villiers are both thinking of bats, in spite of the references to cannibalism in the same paragraph. The author is, of course, laying groundwork for later plot developments, and this passage is more important than it seems in establishing the nature of Césaire's indwelling *animal spirit* and the inability of Bonhomet's previously-quoted treatise on evolution, *On the Tadpole*, to accommodate such entities.

{80} Eliphas Lévi was the pseudonym adopted by Alphonse-Louis Constant (1810-1875), a failed *littérateur* and political dabbler who became the great pioneer of modern occult scholarly fantasy by publishing *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie* (*The Doctrine and Ritual of Transcendental Magic*) (1854-56). *Histoire de la Magie* (*The History of Magic*) (1859) provided the earlier book with appropriately elaborate, if largely imaginary, historical foundations and prompted the poverty-stricken historian Jules Michelet to dash off the highly imaginative potboiler that was to become the most influential scholarly fantasy of its era, *La Sorcière* (*The Witch*) (1861). All three books enjoyed great success in the years before Villiers wrote *Claire Lenoir*, and most of what he knew about occultism was probably derived from Lévi.

{81} Raymond Lulle (c. 1235-1315) was a Spanish scholar and missionary who accumulated a considerable posthumous reputation as an alchemist.

{82} Friedrich Anton Mesmer (1733-1815) was the German physician who devised the theory named after him, popularly known as "*animal magnetism*." He was no longer in vogue when Villiers wrote *Claire Lenoir*, although Ponson du Terrail's fellow *feuilletoniste*, Frédéric Soulié, had written a sensational novel called *Le Magnétiseur* (*The Hypnotist*) (1834), of which Villiers might have been aware.

{83} Guillaume Postel (1510-1581) was a French Orientalist and visionary.

{84} Johannes Trithemius, Abbot of Spondheim (1462-1516), was a noted German theologian and historian.

{85} The Swiss physician and alchemist who preferred to be known as Philippe Aureolus Paracelsus (1493-1591) was initially known as Theophrastus Bombast von Hohenheim. Villiers (or Césaire) has mixed the names up slightly.

{86} Jacques Gaffarel (1604-1681) was a noted Orientalist who also wrote an early book on caves, *Le Monde Souterrain* (*The Underground World*).

{87} The highly influential founder of the New Church, Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), was the most famous visionary of his era; some of his odder works were published in French for the first time in the early 19th century. The analysis of his works cited by Césaire was by the philosopher and statesman Jean-Ernest Reynaud (1806-1863).

{88} Jules Eudes, Marquis de Mirville (1802-1873) launched a fierce polemical attack on Kabbalism and Spiritualism in his ten-volume *Pneumatologie*, arguing that they were instruments of the Devil. It is, therefore, rather mischievous of Villiers to bracket him with William Crookes (1832-1919), a notable chemist and physicist whose investigations of Spiritualism caused a sensation when they were published in *Psychic Force and Modern Spiritualism* (1871) and *Researches into the Phenomena of Modern Spiritualism* (1874). Villiers wrote a sensational article about Crookes' experiments with Spiritualist mediums for *Le Figaro* in 1884, which was reprinted in *L'Amour Suprême* (1886); the reference to Crookes in *Claire Lenoir* was added between editions.

{89} Allan Kardec (Villiers has *Kardek*) was the pseudonym of Hippolyte Rivail (1804-1869), the leading advocate of spiritualism in France, who published *Le Livre des Esprits* (*The Book of Spirits*) (1856) and *Le Livre des Mediums* (*The Book of Mediums*) (1864) shortly before Villiers wrote *The Vampire Soul*.

{90} Jakob Joseph von Görres (1776-1848) was a German historian who became a prominent advocate of the Catholic Church. The annotator of the *Oeuvres Complètes* points out that Villiers' reference to the fifth volume of Görres' work included in the 1887 edition is mistaken, although the 1867 version was correct in referring to the third; I have, in consequence, preferred the original version.

{91} Jules Denis, Baron Dupotet de Sennevoy (1796-1881) was perhaps the most illustrious of Mesmer's disciples, and wrote an influential *Introduction to Animal Magnetism*. Antonio Regazzoni was one of his experimental collaborators, of whom little seems to be known save that he published a *practical manual* of magnetization in 1859. The two names were often bracketed together in the writings of the theosophist Madame Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891), but Villiers must have made the connection independently because *Isis Unveiled* was not published until 1876.

{92} When the French King Philippe le Bel seized the wealth of the Knights Templar, he did so by trumping up charges of sorcery, extracting confessions to the effect that the masters of the order secretly worshipped a demonic idol named Baphomet.

{93} *The Key of Solomon* is the most notorious of all the fake handbooks of black magic which provided such inspiration to scholarly fantasists like Eliphas Lévi.

{94} The term *sidereal body* has more than one meaning, cropping up in widely various contexts, but the one intended here–reproduced, like much else in this passage, from Lévi–is derived from an astrological theory which supposes that a star chart relating to the moment of conception relates to the fate of the physical body, whereas a natal chart relates to the sidereal, astral or psychological body–a version of the soul.

{95} The annotations in the *Oeuvres Complètes* suggest, convincingly, that Villiers derived this quote from Auguste Véra's *Introduction à la Philosophie de Hegel* (second edition, 1864), from which Villiers' knowledge of the German philosopher derived. Véra wrote three popular accounts of German idealistic philosophy in the 1860s, which introduced many French readers and writers to Hegelian ideas.

{96} Villiers uses the term *Polype-Humanity*–I am not sure whether he is merely trying to exploit the resonance of *poly* or whether he is drawing an abstruse analogy between the human collective and some other kind of organism.

{97} The French physician and philosopher Pierre-Jean-Georges Cabanis (1757-1808) attempted a systematic discussion of the relationship between the body and the soul in *Rapports du Physique et du Moral de l'Homme* (1808).

{98} This casual list of notable German philosophers glosses over some important differences as to the nature and import of their notions: Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was one of the founders of modern philosophy, whose careful distinction between *noumena* (things as they are in themselves) and *phenomena* (things as they appear to the senses) paved the way for ambitious Idealists like Johann Fichte (1762-1814), Friedrich von Schelling (1775-1854) and Césaire's hero, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831). Although Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) worked in the same Romantic philosophical tradition, he was very dismissive of Hegel and ought not to be represented as the next term in a coherent series.

{99} The notes in the *Oeuvres Complètes* do not indicate that this reference to the rabies *virus* was a new insertion in the 1887 edition, although Louis Pasteur did not begin his celebrated inoculations, intended to destroy the *fixed virus* he presumed to be responsible for rabies patients, until 1885. It is conceivable that Cabanis used the term and that Pasteur obtained it from the earlier writer, but I have not been able to check this out.

{100} Virtue, in this instance, refers to one of the nine orders of angels popularized by Dionysius the Areopagite, ranking between Dominions and Powers.

{101} Nebuchadnezzar was the Babylonian king who took the Jews into captivity; the story of the various lessons he failed to heed–including one in which he was temporarily reduced to the status of a beast (but an ungulate rather than a carnivore)–is told in the *Book of Daniel*.

{102} The reference appears to be to *Canto XXVII* of the *Inferno*, although the logician in question is merely one of Satan's demonic henchmen.

{103} This argument recalls Dr. Johnson's commonsensical refutation of the idealism of George Berkeley, which presumes that the solidity of the world is simply too obvious to be doubted by anyone who ever kicked a stone (or a piece of wood). Idealism–which defines matter as the possibility of sensation–is, of course, invulnerable to such crude objections.

{104} Villiers' reference to *Sciences Noires* is an interesting substitution for the more familiar *Black Arts*.

{105} The post-Cartesian French philosopher Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715).

{106} Tertullian, or Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus (150-230), was one of the founders of the Latin Church.

{107} Jacob Boehm or Boehme (1575-1624) was a German mystic who attempted to *refresh* the sternness of Lutheran religious philosophy with a generous injection of alchemical symbolism.

{108} The English theologian Samuel Clarke (1675-1729).

{109} The quotation is an epigraph from Dante's *La Vita Nuova*, Chapter XXIV.

{110} The reference is to *Paradise Lost*, Book IX. Line 473 begins with the words "*Thoughts, whither have ye led me?*"–which are indeed spoken by Satan, although he is not identified at that point in the manner indicated by Villiers.

{111} Bollandists were followers of Jean de Bolland (1596-1655) who continued his work on the lives of the saints.

{112} Joshua, according to Biblical legend, successfully petitioned God to halt the movement of the Sun in order that he might complete his vengeful massacre of the Amorites (Joshua 10: 12-13); Copernican astronomers, in establishing that the Earth orbits the Sun rather than vice versa, had also "*stopped the Sun*," thus winning a crucial victory for Science over religious dogma.

{113} Jacques de Chabannnes, Seigneur de La Palice (1470-1525) was a French captain whose soldiers composed a song about him containing the observation that "*a quarter of an hour before he*

died/he was still alive." Although they only meant to comment on the deadliness of his wound, the couplet was eventually taken up as the very epitome of stating the obvious; hence a "*mot de La Palice*" came to be synonymous with something utterly obvious.

{114} "*Après nous, le Deluge*!" (*After us, the flood*!) was the famous remark credited to Louis XV's mistress Madame de Pompadour (1721-1764) by Madame de Hausser's memoirs.

{115} This argument is taken from Descartes' first meditation.

{116} The quotation is from Leconte de Lisle's *L'Ecclésiaste* in *Poèmes Barbares* (1862).

{117} The notes in the *Oeuvres Complètes* suggest that Villiers found this quotation in Honor de Balzac's novella *Séraphita* (1834), from which his knowledge of Swedenborg's ideas was largely derived.

{118} Villiers has *cephalopods* but clearly does not mean octopodes or squid. The idea that abnormal births must be caused by unfortunate experiences during pregnancy was common at the time, for want of a better theory.

{119} The first reference in this paragraph is presumably to Pierre-Augustin Béclard (1785-1825) rather than his son Jules (1817-1887); the other two Frenchmen are Marie-François-Xavier Bichat (1771-1802) and François-Joseph Victor Broussais (1772-1838); the English pioneer in whose footsteps the last-named was following was Sir William Harvey (1578-1657). The notes in the *Oeuvres Complètes* suggest that the "great physiologist" allegedly quoted by Broussais is the Dutchman Jacob Moleschott (1822-1893) but if the aphorism is original to Moleschott then Villiers must surely have misremembered where he read it, as Broussais–who died in 1838–obviously cannot have been familiar with it.

{120} The source of this quotation is unknown to the annotators of the *Oeuvres Complètes*, but Claire's riposte refers to Voltaire's *conte philosophique*, *La Princesse de Babylone* (*The Princess of Babylon*).

{121} This quotation from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was added to the 1887 edition to replace a quotation from Schiller, which Villiers–according to the annotators of the *Oeuvres Complètes*–had found in the French translation of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's occult romance *Zanoni* (1842), an important source of inspiration for Eliphas Lévi and other French lifestyle fantasists.

{122} The notes in the *Oeuvres Complètes* point out that this thesis regarding residual "*animal spirits*" that occasionally express themselves in human behavior can not only be found in the writings of Eliphas Lévi but in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862), a book that Villiers had certainly read, and perhaps admired, although he did not approve of its morality. (Also see Note 142.) {123} This quotation appears to be misrendered from Balzac's *L'Elixir de Longue Vie* (*The Elixir of Life*) (1830); the actual quotation is translatable as "*Death is as sudden in its caprices as a courtesan in her disdains, but more faithful–she never deceives anyone*."

{124} These substances are, of course, far from inoffensive; I have translated Villiers' reference to *chloroborate de mercure* straightforwardly, although I cannot find any reference to a *chloroborate* of mercury and I suspect that Villiers may be thinking of mercuric chloride, or *corrosive sublimate*, which was a well-known poison used for medical purposes in the treatment of syphilis.

Bonhomet's attempts at treatment can only have exacerbated Lenoir's problems, and one critic (Margit Schmidt) has argued, improbably, that Bonhomet must have murdered Césaire out of jealousy. Even Raitt (see Note 2) has no hesitation in concluding that Bonhomet has actually killed his poor friend, but it seems unlikely that Césaire would have continued sniffing considerable quantities of noxious compounds had there not been something seriously amiss with him; he certainly seems to have been guilty of a certain contributory negligence, if not of suicidal intent. At any rate, Villiers presumably makes Bonhomet offer this absurd explanation of his host's death primarily to emphasize the Doctor's blithe ignorance of the fact that Lenoir has been driven to the edge of insanity and beyond by his inability to forgive his unfaithful wife, in spite of her desperate pleas.

{125} Sternutatory drugs induce sneezing; revulsives are counter-irritants whose supposed medical purpose was to relieve symptoms in one part of the body by producing them in another.

{126} The phraseology implies that Villiers has invented the phrase "*chaude alarme*," whose literal meaning I have reproduced, although "*hot alarm*" might be equally appropriate. Villiers is making a pun on the much more familiar phrase "*pleurer à chaude larmes*," meaning "*to weep bitterly*," but the description of this incident as a *warm alarm* is probably also intended as a clue to what is happening. Claire gives a more elaborate account of this incident in Chapter XVIII, which may be unreliable but casts valuable further light on the precise nature of the animalistic and quasi-demonic entity that seems to survive Césaire's death.

{127} I have translated "*plume au chapeau*" literally, although Villiers is making another pun, *plume* also meaning *pen*.

{128} Villiers appears to have invented the word *Ottysor*, although it is not impossible that he found it in some esoteric account of explorations in Oceania by an early 19th century navigator. The nearest term included in the first edition of Larousse (omitted from subsequent editions) is *Otisorex*, which refers to a genus of insectivorous mammals, but the similarity is surely coincidental.

{129} Act I, scene 5.

{130} The Danish geographer Bjorn Zachnussën appears to be an invention of Villiers; his name is suspiciously reminiscent of Arne Saknussemm, the pioneer who mapped out the way for Jules Verne's characters in *Voyage au Centre de la Terre* (*Journey to the Center of the Earth*) (1864).

{131} In Greek mythology, Hippomenes and Atalanta ran a famous race, with her hand in marriage as the prize; he won by dropping three golden apples, which she stopped to pick up.

{132} i.e., photographers.

{133} The lines are from Baudelaire's poem *Une Martyre*, included in *Flowers of Evil*, Villiers' version is very slightly misquoted, but the translation is unaffected.

{134} *Teterrima facies daemonum* means *The Appearance of Demons is Extremely Loathsome*.

{135} In response to Saint Bruno's command to "*Answer me*!" the dead bishop's reply, in Villiers' Latin version, is something like: "*I have appeared*! *I have been judged*! *By a just judgment of God, damned*!" The legend is usually formulated so that the bishop's words are: "*God has accused me*! *God has judged me*! *God has damned me*!"

{136} Ham, the son of Noah–from whom, according to legend, all black people are descended.

{137} This phrase–*le Roi des Epouvantements* in French–is taken from Poe's *The Pit and the Pendulum*.

{138} I have translated the actual form of words Villiers uses; in the Authorized Version the relevant phrase is given as: "*the deep uttered his voice and lifted up his hands on high*."

{139} Villiers' use of the phrase *Ottysor-vampire*–in the 1867 version he did not combine the words, contenting himself with *le vampire, l'Ottysor terrible*–may be the most telling clue to what is actually supposed to have happened here, bearing in mind Bonhomet's former comment that there was something of the *hairy vampire* in Césaire Lenoir, Césaire's rhapsody on the survival of brutal animal spirits in the depths of the human psyche and the *warm alarm* experienced by Bonhomet after Césaire's death. The entity that has apparently survived Césaire's death, which tried to possess Bonhomet in order to murder Claire on the occasion of the *warm alarm*, is not Césaire's soul in the usual sense, but rather a demonized fragment thereof: the savage animal spirit that still lurks within many a human being, ever avid to express and liberate itself. This undead creature eventually possesses the Ottysor, who is helpless to resist its imperious lust for revenge–or so, at least, it seems to the guilt-ridden Claire and to poor Bonhomet (who fails repeatedly, and dismally, in his desperate attempts to keep control of his overactive imagination).

{140} The text has *impondérable* where I have substituted *ponderable*, but the latter is surely what Villiers means.

I have translated *voyant prunelles* literally, as *voyant pupils*, although the analogy between the interior of the eye and a camera obscura and Bonhomet's use of an ophthalmoscope make it perfectly clear that Villiers knows full well that any such image–if it really exists–must be situated on the retina. Villiers' insistence that the image is *inside* the pupil derives from the implicit notion that if the iris of an eye were to be regarded as a target, the pupil would be its (black) bull's-eye. The terrible image is, therefore, situated at the dead center of the hypothetical target–it is, in French parlance, "*mise dans le noir*" as well as "*mise dans* (*Claire*) *Lenoir*." As just punishments for adultery go, this one may be a little too poetic–but she did do it.

{141} Jean Marras (1837-1901) was one of Villiers' three lifelong friends, the others being Catulle Mendès and Stéphane Mallarmé. Villiers' relationship with Mendès was often stormy, thanks to a

clash of egos, and his relationship with Mallarmé was distanced for many years while the latter was teaching in the provinces, but Marras was a much steadier presence. Although he wrote little himself–he worked in insurance before being appointed curator of marble statues for the state collections–Marras was an *habitué* of the best literary salons, including that of Charles Leconte de Lisle, where Villiers played the *enfant terrible* for many years. Marras provided Villiers' life with a much-needed anchor of common sense as well as a useful source of funds when Villiers was desperate. He appears to have been the only man whose critical judgment Villiers took seriously, even when they had drifted apart politically (Marras was a staunch Republican who loathed the Roman Catholic Church).

{142} To this quotation, taken from *Les Misérables* (1862), Villiers adds the following revealing footnote: "*It is, we suppose, unnecessary to add that in this authentic quotation, it is not the author of* La Bouche d'Ombre *who is speaking but only one of his characters. It would hardly be just, indeed, to attribute to an author of such integrity the blasphemous monstrosities and cheap word-games–which, for particular and perhaps good reasons–he sadly resolved to lend to certain Helots of his imagination.*"

Helots were Spartan serfs, and the word has often been used metaphorically to refer to members of the downtrodden masses. Villiers was a great admirer of Hugo's poetry–*La Bouche d'Ombre* can be found in *Les Contemplations* (1856)–but did not see eye-to-eye with him on political and philosophical matters, especially in 1887, when his own occasional tendencies to radical skepticism were far behind him.

{143} Maecenas was the Roman aristocrat who became the patron of Virgil and Horace, enabling the former to recover his farm and buying a farm for the latter.

{144} The word *Eventualistes* seems to be original to Villiers, ironically echoing the identification of a contemporary political party as *Opportunistes* (in opposition to *Radicals*). It reidentifies the Opportunists as cynical exponents of the dictum that "*politics is the art of the possible*." In the *Tribulat Bonhomet* collection, this item appears after the next, although it appeared a month earlier in *Gil Blas*.

{145} The dancer Méry Laurent (1849-1900) struck up a warm but probably Platonic friendship with Stéphane Mallarmé in the early 1880s; she had formerly been the mistress of the painter Edouard Manet and the writer François Coppée, although she was being kept by an American dentist when she struck up her acquaintance with Mallarmé–and, through him, with Villiers. She followed in the footsteps of Judith Gautier and Nina de Villard in treating Villiers with considerable kindness, often sending him food when he was penniless and ill, as he often was during his last years.

{146} Luc de Clapiers, Marquis de Vauvenargues (1715-1747) was the author of a popular book of deftly moralistic *Maximes*, but this one appears to be a fake.

{147} Mill, Bain, Smith and Spencer were among the most prominent of the British founders of social science in the 19th century.

{148} Panclastite and melinite–from which Villiers derives the neologisms *panclastitating* and *melinitating*–were explosives based on picric acid invented by the French chemist Eugène Turpin (1848-1927). Villiers used the term panclastite in a more general and adventurous sense in his bizarre story *L'Etna chez soi* (*Etna in One's Own Home*) (1887), reprinted in our companion volume, *The Scaffold*.

{149} Villiers was a notorious *night-bird* who was always extremely reluctant to leave the bars and bistros in which he spent a great deal of time in conversation, and where he did much of his writing. He undoubtedly had a natural proclivity in this direction, but his reluctance to go home was greatly intensified by the fact that throughout his time in Paris, he was deeply ashamed of the circumstances in which he was forced to live. Whether he was sharing lodgings with his family or living alone, he always felt that he was not living as an aristocrat should–and in later life he was certainly living in accommodations that anyone at all would have considered mean, shabby and wretched. He was very familiar with the symptoms listed here, and in spite of his own political conservatism he undoubtedly had a certain sympathy with any anarchist or nihilist who wanted to blow the entire bourgeois world to kingdom come (as *Etna in One's Own Home* demonstrates, albeit obliquely).

{150} Villiers adds an explanatory footnote to this title: "*On receiving the news of the most horrible Earth-tremors (in the last days of February and the first of March, 1887)–phenomena which devastated the South of France–the illustrious Doctor believed it to be his duty to set the present motion before both Parliamentary Chambers. In spite of the vow of secrecy secured by a double majority, its implementation was indefinitely postponed (at least in the energetic terms put forward by Bonhomet himself). We can only add the following epigraph to indicate the keynote of the famous specialist's professorial intonation.*" The Earth-tremors in question were felt in Northern Italy and Southeast France on February 23-24 and March 1, 1887; thousands of refugees did indeed flock into Paris during the ensuing panic. The piece must have been hastily penned, as it was first published in *Gil Blas* on March 13, 1887.

{151} Gustave Guiches (1860-1935) was one of many young writers entranced by Villiers' gift for performance in the late 1880s; he was one of very few who cultivated an acquaintance sufficiently close to be permitted to see the squalid lodgings in which Villiers lived and it is to him that we owe its most vivid description. It was also Guiches who recorded the fact that Villiers' rivals often noted down the plots he invented in such reckless profusion, and the anecdotes he told, for their own use.

{152} Pharamond was a legendary king of France, allegedly the first, featured in Arthurian romance; if he did not improvise the quotation himself, the identity of Villiers' *modern sage* remains mysterious.

{153} The notes in the *Oeuvres Complètes* suggest that Eve del Rio must have been a contemporary astrologer.

{154} *Simila similibus* is the motto of homeopathic medicine, coined by Samuel Hahnemann, who proposed that diseases should be treated by minute doses of drugs that are known to induce symptoms similar to those of the disease.

{155} Emile Pierre was one of several younger writers who admired Villiers; Villiers thought sufficiently highly of him to write a preface for his story collection *Le Rêve d'aimer* (*To Dream of Love*) (1885). He accepted an invitation to stay with Pierre for a fortnight of much-needed rest in Nogent-sur-Marne in the summer of 1885, in a villa like the one described in Villiers' short story *Catalina* (which he may well have written there), reprinted in our companion volume, *The Scaffold*.

{156} Villiers mangles this citation slightly; the words "*said the Eternal*" do not appear in the Authorized Version Biblical text, which is there to be found in verse 16 of Isaiah, chapter 57. Although Villiers might be guilty of overconfidence in his excellent memory, it is also probable that he occasionally felt free to adopt a certain poetic license in adapting his sources of inspiration to his own purposes.

{157} Cantharides is the beetle that supplies the notorious aphrodisiac Spanish fly; Chandernagor was a French territory in India.

{158} Saint Vincent de Paul (1576-1660) was the founder of a famous Foundling Hospital in Paris, and of the order of the *Filles de la Charité*.

{159} The Cauchois are the inhabitants of *Pays de Caux*, the part of Normandy that extends from the north bank of the Seine to the channel ports of Dieppe and Le Havre.

{160} There is no such word as *fructuence*, but if there were, it would be roughly equivalent in implication to *fruitfulness*–or, more, cynically, *profitability*.

{161} In 19th century medicine, *drastics* were powerful purgatives (they were so-called to contrast them with *bland* cures, of which drinking milk–not necessarily after the fashion followed by Bonhomet–would have been a typical example). Hydragogues were diuretics and minoratives were purgatives of a less violent kind than drastics.

{162} The literal meaning of *Digne* is *worthy* or *dignified*.

{163} The phrase "*pour tuer le ver*" is commonly employed metaphorically, with reference to the habit of drinking a glass of liquor before breaking one's fast, but I have rendered it literally because Villiers is playing with its literal and metaphorical meanings.

{164} François-Adrian Boieldieu (1775-1834) was a French composer who served as choirmaster to the Tsar Alexander I. His name crops up here as part of a compound play on words, as Bonhomet wonders whether it is to the *Bon Dieu* (*Good Lord*, elsewhere translated as *God*) or merely to *Boieldieu* that he has the honor of addressing. (*Bois* means *wood*, so there is a faint but distinct implication of *graven image* about the name.) {165} Tardieu is a fairly common French surname, so it might not have been entirely clear to his readers which one Villiers had in mind. Some contemporary readers might have associated the name primarily with the 18th century artist Jacques Nicolas

Tardieu, but the only one Bonhomet was likely to claim as a colleague is Auguste Ambrose Tardieu (1818-1879), the pathologist who pioneered forensic medicine in France, who is briefly mentioned in Villiers' story *Le Secret de l'Echafaud* (*The Secret of the Scaffold*), included in our companion volume *The Scaffold*. *Tard* is, of course, French for *late*, prompting the "*better late than never*" quip (although I have substituted *tardy* to maintain the pun).

{166} Within this list of things that God's voice is not, neither *trial* nor *laruettes* is readily comprehensible in French or English. The annotators of the *Oeuvres Complètes* suggest–convincingly, in view of the pairing, but still rather enigmatically–that they must be derived from the names of two celebrated tenors of the 18th century, Antoine Trial (1736-1795) and Jean-Louis Laruette (1731-1792), both of whom specialized in comic roles.

{167} The term Villiers uses here is "*arrière-pensée*" (his italics), whose literal meaning, "*behind thought*" is usually translated as *ulterior motive* or *mental reservation*. The emphasis on the first element of the portmanteau word stresses the deceptiveness of the term, which licenses God's next statement. *Afterthought* seemed to me to make more sense in English than any other substitution.

{168} This mildly slanderous reference is to the tendency of the Church to collaborate with the concealment of so-called "*crimes of passion*" when matters of aristocratic honor were concerned. Although the right of well-born husbands to shoot unfaithful wives and/or their lovers was never formally enshrined in law, the French always tended to take a rather lenient view of such actions; many such cases never came to trial, even if the fatal shot was fired in circumstances far less formal and far less fair than those of a formal duel.

{169} Ernesto Tamberlick (1820-1879) was a famous Italian tenor, who often sang the title role in Rossini's Otello (although Villiers renders the name, as I have, in its Shakespearean spelling).

{170} Divorce had been legally established in France, for the first time, by a law passed on July 27, 1884 (the first appearance of this story was on May 19, 1885). Villiers disapproved strongly of this enactment, and hastened to offer satirical protests. This was his second, and more successful attempt, the first being *L'Agence du Chandelier d'Or* (*The Golden Candlestick Agency*) (see Note 178).

{171} The anecdote to which the Vicomte refers was originally told of Brunelleschi before being re-credited to Columbus. After an assembly of wise men confessed themselves defeated by the problem of how to make a egg stand on end, Columbus (or Brunelleschi) held it in a clenched fist and brought it down heavily upon a table, crushing the relevant part of the shell into a mosaic of little pieces–in which condition it could easily be stood on end. "Anyone could have done that!" one of the witnesses objected. "Yes," said the perpetrator–and this serves to explain why the discoverer of the new world inherited the imaginary mantle–"but I did it!"

{172} See Note 114.

{173} i.e. that she is pregnant.

{174} François Ponsard (1814-1867) was a dramatist, popular in his day, whose work typified everything Villiers had hated about fashionable contemporary drama since his arrival in Paris.

{175} *He died doing good*.

{176} The four sergeants of La Rochelle were guillotined for treason on September 21, 1822. The annotators of the *Oeuvres Complètes* are, however, at a loss to explain why Villiers seems to have thought (wrongly) that a remission of their sentence had been issued which arrived too late.

{177} Don Quixote.

{178} The French title is *L'Agence du Chandelier d'Or*, which I have translated literally. As well as the literal meaning (candlestick), the French *chandelier* has a euphemistic meaning, referring to what the Italians once called a *cicisbeo*: a companion who accompanied a married woman to society functions in the absence of her husband, but was not her lover–although he often served as a smokescreen to conceal a sexual liaison with someone else. This was the first of many tales Villiers wrote for the humorous periodical *Gil Blas*, which was his most reliable market during the last few desperate years of his life; it appeared there three weeks after Naquet's divorce law was enacted on July 27, 1884.

{179} See Note 155.

{180} Like many of Villiers' attributions to the Fathers of the Church, this one is difficult to authenticate.

{181} Villiers gives the French version of the phrase that I have given in its more familiar Latin form–which is a polite way of saying caught red-handed. Villiers offers a mocking paraphrase of the actual amendment (article 298, repealed in 1904), which specified that if a divorce were granted on the grounds of adultery, the culpable spouse could not be subsequently married to the cited co-respondent.

{182} Lovelace, the suave villain of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa Harlowe* (1747-1748)–which was even more popular in France that it was in England–lent his name to a species of glamorous but wicked seducers.

{183} The extreme but ultimately unsuccessful temptation of Saint Anthony was a favorite topic of French art and literature.

{184} Lethe was the Underworld river of Classical mythology, from which the dead drank in order to forget their past lives.

{185} Tantalus was punished in Tartarus by having food and drink set just out of reach, which retreated as he strained to reach it; had his hunger and thirst been removed, his predicament would have been greatly relieved.

{186} An organization of bankers which collapsed in 1882, in the Crash to which this passage subsequently refers.

{187} Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Auget, Baron de Montyon (1733-1820), was a philanthropist who founded several prizes for valor and literature, awarded annually by the Institute named after him.

{188} I have given a literal translation of "*Les Funérailles de l'honneur*;" Villiers italicizes it to remind his readers that the phrase had been used as the title of a play by Auguste Vacquerie (1819-1895).

{189} In honor of the Platonic affection manifested by its agents.

{190} *Non possumus* means "*We cannot*." It was supposed to have been said by Christians when they were instructed, under threat of punishment, to offer sacrifices on the altars of Rome.

{191} The Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, Abdul Aziz, had died in 1876. Whether this event really resulted in the redundancy of a large company of eunuchs is difficult to determine, but not very relevant.

{192} *Patito* is an Italian term of endearment, whose literal meaning refers to individuals who sigh (with concern rather than contentment).

{193} See note 178 above.

{194} From 1886-1892, René d'Hubert was the editor of *Gil Blas*, which was Villiers' steadiest market during the last few years of his life, and where this piece–and many other humorous sketches, first appeared.

{195} This quotation does not actually appear in the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes, although it makes use of a key phrase from the first verse and echoes the sentiments of the first chapter. Villiers always felt free to improvise in this manner.

{196} Inspired by the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a cult of *sensibility* emerged in late 18th and 19th century France, which lauded spontaneous outbursts of feeling on the grounds that they were echoes of the essential nobility of primitive human nature. The cult was always an object of derision, although the most notable English writer who took the trouble to poke fun at it–Jane Austen, in *Sense and Sensibility*–was scrupulously polite in her criticism.

{197} The dog-days are the hottest days of midsummer, so-called because the Romans thought their excess of heat was due to the contribution of the star Sirius, which rose in company with the Sun in July and early August.

{198} The term Villiers uses to describe M. Juste Romain (loosely, *Roman Rectitude*), which I have translated, perhaps with insufficient implication of insult, as *consultant engineer*, is the portmanteau neologism *ingénieur-possibiliste*. *Possibiliste* is a term sometimes applied in France to cynically opportunistic socialists. The observation that Romain's eulogy has not yet been written refers to the practice, instituted by Bernard de Fontenelle, that whenever a member of the Académie des Sciences dies, an obituary essay summarizing his contributions to the advancement of human knowledge is compiled by a representative of the Académie.

{199} *Poisson* is French for *fish*–the name is intended to provide a further clue regarding the true nature of the letter to incautious readers who, like Juste Romain, had failed to take proper account of the two dates featured therein. The French for *April's Fool* is "*Poisson d'Avril*" (literally, *April's Fish*). The idea that anyone would take the trouble to write such a malicious and futile letter in the circumstances described is, of course, utterly preposterous–even more so, perhaps, than the cult of sensibility and its occasional manifestations.

{200} Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893) was the leading French short story writer of his era; Villiers was only slightly acquainted with him, but might have hoped that Maupassant could be persuaded to help him place his work. Like the protagonist of the story, Maupassant had family ties to Normandy, where he had become acquainted in childhood with Jean Lorrain, one of the young writers who became a fervent admirer of Villiers in the 1880s.

{201} *Maître* is the honorific title given to French attorneys, the equivalent of *Esq.* in English. *Pied* means *foot*, but is also an epithet meaning *clumsy* or *idiot*. *Maître Pied* could be literally translated as *Clumsy, Esq*. In that respect, Maître Pied is not dissimilar to Doctor Bonhomet.

{202} Louis le Gros (Louis the Fat) was the nickname of Louis VI, born 1081, who ruled France from 1108 until his death in 1137. At that time–when feudalism was at its height–Normandy was an English possession, a state of affairs that Louis failed to remedy in battle.

{203} "*Yes, without God or masters eroding legitimate rights, I would gladly strangle the last king with the bowels of the last priest*." This particular version of the famous radical slogan is taken from Diderot, but the original was a sentiment attributed to "*an ignorant, uneducated man*" in the memoirs of Curé Meslier (c1664-1733), who wished a similar fate on the entire nobility (presumably requiring the sacrifice of a considerable proportion of the clergy).

{204} The literal meaning of *Mens divinior* is "*A Mind more divine*," although the phrase is conventionally used to indicate literary inspiration.

{205} Villiers is, of course, indulging in obvious wordplay, *pied* being French for *foot* (see Note 201).

{206} I have reproduced Villiers' spelling, although I feel sure that the intended reference is to Jacques de Chabannes, Seigneur de La Palice (1470-1525), whose name was frequently invoked in the context of stating the obvious for reasons explained in Note 113.

{207} Félix Pyat was a revolutionary socialist who, after numerous brushes with the law, was elected as a deputy for Bouches-des-Rhône in 1888; that success presumably inspired Villiers to write the story.

{208} The reference is presumably to *Jérôme Paturot à la Recherche d'une Position Sociale* (*Jérôme Paturot Searching for a Position in Life*) (1843), a novel by Louis Reybaud that offers a scathing satirical critique of French society after the July Revolution of 1830.

{209} This was the cry raised by a young lawyer named Charles Floquet (1828-1896) when the Russian Tsar Alexander II visited the Paris Exposition in 1867; he went on to enjoy a successful

political career.

{210} The reference is to the financing of the Panama Canal, begun by de Lesseps in 1881 but not completed until the USA finally took over the project and carried it through in 1914.

{211} Jacques Laffitte (1767-1844) was a French banker who played a prominent role in the July Revolution of 1830.

{212} This was the election in which the controversial General Boulanger was re-elected on a tide of popular support, as observed in the notes to *L'Amour du Naturel* (*The Lover of the Natural*), a story reprinted in our companion volume, *The Scaffold*.

{213} The version of this story printed in the collection *Nouveaux Contes Cruels et Propos d'Au-Delà* (*New Cruel Tales & Words from Beyond*) ends here, the editor consigning to footnote a subsequent addition to the text made by Villiers, which was restored by the editors of the *Oeuvres Complètes*: "*Fortunately, I only perceive, on the walls, the posters of a certain baker named Jacques–and I cannot believe that this competitor has the power to carry the day against a man of such proven value as our worthy and clear-sighted arsonist.*"

The addition is significant because the reference is obviously to General Boulanger (*boulanger* is French for *baker*, and although the General's first name was Georges there was another radical candidate in the election who preferred to be advertised simply as Jacques) and might conceivably have been omitted by the editor of *Words from Beyond* for reasons of diplomacy rather than obsolescence. Given that the reference is now redundant, I have preferred the last line of the first-published version on aesthetic grounds.

Table of Contents