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VILLIERS DE L'ISLE-ADAM,
"THE OMEN," "LA TORTURE PAR L'ESPERANCE,"
AND SELECTED STORIES

(TRANSLATED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY DANA KRESS)

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
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Dana Kress

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DEDICATION

To Albert Wallace

Who has drunk, will drink. Who has dreamed, will dream. He will not give up that alluring abyss, that sound of the fathomless, that entrance to the forbidden, that effort to handle the impalpable and to see the invisible; he returns to it, bends over it, he takes one step forward, then two; and thus it is that one penetrates into the impenetrable and there it is that one finds the boundless release of infinite meditation.

Victor Hugo

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ABSTRACT

Given the lasting popularity of Edgar Alan Poe both in France and the United States, it is surprising that Villiers, the "French Poe," has not found widespread acceptance in this country. This is perhaps due to the unavailability of a collection of his best stories translated into English. The present translation is an attempt to bring together in one volume the best and most creative stories that Villiers wrote under the influence of Edgar Alan Poe. In this work, comparisons are made with Poe's works in an effort to clarify and demonstrate the importance of Villiers' literary achievements. Included in this study are "Vera," "La Torture par l'espérance," "The Amazing Muttonets," "The Adventures of Tsë-i-là," and an abridged version of "Claire Lenoir."

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INTRODUCTION

The life of Jean Marie Mathias Philippe Auguste, Count Villiers de l'Isle Adam was as colorful as that of any fictitious character of nineteenth-century literature. He was born in Saint Brieuc in Brittany on November 7, 1838, the last and perhaps most brilliant scion of an ancient aristocratic line. One of his ancestors, Jean de Villiers de l'Isle Adam, saved Rhodes from the attacking moorish armies and founded the Knights of Malta.¹ Villiers' father, the Marquis de l'Isle Adam, nurtured the youth with tales of past family glories and dreamed of reestablishing the family fortunes. His schemes often backfired, however, leading the family to financial ruin. Villiers left Brittany for the capital when he was seventeen and except for brief visits to his family home, a stay at the abbey of Solesmes and a period at Nogent at the end of his life, Paris was to be his permanent home. There he began to move within the circle of artists who frequented the cafes, and it was probably at one of these, the Brasserie des Martyres, that Villiers met Baudelaire.² Through Baudelaire, Villiers was introduced to the works of Edgar

¹Alan William Raitt, The Life of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 3.

²Ibid., p. 18.

Allan Poe. The ideas of these two men were to influence Villiers for the rest of his life.

During the following ten years Villiers came to be known as a playwright, novelist, poet and storyteller. He acquired a reputation as an eccentric, covering himself with strange medals and decorations and encouraging all sorts of rumors about himself.³ One of the most fascinating stories concerns his nomination for the throne of Greece. This episode dates from 1862 when Otto I of Greece was overthrown. Villiers' name was mentioned; his father borrowed money from the Rothschilds, and when Villiers was granted an audience with the Emperor Napoleon III, rumor swept through the French capital like wildfire.⁴ Rumors of this sort were to surround Villiers his entire life, and he undoubtedly encouraged them. In fact, the details of his life remain somewhat sketchy because it is difficult to distinguish the real events from the imaginary ones. Villiers was secretive about his private life, so much so that even his best friends would often not know his whereabouts for months on end.

Gifted at the piano, he set to music poems by Baudelaire, and he counted Wagner, Liszt, Saint-Saens, Chabrier, Augusta Holmes, and Duparc among his musician friends.⁵ Among the painters he knew were

³Ibid., p. 37.

⁴Ibid., p. 38.

⁵Alan William Raitt, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam et le mouvement symboliste (Paris^ŕ J. Corti, 1965), p. 123.

Degas, Manet, Renoir, and Whistler.⁶ Villiers was a disciple of Baudelaire and a most intimate friend of Mallarmé. He was acknowledged by Verlaine, W. B. Yeats, Leon Bloy, Huysmans and many others who recognized the hand of a master in Axël and the Contes cruels.

These same men rallied around Villiers in 1887 when he was stricken with the disease that was to eventually take his life. Thinking that he was living off royalties, Villiers was unaware that Mallarmé had circulated a letter among his friends asking them to create a monthly stipend for the dying man. More than fifty friends, including Huysmans, Dumas, Hérédia, Maupassant and Sully Prudhomme responded to this letter and during the final two years of his life they never let him know that he was the recipient of charity.⁷

Villiers' life was a bizarre mixture of aristocratic trappings and grinding poverty. A letter from Jules Feuillade seven years before his death gives a striking portrait of the writer's miserable existence:

In two months he has moved ten times. No one knows where he is at present. He is forty-four and it seems that a man with his name and perspicacity could have made something of himself ten years ago. Unfortunately, the bad company he keeps has ruined him. He gave up all religious practice some time ago. He gets up late, smokes too much and drinks

⁶Ibid., p. 34.

⁷Raitt, The Life of Villiers, p. 349.

continually. His are sleepless nights and turbulent days.⁸

In spite of these difficult conditions, Villiers continued to write, infusing his stories with his dreams of the ideal. Perhaps the most accurate appraisal of Villiers as an artist is given by Mallarmé:

Villiers de l'isle Adam wrote the last pages of L'Eve future flat on his stomach on the floor of a room emptied of its furniture and lit by the stump of a candle . . . flat on his stomach! But his spirit stood upright. For the spirit, with some people, always forms a right angle with the crushed body.⁹

His struggle to conquer the literary world endured his entire life. Ironically, just as his work was beginning to find acceptance, he was stricken with cancer. He died in 1889 after a three year battle against the disease.

The stories in this volume were all originally published in magazines and later grouped together in various collections; "The Omen,"¹⁰

⁸ Correspondance générale de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, ed. Joseph Bollery (Paris: Mercure de France, 1962), II, 13.

⁹ Raitt, The Life of Villiers, p. 350.

¹⁰ Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Comte de (Jean Marie Mathias Philippe Auguste), Contes cruels, Nouveaux Contes cruels, ed. Pierre-Georges Castex (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1980), pp. 218-238.

"Claire Lenoir,"¹¹ "La Torture par l'espérance,"¹² and "Vera"¹³ were chosen because they were written in a style similar to that of Edgar Allan Poe; "The Amazing Muttonnets,"¹⁴ and "The Adventures of Tsë-i-lâ,"¹⁵ were included to provide a darkly humorous element to the collection.

"The Omen" first appeared in "La Revue des Lettres et des Arts." It was originally published in serial form in the issues that appeared in December of 1867 and January of 1868. The story is dedicated to the Abbot Victor de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam who was rector at Ploumillan. Robert du Pontavice has indicated that the Abbot not only served as the model for Abbot Maucombe, but also that the story was written in the rectory in Brittany.¹⁶ The folklore of Brittany must have had an impact on Villiers; certainly there are many elements of "The Omen"--the deserted roads, the tumbledown cemeteries, the blinding mists--that are reminiscent of a good Breton ghost story. It

¹¹Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Oeuvres complètes de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam (Paris: Mercure de France, 1922), III, 43-205.

¹²Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Contes cruels, pp. 323-330.

¹³Ibid., pp. 15-27.

¹⁴Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, "L'étonnant couple Moutonnet," in Chez les Passants (Paris: G. Crès et Cie, n.d.), pp. 1-8.

¹⁵Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Oeuvres complètes, V, 213-226.

¹⁶Max Daïreaux, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer et Cie, 1936), p. 357.

is perhaps this Breton heritage that explains Villiers' predilection for Poe.

It has been said that Villiers' stories resemble those of the American writer--Rémy de Gourmont even called him the French Poe.¹⁷ However, a discerning reader will find a very great difference between Poe and Villiers, and though indebted to Poe in regards to style and genre, there is a decidedly creative element in his work. Indeed, Villiers created the model of a character that was to dominate an entire literary movement.

One important point in which Poe's stories differ with those of Villiers is the use of objects to elicit a sense of terror. In Villiers' stories, although the objects may take on a life of their own, even though they do set a mood, they are very seldom the source of terror that is the subject of the story. The source of terror is usually found within the protagonist himself. A comparison of "The Pit and the Pendulum" and "La Torture par l'espérance" provides a good illustration of this. It is clear that Villiers' story is a re-working of the story by Poe. Both tales take place in Spain during the Spanish Inquisition--even the epigram at the beginning of "La Torture par l'espérance" is a quotation from Baudelaire's translation of the American work. Still, the mechanism that triggers our feelings of fear and apprehension is vastly different in these two stories. The swinging pendulum, moving walls, bottomless pit, as well as a

¹⁷ Raitt, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, p. 84.

myriad of other devices used by Poe have perhaps become worn with time, but Poe wished to produce a sensation of fear within the reader and he used all the means that were available to him. His stories follow the ideas he proclaims in "The Poetic Principal;"¹⁸ that is, a work should strive to create one effect or emotion and all of its parts should weld themselves together in such a way that this idea is powerfully achieved. Villiers, however, was more interested in a psychological study of man, and he often attempted to clarify some aspect of human nature. Thus we see that it is the Rabbi's own hope that is used to torture him, and this personal torture is more terrifying than any physical torture could ever be. Villiers was interested in universal truths and recognized that the things that may elicit a sense of horror in one reader might have a very different effect on another reader. Thus Villiers used the element of hope because hope is universal to all men; we are made to realize that all men torture themselves with the things they hope for.

Not only did Villiers search for the universal, it seems that he wished to destroy the reader's preconceived ideas of reality. This militancy reoccurs consistently in his stories because, for Villiers, it is only by the destruction of apparent, seeming reality, and a creative flight into the world of the mind that man can escape the destructive forces within himself. For Villiers all earthly hopes

¹⁸ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Poetry and Selected Criticism of Edgar Allan Poe, ed. Allen Tate (New York: New American Library, 1968), pp. 153-177.

and pursuits are useless, and if this philosophical development is somewhat less prominent in the work of Poe, it is because Poe wished to terrify and entertain his reader; he never attempted to "change" him. Villiers, too, wished to terrify the reader, but he attempted to do it by driving him from the safe refuge formed by his preconceived ideas. In a letter to Mallarmé, dated September 27, 1867, Villiers even states:

. . . we must drive the reader insane . . . what a triumph if we could send some subscriber to [the insane asylum] at Bicêtre! Indeed Mallarmé, that would be the epitome of Art, that would be sublime! . . . and I flatter myself to have finally found the road to his bourgeois heart! I have raised him up only to assassinate him all the more surely in my own good time.¹⁹

Mallarmé's response, dated September 30, 1867, helps to clarify Villiers' ideas:

We have to drive the monster mad, and I think my plan is perfect. I await with impatience your sugary concoction that will make him vomit upon himself: You are right, avoid tribunals, the art of it will be to make him judge himself to be unworthy of living.²⁰

Clearly, Poe and Villiers do not share the same opinion of the bourgeois. Poe wished to entertain them while Villiers, filled with disdain for their beliefs, was a passionate militant. Thus Poe does

¹⁹Correspondance générale, I, 113.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 115.

not escape Villiers' criticism, and one may assume that Bonhomet is speaking for Villiers when he describes Poe's stories as deliciously boring because they are told from a bourgeois point of view.²¹

Their goals may be different but these two writers have much in common as regards to style; certainly the tone of their stories is similar. Both authors tend to write dark, sinister tales and the themes of madness, hereditary illnesses and fear are recurrent in their works. This is their common ground and it is here that Villiers owes a debt to Poe. Thus in "Claire Lenoir," Claire is seen to become intensely incited at the mention of the titles of Poe's stories and she listens carefully to their plots. One can surmise that the interest of the idealistic and perspicacious Claire is a reflection of Villiers' own interest.

There are other similarities that exist between "Claire Lenoir," "The Omen," and "Vera" by Villiers, and "The Fall of the House of Usher" or "Ligea" by Poe. With the exception of Bonhomet in "Claire Lenoir," each hero is a man of about thirty; all are intelligent, nervous, marked by an aristocratic bearing, and all suffer from a hereditary illness. In each story the hero must deal with a crisis that centers about his perception of reality. There are obvious similarities between "Vera" and "Ligea." In both stories the beloved young wife dies and struggles to return to the world of the living. Ligea, through the strength of her own will, succeeds in her endeavor,

²¹Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Oeuvres complètes, III, 95.

while the Count of Athol, through his will, succeeds in creating a new reality where "the great Dream of Death and Life should open for a minute those infinite doors."²² In this reality he manages to re-create his wife, until suddenly, with the realization that she is dead, his world crumbles beneath him, leaving the reader to question the soundness of the poor Count's mind.

The theme of madness was often explored by both Villiers and Poe. This theme, so favored by Poe, was highly appreciated by Villiers because he wished to destroy the reader's preconceived ideas of reality; the constantly shifting reality of madness is an effective metaphor for Villiers because all preconceived ideas are radically destroyed by the illogical. Admittedly, one often finds that the normal state of affairs, the preconceived notion of reality is often destroyed by the illogical in Poe's stories, but Poe uses the technique, aided by a powerful sense of rhetoric and images that are distasteful to his middle class audience, to create a sense of fear and anxiety within that audience. Villiers acknowledges the rhetorical genius of Poe in "Claire Lenoir" but he attacks what he calls the bourgeois banality²³ of Poe's works. Villiers does not simply wish to frighten or entertain the reader; he wishes to challenge and attack what he considers to be a narrow vision of the world because,

²²Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Contes cruels, p. 25.

²³Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Oeuvres complètes, III, 95.

although all men attach themselves to a given set of standards, for Villiers these are not and cannot be true or durable. Poe's readers may be frightened; they are seldom challenged. They may be entertained; their beliefs are seldom called into question. They may enjoy what they read; they are rarely changed.

Thus the production of fear and the entertaining qualities of Villiers' stories are merely a vehicle for his study of the nature of reality. Fear is used as a tool to make the reader more susceptible to his message--all things of this world are to be distrusted so that one may focus upon higher thoughts, so that one may create a world within the mind that is independent of "the imperfect bonds of the Instinct."²⁴ According to Villiers, unthinking men are no more than animals:

Hence their inborn hate for thought, their unquenchable organic thirst to bring down, to annihilate, to profane every pure and noble tendency! Hence--their grotesque disdain for any sublime art, for any disinterested charity, for all that is not low and impure --like their preoccupations, their acts, and their works! Hence their way of demonstrating the justice of their opinions with power and blood!²⁵

There can be no doubt as to Villiers' attitude towards bourgeois society. The facile acceptance of any ready-made truth was abhorrent to him and very frequently his target is the everyday man, the good citizen and property owner who seeks more money, more property and

²⁴Ibid., p. 160.

²⁵Ibid., p. 160.

greater position in life. Yet Villiers' attack upon the society around him should not be viewed as malicious. It is, instead, an indication of his desire to make the reader reflect upon his own values. He wished to destroy the comforting beliefs that give support to a false concept of reality so that the reader may choose for himself, and as the Abbot Maucombe says, "to make the right choice since we are here to choose and we become what we believe."²⁶

Villiers uses a clever device to make the reader judge himself, and it may be argued that Villiers leads the reader into a kind of trap; he uses the same trap to reveal his characters. For example, the story "Claire Lenoir" is told in the first person and consequently the reader tends to identify with the good doctor Bonhommet. Even his name--Bonhommet--reassures us that this is a man worthy of our esteem. We are shocked when we realize that he murders his friend but we are able to forgive him because he seems to be unaware of his responsibility--after all, he cared for Cesaire with "all the solicitude of a mother."²⁷ Finally, however, we realize that he is a monster, and we are forced to reevaluate our initial judgment of him. Like Bonhommet, we are forced to admit that our perception of reality has been false from the beginning. It is of interest to note that after his experience with Claire Lenoir, Bonhommet goes insane.²⁸

²⁶Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Contes cruels, p. 225.

²⁷Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Oeuvres complètes, III, 166.

²⁸Ibid., p. 210.

The technique that Villiers uses is not new but it is of special interest in light of a letter to Mallarmé dated September 11, 1866:

. . . I will do to the bourgeois what Voltaire did to the clergy, Rousseau to gentlemen and Molière to Doctors. . . . I seem to sing their praises while killing them off like chickens. You will see who my characters will be--Bonhomet, Finassier and Lefol; I enamel them and carve them with all possible care. In brief I have found the weak point in his hide and that will be unexpected.²⁹

It seems likely that the good bourgeois Doctor Bonhomet has been created under the influence of Molière. Like Molière, who in his comedies permits his characters to make fools of themselves, Villiers allows an unknown Bonhomet to expose himself.

This is an important work for Villiers because it was in this story that he felt that he had found the chink in the armor of middle-class society. Villiers' technique is especially effective because the reader has come to identify with Bonhomet, only to be forced to recognize his own self-righteous hypocrisy and to doubt his own contradictory beliefs. It is this interpretation of the story that reveals the importance of the standard printed on the cover of "La Revue des Lettres et des Arts." This standard "Faire Penser"³⁰ shows that Villiers did not wish merely to please his readers, he wanted to shake them.

²⁹Correspondance générale, I, 99.

³⁰E. Drougard, Les Trois premiers contes (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1931), I, 13-14.

Huysmans was quick to acclaim "Claire Lenoir" as a masterpiece in A Rebours and Mallarmé clearly understood and sympathized with Villiers' approach to literature. Unfortunately, the story in its original form is somewhat longwinded. This is perhaps explained by the fact that, as Villiers states in a letter to Jules de Goncourt, "'Claire Lenoir' was written during the spare moments I had left over from my duties as editor to the magazine."³¹ Perhaps Villiers hesitated to undertake an extensive revision of a text that had drawn the praise of Huysmans, brought his name to public attention, and provided him much needed financial support. It is possible that his attention was drawn to matters that he considered to be more important--such as the development of the symbolist doctrine in Axël. Villiers had planned to rewrite the story in 1886 and had even signed a contract in which he had agreed to deliver the manuscript by September 15. However, he was still working on the proofs in April of the following year.³² For this reason it is strange that he never managed to completely rework this story as he had done "The Omen." As a result, it has often been attacked because of its lack of unity and its excessive length. One critic, William Conroy, Jr., has made the observation that "the long central section interrupts the action, weighs down the story with erudition . . . , dispels momentarily the atmosphere

³¹Correspondance générale, I, 117.

³²Raitt, The Life of Villiers, pp. 314-315.

of fear, and imposes a dramatic form on an essentially narrative work."³³ Certainly it is difficult to maintain a tone of horror for two hundred pages, and the weighty central section is filled with useless details that do little to advance the action or prepare the reader for what is to come. As in the case of "The Omen," the original chapter divisions were made to facilitate the serial publication of the work in "La Revue des Lettres et des Arts." Since Villiers himself later reworked "The Omen," omitting the chapter divisions, it is reasonable to assume that he considered a similar reworking of "Claire Lenoir." The abridgement of this story is justified both by the high quality of the story itself and by the importance of "Claire Lenoir" to the development of Villiers' style and philosophical ideals.

Certainly Villiers is approaching the Symbolist ideal when Claire proclaims "our prayers being formed by the will, are cast beyond Nature and escape destruction."³⁴ This statement portrays the Symbolist belief in the dignity and freedom of man. No longer is man the helpless slave of nature and the instinct, he has the ability to form an ideal destiny through the power of his own mind. It may be true that man cannot change the world around him, but for Villiers this is not important because man does have the ability to form within himself, within his own mind, a world that will adhere

³³William Thomas Conroy, Jr., Villiers de l'Isle-Adam (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), p. 58.

³⁴Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Oeuvres complètes, III, 194.

to a reality that is formed of pure thought. Though this is a flight from reality into dream, for Villiers the dream is more real and more knowable than everyday reality. It is for this reason that he attacks the bourgeois mentality with its blind acceptance of what it believes to be true--its love of money and its violence against the things it does not understand.

Villiers shows us that only those who are filled with disdain for earthly life have the courage and fortitude to rise above the mediocre existence that is the lot of the average man. For example, in "Tsë-i-lâ" the young hero states "I believe only in harmonious and profound thoughts that endure after princes and kingdoms; being a prince in that immortal empire I have no need to be a prince in yours."³⁵ It is because he possesses the eternal that he is capable of risking his own death in order to raise himself to the level of the king's beautiful daughter. Tsë-i-lâ is victorious because he dares to be. He does not cling to his life and thus this instinct is unable to bind him to a mediocre existence, while those around him are unable to rise above their mediocrity because they grasp at something that is temporary rather than eternal.

It is this flight into ideal thought and away from a reality governed by instinct that is the most important aspect of the Symbolist movement. Indeed, these developing ideas explain why Villiers changed the conclusion of "Vera" in 1876. In the 1874 version the

³⁵Ibid., V, 224.

Count d'Athol performs prescribed rites and thus ressurects his dead wife. This version ends with the two lovers embracing.³⁶ This first version, then, is strikingly similar to the story "Ligea" by Poe-- also a tale of resurrection from the dead. However, in 1876 Villiers rewrote the story making d'Athol realize that his wife was dead, and as she vanishes and reality crushes in upon him, a key falls to the floor before him. D'Athol picks it up realizing happily that it is the key to the tomb. Conroy describes this version as "less comprehensible than the version of 1874,"³⁷ but when the rewritten story is analyzed from the point of view of Villiers' philosophy, it takes on a new meaning. This is true because of Villiers' view that concupiscence and the quest for worldly things are futile efforts to gain happiness. Thus the two lovers strive to unite themselves through worldly love but realize the impossibility of their efforts. Still, for them all is not lost because when d'Athol asks "what is the way to you now?,"³⁸ the key to the tomb falls to the floor as his answer. The tomb becomes the gateway to the ideal and the reader knows that the Count will choose it. Death is chosen over life and the Count will flee the world and pass into the ideal through death.

This flight into dream, into death, into the ideal, is perhaps the most salient element of the Symbolist movement, and it is this

³⁶Conroy, p. 91.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Contes cruels, p. 27.

element of Villiers' work that is most different from Poe. In Poe's works death is always a loathsome thing; it is always the ultimate horror. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in stories such as "The Premature Burial" where the wretched protagonist is entombed only to reawaken from a catatonic trance. Poe carefully manipulates the reader's fear of death and the unknown to evoke a feeling of terror, but his characters, like his readers, strive to live. It is this wish to deny death that is most foreign to Villiers' fully developed heroes. In "The Omen" and "Claire Lenoir," stories that Villiers admittedly wrote under the influence of Poe, we see that the protagonists are indeed afraid to die. However, soon after "Claire Lenoir," Villiers sets out in a new direction and gradually it is seen that his heroes no longer seek to escape death but rather choose it as the perfect symbol of an ultimate and perfect ideal. Thus the rewritten version of "Vera" stands as a pivotal work for Villiers because a marked shift of philosophical perspective takes place--no longer is happiness sought in life but rather in death.

It is this escape into death and the ideal that most distinguishes Villiers de l'Isle Adam from Edgar Allan Poe, and nowhere in Villiers' work is this idea more developed than in his masterpiece Axël. In this drama Axël and Sara have everything mortals could wish for--wisdom, wealth, power, love, youth, beauty, and yet they choose to give it up because they recognize that all human things decay and pass away. Axël says:

. . . All the realities, what would they be tomorrow compared with the mirages we have just lived? Why follow the example of cowardly mortals . . . What can we ask of this wretched star, where our melancholy lingers on, save pale reflections of such moments? The earth, you say? But what has it ever accomplished, that drop of frozen mud, whose Time is never more than a lie up in the heavens? It is the earth, don't you see that has become the Illusion! . . . In our strange hearts we have destroyed the love of life--and it is indeed in Reality that we ourselves have become our souls! To agree to live after that would be but a sacrifice against ourselves. Live? Our servants will do that for us.

Sated for an eternity, let us rise from table, and, in all fairness, leave the crumbs of our feast to be picked up by those hapless creatures who, by nature, cannot measure the values of reality by anything but Sensation. I have thought so much I would not deign to act! . . . Why seek to bring back to life all the intoxications, . . . and why wish to subject our most majestic desires to momentary concessions, detracting from their very essence, which would doubtless be destroyed tomorrow? Would you then accept, with our fellowmen, all the pities that Tomorrow holds in store for us, the surfeits, the illnesses, the constant disappointments, old age, and yet again give birth to creatures doomed to the boredom of continuing? . . . We, whose thirst would not be slaked by an Ocean, shall we consent to be satisfied by a few drops of water, because some madmen have claimed, with insignificant smiles, that, after all, there lies wisdom? Why deign answer Amen to a litany of slaves? . . . Oh! the external world! Let us not be taken in by the old slave, chained to our feet in the light of day, and that promises us the keys to a palace of enchantments, when in its clenched black fist it hides only a handful of ashes. . . . The earth, I tell you, is blown up like a bright bubble, with woes and lies, and daughter of the primordial nothingness, it bursts, Sara, at the merest breath of those that draw near it! Let us withdraw from it completely! Suddenly! In a sacred bound!³⁹

³⁹Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Axël, trans. June Guicharnaud (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), pp. 182-184.

Clearly, Axël's renunciation of life is unlike anything that is found in the stories of Poe. This vision of renunciation, developed over the years in Villiers' stories, reached its culmination with Axël--the last work he was to write. Little read now, this drama had a profound effect on the artists of the time. That importance has not been lost upon critics of the period. Edmond Wilson's study of Symbolism even bears the title Axël's Castle, although it is a study not of Villiers de l'Isle Adam, but of W. B. Yeats, Paul Valéry, T. S. Elliott, Marcel Proust, James Joyce and Gertrude Stein. And yet, the justification of the title Axël's Castle is clear because, ". . . this superdreamer [Axël] of Villiers' is the type of all the heroes of the Symbolists of our day as well as his."⁴⁰

⁴⁰Edmond Wilson, Axël's Castle (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931), p. 246.

"The Omen"

A Monsieur l'abbé Victor de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam.

It was a wintry evening at the home of Baron Xavier de la Va . . . , we were seated about the hearth sipping our tea, an intelligent group, when the conversation fell onto one of the most somber subjects: it was a question of the nature of those extraordinary, stupifying and mysterious coincidences that manifest themselves in the lives of some people.

The baron was a pale young man whose long military service in Africa during his youth had left him with a weakened temperament and moral savagery seldom equalled.

"Here is a story," he said, "about which I will give no further commentary. It is absolutely true. Perhaps you will find it impressive."

We lit our cigarettes and listened to the following account:

"In 1876, about the time of the automne equinox, when the ever-increasing number of hurried and rashly performed burials was beginning to cause alarm among middle-class Parisians, one evening just as I was leaving a most curious seance and bound for home I could feel myself coming under the influence of the hereditary melancholy whose black oppression baffles and reduces to nothingness the efforts of my mind.

It was in vain that at the instigation of the doctors I had repeatedly intoxicated myself on potions of senna, in vain had I taken all the formulas of quintal of iron and trampled underfoot all pleasure; I, like a new Robert d'Arbissel, had made the quicksilver of my

passions descend to the level of the Samoyeds⁴¹--to no avail! Yes, it seems that I am decidedly a taciturn and morose individual! It must be true that under a nervous exterior I am, as they say, built on shifting sand because I find that even after so many attempts to deaden myself I am still able to contemplate the stars.

That evening in my room, as I was lighting a cigar at the candle before the mirror, I perceived that I had grown mortally pale! I sank into an overstuffed armchair, a worn old thing covered with a garish red velour. There the flight of time during my long reveries customarily seems less heavy, but that attack of melancholia grew more intensely painful, approaching the point of prostration! Judging it impossible to shake off those shadows by any worldly distraction--above all in the midst of the horrible worries of the capital--I resolved, as an experiment, to leave Paris, to go far away to take in a bit of nature, to give myself some hardy exercise, lively hunting trips for example, in order to renew myself.

Scarcely had this thought occurred to me--indeed at the very instant that I decided upon this line of action, the name of the abbot Maucombe, an old friend that I hadn't thought of in years, flashed into my mind.

--"Abbot Maucombe," I said to myself!

⁴¹Castex gives the following explanation: The Breton theologian Robert d'Arbrissel founded the abbey of Fontevrault in 1100. He advocated sleeping with the sisters "in order to accustom oneself to the resistance of temptation." (Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Contes cruels, pp. 219-221.)

My last encounter with the knowledgeable priest dated from the time of his departure for a long pilgrimage in Palestine. The news of his return had come to me some time before. He was living in the humble rectory of a small village in Basse Bretagne.

Maucombe must have some sort of nook or cranny at his disposition--and doubtless during his voyages he had amassed some ancient volumes, some curiosities from Lebanon. The ponds near the neighboring manors were a haven for wild ducks, so it would seem . . . What could be better! . . . And if I wanted to sport about that red-denied earth during the last two weeks of the enchanting month of October, if I wanted to see again the long and resplendant autumn evenings over the wooded highlands before the first frosts, I had to hurry!

I jumped up shaking the ashes from my cigar. Then, like a decisive man, I put on my hat, overcoat, and gloves, gathered up my bag and rifle; blew out the candles and left--craftily locking the hidden bolt that is the pride of my door.

Less than an hour later, the Brittany train was whisking me away to the small village of Saint-Maur where the abbot Maucombe was minister; I had even found time at the station to send a hastily penned note to my father informing him of my departure.

The next morning I was at R--- and Saint-Maur was but two leagues distant.

Wishing to pass a comfortable night so that I could set out with my rifle at daybreak--any midday siesta seeming to me likely to interfere with my sleep--I dedicated my morning to several visits to old

school chums. Thus I would stay awake in spite of my fatigue. About five o'clock, having accomplished these duties, I had a horse saddled at the Soleil d'Or where I had arrived, and in the sunset glow I found myself within sight of the village.

Setting out, my thoughts were full of the priest with whom I was planning to spend a few days. The lapses of time since our last meeting, the travels, the ensuing events, and his solitary ways must have modified both his personality and his appearance. I expected to find him greying, but I was mindful of the stimulating conversation of the learned man and fashioned a hopeful dream of the evenings we would while away together.

"The abbot Maucombe," I repeated to myself ceaselessly, "excellent idea!"

Upon inquiring the whereabouts of his cottage from the old people who were pasturing their cattle along the roadside ditches, I became convinced that the abbot--as the perfect confessor of a merciful god--had acquired the profound affection of his flock. After inquiring which was the correct road to the parsonage, for it lay some distance from the ramshackle huts and stalls that constitute the village of St. Maur, I headed in that direction.

I arrived.

The rustic appearance of the house, the casement windows with their green louvered shutters, the three sandstone steps, the ivy, clematis, and ten roses that engulfed the walls right up to the roof where a small cloud of smoke was escaping from a pipe crowned with a

with a weathervane--all this inspired me with thoughts of contemplation, health and profound peace. Through a trellished arbor the trees of a neighboring orchard revealed their leaves, reddened by the season's sharpness. The two windows of the lower story were aglow with western fires, and between them had been carved a niche that harbored the statue of a saint. I silently dismounted, fastened the horse's reins to a shutter and raised the doorknocker, casting a wary eye towards the horizon behind me.

But the evening glow kindled so the faraway oak forests and wild pines where the last birds were flying in the evening air, the waters of a reed-covered pond reflected so solemnly the distant heavens at this moment of falling silence, nature was so beautiful in the midst of the still air in this deserted countryside, that--without letting the knocker fall--I was transfixed.

"Oh you," I thought, "who has no asylum for your dreams, and for whom the land of Chanaan, with its palms and springtide does not come to pass, here in the midst of these fiery heavens after so much toil under hardened stars, voyager so filled with joy at the outset and now so full of gloom--heart made for exile in kingdoms other than this bitter kingdom which you share with your unfortunate brothers--behold! Here there is peace on these melancholy stones. Here dead dreams are renewed, forestalling the tomb. If you truly wish to perish--approach; here the sight of the heavens intoxicates unto forgetfulness."

I was in that state of lassitude that is brought about by overwrought nerves that tremble at the slightest provocation. A leaf fell

near me; its furtive rustle made me shudder and the enchanted horizon of this countryside entered into my eyes! I sat before the door, alone.

But, shortly thereafter, as the evening chill was setting in, my perception of reality returned. I quickly rose and returned to the knocker, inspecting the laughing house.

But hardly had I fixed it within my distracted vision when I was forced to pause once more, this time asking myself if I wasn't the victim of some hallucination.

Was this the house that I had seen a few moments before? What was the nature of this antiquity that was revealed to me now by the long cracks among the pale leaves? --This cottage had a strangeness about it; the windowpanes, lit by the agonized evening rays, burned with an intense glow. The sheltering doorway was inviting me with its three steps, but in focusing my attention upon these grey stones, I saw that although they had just been polished, the tracks of incised letters could still be seen. I saw clearly that they had come from the neighboring cemetery whose black crosses were now visible to me, to one side, a hundred steps away. And the house itself seemed changed in such a way as to send shivers through me, and the echoes of the shadowy hammer blow, which, stunned, I had permitted to fall, sounded within the interior of this abode, like a death knell.

These types of visions, being more mental than physical, vanish rapidly. Yes, I was, and it's not to be doubted for a second, the victim of that intellectual exhaustion of which I have spoken. Anxious

to see a face that might help to dissipate the vision, I immediately raised the latch and entered.

The door, moved by a clock weight, shut itself behind me.

I found myself in a long corridor at the end of which the jovial Nanon, the aging governess, was descending the staircase, candle in hand.

--"Monsieur Xavier . . ." she exclaimed, all joyful at recognizing me!

"Good evening, dear Nanon," I answered as I hastily confided my bag and rifle to her.

I had left my overcoat in my room at the Soleil d'Or.

I went up. A moment later I was embracing my old friend.

The affectionate emotion of our first words and a melancholy feeling of the past briefly weighed upon us. Nanon came to bring us the lamp and to announce dinner.

"My dear Maucombe," I said as I passed my arm under his to descend, "I see that we share the sentiment that intellectual friendship is eternal."

"Among Christian spirits it is something very much like divine kinship," he responded, "yes, the world has less reasonable beliefs which find ready patrons who sacrifice their blood, happiness and duty. They are fanatics," he ended with a smile. "Let us choose, by way of faith, the most useful of these beliefs since we are free and since we become what we believe."

"The fact is," I answered, "that it is really quite a mystery that two and two make four."

We went into the dining room. During dinner the abbot, having gently scolded me for my long neglect, told me of the village news.

He spoke of the countryside, telling two or three anecdotes concerning the lords of the area.

He cited his own hunting adventures and his triumphs at fishing; in a word, he was both jovial and charmingly spunky.

Nanon, a rapid messenger, scurried about making herself seem all around us, her vast headdress rustling and fluttering like beating wings.

As I was rolling a cigarette and drinking my coffee, Maucombe, a former officer of the Dragoons, did the same. The silence of our first puffs having left us to our thoughts, I began to consider attentively my host.

The abbot was a man of about forty-five and tall stature. His long grey hair surrounded his narrow strong face with a mysterious intelligence. His features were regular and austere and his trim body resisted the ravages of the passing years. He knew how to wear his long cossack and his words, borrowed from science and civility, were delivered by excellent lungs. He seemed to me to be vigorously healthy; the years had hardly touched him.

He invited me into his small library.

The lack of sleep during my journey and the piercing evening air, a prelude to winter, caused me to shiver. Consequently, when an armful

of vineshoots flamed among two or three logs before my knees, I felt a kind of relief.

Our feet propped up on the andirons, and our elbows propped upon our two brown leather armchairs, we spoke unconstrainedly of God.

I was tired; I listened without response.

"In conclusion," said Maucombe in rising, "we are here to witness, by our works, thoughts, words, and our struggle against nature, to witness if we weigh the weight."

And he finished with a quote from Joseph de Maitre, "Between Man and God there is but Pride."

"For all that," I said, "we have the honor of existing, we, the spoiled children of nature, in a century of enlightenment."

"Let us prefer him, the Enlightenment of centuries," he responded with a smile.

We had reached the landing, candles in hand.

A long corridor, parallel to the one below, separated my room from that of my host; he insisted on settling me in himself. We entered; he saw to it that nothing was lacking and when we had drawn near to give one another our hands and a goodnight salute, a lively reflection from my candle fell across his face. --I shuddered this time!

Was this a man at death's door standing there near the bed? The face before me was not, could not be the same as at supper! Or at least, if I vaguely recognized it, it seemed that I had not seen it, in reality, until this very moment. A single thought made me understand: the abbot was giving me, humanly, the second sensation that by some obscure correspondence his house had made me feel.

The head I saw before me was grave, very pale, the pallor of a dead man; his eyelids were lowered. Had he forgotten about me? Was he praying? What was wrong with him that made him stand there so? This solemn transformation was so sudden that I closed my eyes. When I reopened them, after a moment, the good abbot was still there--but I now recognized him--at last! His friendly smile dissipated entirely my unease. The impression had not lasted the time required to ask a question. It had been a kind of seizure, a kind of hallucination.

Maucombe wished me a goodnight a second time and withdrew.

Once alone, "a good night's sleep, that's what I need," I thought.

Straightaway I thought about death; I entrusted my soul to God and climbed into bed.

One of the peculiarities of extreme fatigue is the impossibility of immediate sleep. Every hunter has felt this. It is well known.

I was expecting a quick and deep sleep and had great hopes of passing a good night. But after ten minutes I had to admit that this nervous discomfort could not be persuaded to loosen its hold over me. I heard clicks and taps, tickings, short cracks from the wood and walls--doubtless death-watch beetles; each of these imperceptible noises echoed within me like an electric shock.

The black branches scraped each other in the windy garden. At each moment wisps of ivy beat against my window. Above all I had an acute sense of hearing, like that of a man who is dying of hunger.

"I drank two cups of coffee," I thought; "that's what it is!"

Propping myself up on the pillow, I began to stubbornly stare at the candle on the nearby table. I watched it fixedly through narrowed eyelids. I watched it with the intense attention that the mind's absolute distraction gives to the gaze.

A small stoup of colored porcelain with a sprig of boxwood was suspended near my bedside. I hastily moistened my eyelids with the holy water to cool them and then I extinguished the candle and closed my eyes. Sleep was coming; the fever waned.

I was drifting into sleep.

Three short knocks were commandingly struck upon my door.

"What," I said to myself with a jerk.

Then I perceived that my first sleep had already begun. I didn't know where I was. I thought it was Paris. Certain types of sleep induce this laughable forgetfulness. Having almost forgotten the immediate cause of my waking, I stretched out voluptuously, completely unaware of the situation.

"Oh yes," I said to myself suddenly, "someone knocked--what kind of visit could . . .?"

At that point of my sentence a confused and obscure realization that I was no longer in Paris but at the abbot Maucombe's rectory in Brittany came to my mind.

In a blink of an eye I was in the middle of the room.

My first impression was a coldness about my feet and the awareness of a lively glow that filled the chamber. The full moon was shining through the window above the church, piercing the curtains and cutting a pale and barren flame upon the parquet.

It was at least midnight.

Dark, unhealthy thoughts welled up within me. So, what was this? The shadows were extraordinarily profound.

As I neared the door a burning spot of light emanating from the keyhole wandered over my hand and sleeve.

There was someone beyond the door! Someone had really knocked.

However, two steps from the latch, I suddenly stopped.

One thing was surprising to me: the nature of the spot that was running along my hand. It was a frozen glimmer--bloody; it gave no illumination. And how was it possible that I saw no line of light under the door within the corridor? Truly, the glow from the keyhole gave me the impression of the phosphoric gaze of an owl!

At that moment the hour sounded from the church, carried upon the nocturnal wind.

"Who's there," I asked with a hushed voice?

The light vanished. I started forward . . .

But the door swung open, widely, slowly, silently.

Before me standing in the corridor was a tall, dark form--a priest, a tricorne on his head. The moon completely lit him except for his face. I saw only the fire of his two eyes which pondered me with solemn fixity.

The breath of the other world enveloped this visitor and his presence weighed upon my soul. Paralyzed by a fear that welled up hysterically within me, I silently contemplated the desolate figure.

Then the priest slowly extended his arm towards me. He was presenting me a dull, heavy object. It was a cloak, a large black cloak, a cloak used when travelling. He held it out to me as if offering it to me! . . .

I shut my eyes so that I wouldn't see it. Oh, I didn't want to see it! But a nightbird passed between us with a frightful cry and the wind from its wings brushed my eyelids, causing me to open them once more. I could hear it flitting about the room.

With an anguished rattle, the strength to cry out having betrayed me, I slammed the door with my two contracted, outstretched hands and violently turned the key; my hair bristling.

Strangely, it seemed as if all that had made no noise.

It was more than I could bear. I awoke sitting upright in bed, my arms extended before me. I was freezing, my face dripping with sweat, my heart beating against the walls of my chest with dark and heavy thuds.

"Ah, a nightmare," I said to myself!

Still, my insurmountable anxiety endured. It took more than a minute before I even dared to search for the matches. I feared the touch of a clammy hand in the darkness, seizing my own and pressing it tenderly.

I gave a nervous start on hearing the matches catch fire on the iron of the candlestick. I relit the candle.

Instantly I felt better, the light, that divine vibration, scatters morbid inclinations and consoles evil terrors.

I resolved to drink a glass of cold water to bring myself around and got out of bed.

Passing before the window, I noticed one thing: the moon was exactly like the one in my dream, even though I had not seen it before going to bed, and when I went, candle in hand, to examine the lock of the door, I saw that the key had been turned from within, something I hadn't done before going to sleep.

Discovering this, I cast a look around me. The event was beginning to take on a very unusual character. I returned to the bed. I sat; I tried to reason with myself, to prove to myself that the whole thing was only an attack of extremely lucid somnambulism, but I was able to reassure myself less and less--and then a wave of exhaustion swept over me like a wave, rocking my dark thoughts and brusquely making me sleep in spite of my anxiety.

When I woke a healthy sun was playing in my room.

It was a happy morning. My watch, hanging at bedside marked ten o'clock. Ah! Is there anything that can comfort us like the day, like the radiant sun? Above all when one smells the balmy outdoors and the countryside full of fresh wind in the trees, the spring thickets, ditches covered with flowers and moistened with morning dew.

I hastily dressed, quite forgetful of the somber beginning of the previous evening.

Completely rejuvenated by repeated ablutions of cold water, I descended.

Abbot Maucombe was in the dining room seated before an already set table reading a newspaper as he waited for me.

We greeted one another.

"Did you have a good rest my dear Xavier?" he asked me.

"Excellent," I replied distractedly. This was by habit, and I wasn't paying the slightest attention in the world to what I was saying. The simple truth is that I had a hearty appetite.

Nanon interrupted, bringing us breakfast.

During the meal our conversation was at once reserved and joyful; only the saintly are familiar with joy and know how to communicate it.

Suddenly I remembered my dream.

"Oh yes, my dear abbot, it comes to mind that last night I had a most singular dream--and so strange . . . how can I express it? Let's see . . . shocking? astonishing? frightening? --you choose; you be the judge.

And while peeling an apple I began to tell in detail of the somber hallucination that had disturbed my first sleep.

At the moment when I had arrived at the incident of the priest offering me the cloak, and before I had uttered the sentence, the door of the dining room opened. Nanon, with that sort of informality that is so common among governesses to churchmen, entered like a ray of sun in the middle of the conversation, interrupting me by handing me a letter.

"Here is a letter for Monsieur. It's marked urgent. It was just delivered," she said.

"A letter--already," I exclaimed, forgetting my story, "it's from my father! How could that be? My dear abbot, you'll permit me to read it won't you?"

"Go right ahead," said abbot Maucombe, he too was forgetful of the story, and drawn in magnetically by my own interest in the letter.

I unsealed it.

And so Nanon's sudden entrance turned our attention from our conversation.

"Well, " I said, "this is quite annoying, dear friend; I just arrived and I see that I am obliged to leave again."

"How is that," asked abbot Maucombe, setting down his cup without taking a drink.

"I've been asked to return as quickly as possible because of business, a very serious lawsuit, I didn't expect it to go before the courts until December and now I'm advised that it will be heard within two weeks; and since I am the only one who can put together the finishing touches that will win this case for us, I've got to go! . . . Oh, what a bother!"

"That's positively maddening," said the abbot,--"How positively maddening! At least promise me that as soon as it is finished . . . The important business is salvation and I was hoping to have something to do with your own--and here you are escaping! I was already thinking you had been sent by the good lord . . ."

"My dear abbot," I exclaimed, "I'll leave my rifle with you! Before three weeks are up I'll be back and this time for several weeks if you'd like."

"May you go in peace," returned abbot Maucombe.

"Oh, you know, it's a matter of my entire fortune," I murmured!

"God is fortune," Maucombe said simply.

"And how would I live tomorrow, if . . ."

"No one lives tomorrow," he responded.

Soon we rose from the table, a bit consoled by my formal promise to return.

We went for a walk in the orchard, and visited the grounds of the rectory.

That morning the abbot tenderly spread before me his paltry and rustic treasures. Then while he was reading his breviary I walked alone through the surrounding fields, breathing in the pure, cheerful air with delight. When Maucombe returned, he related to me some of the events of his voyage to the Holy land. It was thus we passed the day together.

Evening came. After a frugal supper, I turned to the abbot Maucombe:

"My friend, the express leaves at nine o'clock sharp. From here to R--- I have at least an hour and a half on the road. It'll take a half hour to arrange things at the hotel when I return the horse; total--two hours. It's seven: I must leave immediately."

"I'll go with you a bit of the way," said the priest; "The excursion will be good for me."

"By the way," I responded distractedly, "here is my father's address should you need to contact us; I live with him in Paris."

Nanon took the card and inserted it in the slot between the frame and glass of the mirror.

Three minutes later the abbot and I left the rectory and started down the open road. As one would expect, I was leading my horse by the reins.

We were already two shadows.

Five minutes after our departure a penetrating mist, a scarce rain, fine and cold, carried by a frightful gust of wind struck our hands and feet.

I stopped immediately.

"My old friend," I said to the abbot. "I really can't bear this, you are very dear to me and this rain is quite unhealthy. Turn back, this rain could dangerously soak you. Go home, please!"

Mindful of his flock, the abbot gave in to my reasoning after a brief hesitation.

"My friend, would you promise me something," he asked.

And as I extended my hand to him, he added:

"I'm concerned about the distance you have before you--and this mist is indeed penetrating!"

He shivered. We were beside each other, motionless, eyeing each other like two travelers pressed for time.

Right then the moon rose over the pines beyond the hills, lighting the fields and woods that stretched towards the horizon. We were suddenly bathed in a pale and mournful light from its wasted and hollow flame. Our enormous silhouettes, as well as that of the horse, were traced on the road, and from the vicinity of the old, crumbling, stone crosses--like those scattered all about this part of Brittany--

from beyond the old tumbledown crosses where perch the ill-fated birds escaped from the Bois des Agonisants, I heard a distant and frightful cry, the penetrating and alarming falsetto caw of a raven. An owl with glowing eyes of phosphor, trembling upon the great branch of an Ilex, rose up and passed between us, prolonging this cry.

The abbot Maucombe continued, "As for myself I'll be home in a minute, and so, take,--take this cloak! It is very special to me!"

"Very special," he added in an unforgettable tone, "and you can send it back to me by the porter at the hotel who comes to the village every day . . . please."

As he pronounced these words the abbot held out to me his black cloak. I could not see his face because of the shadow cast by his large tricorne, but I could discern his eyes which considered me with a solemn fixedness.

He threw the cloak about my shoulders and fastened it with a tender, concerned air. My strength failing me, I shut my eyes. Profiting by my silence he hastened homeward. At the bend in the road he disappeared.

With a somewhat mechanical presence of mind, I jumped onto the horse. Then I was still.

I was now alone on the open highway. I heard a thousand sounds from the countryside. Opening my eyes I saw the immensity of the livid sky where numerous leaden clouds filed by hiding the moon,--solitary nature. However, I held myself firm and erect even though I must have been as pale as a ghost.

"Alright," I said to myself, "calm down! You've got a fever and that makes it all like a dream, that's all."

I forced myself to shrug my shoulders; a secret weight prevented me.

And then from the depths of the horizon, from the depths of those forsaken woods came a volley of ospreys amid a great whirring of wings, shrieking horrible and unknown syllables above my head. They passed and beat themselves into the roof of the rectory and upon the clock-tower in the distance; the wind bore their sad cries. My God, I was afraid! Why? Who shall ever tell me? Under fire I have crossed my sword with many others, my nerves are better steeled, perhaps, than those of the most stolid, than those of the most lurid. Still I must humbly admit that this time I was afraid--quite afraid. And as for myself, I have acquired considerable esteem for all those who are not afraid of the things that are worthy of it.

So, with my eyes closed, reins dangling, fingers grasping at the mane, the cloak floating behind me, I silently bloodied the flanks of my poor horse. I felt that the gallop of the beast was as violent as possible, its stomach was almost brushing the earth and from time to time my low growls in its ear communicated surely, instinctively, the superstitious horror that made me shiver in spite of myself. In this fashion we arrived in town in less than a half hour. The ring of the pavement in the suburbs made me raise my head once more--and breathe!

Finally I saw houses! Lit shops! Faces like my own behind the windows! People in the streets! I was leaving behind the land of nightmares!

At the hotel I settled in before the large fire. The prattle of a group of waggoneers sent me into a state of mind much like ecstasy. I had left death behind. I watched the flames through my fingers. I swallowed a glass of rum. At last I reestablished control over myself.

I felt myself reentering the world of the living.

I was even, I admit it, a little ashamed of my panic.

And then too, how tranquil I felt as soon as I had fulfilled my promise to abbot Maucombe! With what a mundane smile I examined the black cloak as I handed it to the hotelier! The hallucination was over. I had willingly been, as Rablais put it, "le bon compagnon."

The cloak in question seemed to offer nothing extraordinary, if not perhaps that it was very old and patched. It had been resewn and reworked with a kind of bizarre tenderness. Obviously his profound charity had spurred the abbot Maucombe to give away as alms the price of a new cloak; at least that's how I explained the thing.

"This works out just fine," said the innkeeper, "the porter has to go to the village right now, he's preparing to leave; he can drop off the cloak at abbot Maucombe's as he passes by, before ten o'clock."

An hour later I was in my wagon, wrapped in my reconquered overcoat with feet propped on the warmer. As I lit a good cigar and contemplated the roar of the whistle I told myself:

"I certainly prefer this wail to those of owls!"

I regretted a bit, I must admit, having promised to return.

And then I slept a good sleep, completely forgetful of an adventure that from that moment onward I would treat as an insignificant coincidence.

I had to stop over six days at Chartres to gather the material that later led to the favorable conclusion of our lawsuit.

Finally, my mind obsessed with ideas of paperwork and quarrels and stricken by morbid ennui, I returned to Paris the evening of the seventh day of my departure from the rectory.

I went straight home. It was about nine o'clock. I went in and found my father in the drawing room. He was seated near the lamp of a pedestal table. He was holding an open letter in his hand.

After a few words:

"I'm sure you aren't aware of the news contained in this letter," he said; "our dear friend, the abbot Maucombe, has passed away since your departure."

I was stunned.

"Yes, he passed away the day before yesterday, about midnight--three days after you left his rectory. He died from a chill he received on the open highway. This letter is from old Nanon. The poor woman seems to be a bit out of her mind. She even repeats one sentence twice, . . . strange . . . something about a cloak . . . Here, read it yourself!"

He handed me the letter in which the death of the holy priest was announced, . . . and from which I read these simple lines:

"He was so happy to be wrapped during his last moments and shrouded in the cloak he had brought back from his pilgrimage to the Holy land because it had touched the Tomb!"

"Vera"

To The Countess d'Osmoy.

La forme du corps
lui est plus essentielle
que sa substance.

La Physiologie moderne

Love is stronger than death, Solomon said. Yes, her mysterious power is unlimited.

It was dusk, one autumn evening, a few years ago in Paris. A few carriages, stragglers with flowing lanterns, were heading towards the somber neighborhood of Saint Germain after their turn about the park. One of them stopped at the portal of a vast and stately mansion that was surrounded by antique and well-established gardens; the arch above the entry was surmounted by a stone shield bearing the coat of arms of the ancient family of the Counts d'Athol. The shield was etched in blue and encrusted with a silver star, and carved in stone under the ermine-lined crown of the princely coronet was the motto "*pallida victrix*."

The heavy doors swung open. A man between thirty and thirty-five years of age, in mourning, his face mortally pale, stepped down from the coach. On the threshold a few taciturn servants raised their flickering torches. The man was the Count d'Athol. Staggering, he climbed the white staircase which led to the room where, that very morning, he had laid to rest in a velvet casket, wrapped in violets and cascades of batiste, his lady of delight, his pale wife Vera, his despair.

Up there, the door opened gently, silently brushing the carpet; the count pulled open the curtains.

Everything was exactly where the countess had left it the evening before. A sudden Death had struck her down. The night before his beloved had fainted in joys so profound, had lost herself in such

exquisite embraces, that her heart, shattered by ecstasy, had failed; a mortal purple swept her lips. Scarcely had there been time to give her husband a goodbye kiss, a silent smile playing upon her lips, when her long lashes, like veils of mourning, had lowered upon the beautiful night of her eyes.

The nameless day had passed.

At noon, after the frightful ceremony at the family vault, Count d'Athol had dismissed his black escort. Then closing himself within the marble walls with the shrouded figure, he pulled after him the iron door of the mausoleum,--incense was smoldering on a tripod;--a shining crown of lanterns at the head of the bier shown upon her.

Standing, dreaming, feeling only forlorn tenderness, he had remained there the entire day. At dusk, when six o'clock rang out he had left the hallowed grounds. Closing the door behind him, he had pulled the silver key from the lock, and climbing onto the highest step of the threshold, he had thrown it gently inside the tomb. He had thrown it through the trefoil surmounting the entrance onto the interior flagstones. And why? Surely because of some mysterious resolution never to return.

And now he was returning to their empty room.

The window under the heavy cashmere draperies was open. A lingering twilight illuminated the ancient wooden frame that enclosed a large portrait of the departed. Around him the count saw, dangling on an armchair, the dress which she had cast off the previous evening; on the mantle were her jewels, her pearl necklace, a half-closed fan, and the heavy flasks of perfume whose scent was forever lost to

her. The ebony bed with spiral columns remained unmade, and near the pillow where the small hollow made by her beloved head could still be seen in a cloud of lace, he perceived the handkerchief, reddened by drops of blood, where her young soul had fluttered for an instant; the open piano with a never-to-be-finished melody laying on the rack, the oriental flowers, picked by her in the greenhouse, now limp, in their old saxony vases, and at the foot of the bed on a black fur, the small slippers of Chinese velour, upon which shown her laughing motto, stitched in pearls "Vera, whoever sees 'er will verily love 'er."

Yesterday morning the bare feet of his beloved had nestled there kissed at each step by swansdown. And there, there in the shadows was the clock whose mechanism he had broken so that it might never sound another hour.

Thus she was gone! Where!? . . . to live now?

To do what? . . . It was impossible, absurd.

And the count sank into an abyss of nameless thoughts.

He dreamed of their entire past existence. Six months had flown by since their marriage. Was it not abroad, at an embassy ball, that he had seen her for the first time? Yes! The memory of that encounter rose vividly before his eyes. She had appeared before him in all her radiance. That evening their eyes had met and they knew that they would love each other unto eternity.

All the tittle-tattle, the staring smiles, the insinuations, all the difficulties which the world creates to delay the inevitable happiness of those who belong to each other, all had vanished before the tranquil certainty that they had of each other at that very instant.

Vera, wearied by the ceremonious dullness of her entourage, had come to him after her first grating encounter, thus simplifying the banal formalities that waste the precious moments of life.

Oh! How from their first words, the vain appraisal of their pathetic judges seemed to them to be as a flight of nightbirds fleeing into the shadows! What a smile they exchanged! What an unutterable embrace!

And yet their nature was most strange! These were two beings endowed with a marvelous, yet exclusively worldly knowledge. In them sensation prolonged itself with a disquieting intensity. They lost themselves in the sheer power of their emotions. However, certain ideas, those of the soul, for example, of infinity, of God even, lay totally outside of their understanding. The faith of the masses in things supernatural was for them but a source of vague astonishment: a sealed book with which they did not bother since they possessed neither the quality of condemnation nor of justification. They were fully aware that the world was a stranger to them. Thus, immediately after their marriage, they had isolated themselves in the old and somber mansion where the dense thicket of gardens muffled the noise coming from outside.

There the two lovers shrouded themselves in the ocean of languid and perverse joy in which the mind merges with the mysterious flesh. They exhausted the violence of the desires born of their quivering and unbridled tenderness. Each became the pulse of the other's being. In them, the mind penetrated so thoroughly the body, that to them, their

very flesh seemed to be of the intellect, and their kisses forged the searing chains of an ideal attachment.

Long vertigo! Suddenly the spell was broken; the horrible accident had separated them; their arms were broken apart. What shade had stolen his dear one from him? Death? No! Is the soul of a cello carried away in the cry of a broken string?

The hours passed.

Through the window he watched Night advancing across the heavens: to him the Night seemed personal. To him she seemed a melancholy queen, pacing sadly in her exile, while the diamond clasp of her mourning robes, Venus, alone, was shining over the trees, lost in the azure depths.

It's Vera, he thought.

At her name, pronounced so softly, he shuddered like a waking man; then, standing up, he looked about him.

The objects in the room were now lit by an until-then-imprecise glow; it was the twinkle of a nightlight. Its glimmer lent a bluish light to the stygion air and the Night, risen in the firmament, made it appear to be another star. It was the lamp of an old icon, still redolent with incense, a holy shrine of Vera's family.

A triptych carved in precious wood was suspended by a cord of Russian esparto between the glass and the image, and golden, vacillating reflections from the interior fell onto the necklace that lay among the jewels on the mantle.

The full halo of a Madonna clad in an azure robe was rendered rose-like by the Byzantine cross which it encircled and the delicate contours of the scarlet cross seemed to melt in the reflections, kindling a bloody glow from within the pearls. Since childhood Vera had pitied, with wide-opened eyes, the pure and maternal countenance of this hereditary Madonna, yet, because she was unable to offer anything but a superstitious love, she offered that, sometimes, naively and pensively, when she would pass before the lamp.

At this sight, the count, the most secret part of his soul being touched by painful memories, jumped up and quickly extinguished the holy light. Then, groping in the shadows for the bell, he rang.

A servant appeared; it was an old man dressed in black. He held a lamp which he sat down before the portrait of the countess. When he spun around, it was with a shiver of terror that he saw his master standing and smiling as if nothing had happened.

"Raymond," the count said tranquilly, "this evening we are horribly exhausted, the countess and I; you may serve supper at ten o'clock. I might add that we have resolved to sever our ties with the world. Hereafter, none of my servants except you are to spend the night in the manor. You may give them three year's wages and then they are to leave. Then you may bar the door and prepare the candles downstairs in the dining room. In the future we shall receive no one."

The old servant trembled and looked at him attentively.

The count lit a cigar, and went down into the garden.

At first, the old man thought that a too heavy, a too desperate sadness had affected his master's mind. He had served him since childhood and he understood instantly that the shock of a too sudden awakening might be fatal to this somnambulist. Above all his duty was to respect such a secret. He lowered his head. Should he be the devoted accomplice to this holy dream? Should he obey and continue to serve them without acknowledging Death? What a strange idea! Would it last only a night? . . . tomorrow, tomorrow, alas! Ah, who could know? Maybe! After all, it was a goodly project! What right did he have to judge it?

He left the chamber, executed his orders to the letter, and that very night their bizarre existence began.

It was a matter of creating a terrible mirage.

The strain of the first days quickly dissipated. Raymond, at first in a stupor, then by a kind of deference and tenderness, had managed to act so naturally, that by the end of the third week he himself was almost duped by his own good will. The troubled thoughts in the back of his mind seemed to diminish. Sometimes, experiencing a kind of vertigo, he had to tell himself that the countess had, indeed, passed away. He had begun this dismal game and day by day grew less aware of reality. After a while it took more than a little reflection to convince himself of the truth and return to his senses. He saw clearly that he would end up by giving in entirely to the frightful magnetism with which the count was slowly penetrating the world around them. He was afraid, but his was a gentle indecisive fear.

It was true that d'Athol lived absolutely unaware of the death of his beloved wife! He couldn't help finding her ever present, so thoroughly was the form of the young woman mixed with his own. Sometimes on a garden bench on sunny days he would read aloud her favorite poems, and in the evening before the fire, their two cups of tea resting on the low table beside them, he would chat with the smiling illusion seated before him in the other armchair.

The days, the nights, the weeks crept by. Neither was aware of what they were accomplishing. Unusual incidents began to occur now--and it became difficult to distinguish the point at which the imaginary and the real had become identical. A presence floated in the air, a form was striving to emerge, to weave itself into the space which had become undefined.

Like a visionary d'Athol lived a double life. His countenance was gentle and pale, and yet he seemed to pass beyond in flashes, between two blinks of an eye--a feeble note struck at the piano, a sudden kiss that would silence him just as he was about to speak, a kindredness with feminine thoughts which would awaken within him in response to something he was saying, an unfolding of himself, such that, around him, he could smell, as if in a liquid mist, the maddening, sweet perfume of his beloved, and at night, between waking and sleep, there were words whispered very softly: everything warned him. It was a negation of death raised, to a power unknown.

Once, d'Athol had felt her and seen her so close to him that he had taken her into his arms; but at this movement she had vanished.

"Child," he murmured with a smile.

And he went back to sleep like a sulky lover who has been turned away by a laughing and sleepy mistress.

On her Saint's Day, as a joke, he placed a bouquet of forget-me-nots upon her pillow.

"Just because she thinks herself dead," said he.

Thanks to the profound love and all powerful will of Count d'Athol, who was forging the life and presence of his wife inside the lonely manor, this existence had finally ripened with a somber and persuasive charm.

--Raymond himself no longer felt any fear, having become gradually accustomed to these sensations.

A robe of black velour glimpsed at the turn of a path, a laughing voice calling to him from the parlor, the ringing bell waking him in the morning just as it used to, all that had become familiar to him; one might say that, like a child, the dead lady played at being invisible. She felt herself to be loved intensely. It was natural.

One year had drifted by.

The evening of the Anniversary, the count, seated near the fire, had just read a Florentine fable to her. He closed the book, then while serving their tea:

"Douchka," said he, "do you remember the Vallée des Roses, the shore of the Lhan, and the castle of the Four Towers? . . . This story reminds you of them, doesn't it?"

He rose, and in the bluish mirror he saw that he had grown incredibly pale. He gathered a pearl bracelet from a tray and attentively examined the pearls. Hadn't Vera just slipped it from her wrist a moment ago, just before undressing? The pearls were still warm and their luster was softened as if from the warmth of her body. And there was the opal of her Russian necklace. That opal loved so well her beautiful bosom that it would become pale and sickly in its golden setting if the young woman neglected to wear it for awhile! Before, the young lady had loved this jewel because of this faithfulness. That night the opal shone as if Vera had just left it, and as if the exquisite magnetism of her beautiful being was penetrating it still. When he returned the necklace and precious stone to the tray, he chanced to touch the silken handkerchief where the droplets of blood were as red and moist as carnations in the snow! There, on the piano, who could have turned the last page of that old tune? What! In the ancient icon the holy lamp had been relit! Yes! The golden flame cast a mystic glow upon the serene face of the Madonna. And those exotic flowers, freshly gathered, bursting from the old Saxony vases; what hand had arranged them there? The room seemed joyous and endowed with life in a more meaningful and more intense manner than was customary. But nothing could surprise the count! It all seemed so natural that he paid no mind when the hour chimed on the clock he had broken more than a year before.

That night, however, it seemed as though, from the shadowy depths, Vera was striving, adorably, to return to this room which was so thoroughly hers! She had left so much of herself there. Everything which

had been her existence beckoned her there, for her spell permeated this room. At last, the long struggle waged by the impassioned will of her husband had unbound the shadowy chains from round her.

She was necessary to this place. Everything she loved was there.

She had to want to return and smile at herself once again in the mysterious mirror where she had so often admired the lily-like image before her! This gentle woman, stricken by death, down there, had thrilled amidst the violettes, beneath the extinguished lamp. This divine, dead woman had quivered, in the tomb, all alone, when she had seen the silver key thrown upon the flagstones. She, too, wanted to come to him! Yet her will was rocked in the idea of incense and isolation. Death, and Heaven, and Life, was this not, for her, their embrace? Still, in the gloom the solitary kiss of her husband beckoned her lips. And the echoing melodies, the impassioned words of other times, the very cloth which covered her and retained a perfumed scent, those magical jewels, which, through their obscure sympathy, wanted her, and above all, the immense and absolute impression of her presence; everything summoned her back. Yes, her presence, stamped upon the very things themselves had drawn her for such a long time, that, at last, healed of this idle death, there was nothing lacking but her alone.

Ah! Ideas are living beings! The count had carved the shape of his love in the air, and this emptiness had to be filled by the only being that was homogeneous to it, otherwise the universe would have crumbled. The conviction came to him, at that very moment, that she

had to be there in that room! He was as sure of it as he was of his own existence, and everything around him was saturated with the same conviction. It could be seen! And since nothing was missing but Vera herself, tangible, real, it had to be that she would appear! It had to be that the great Dream of Life and Death should open for a moment those infinite doors! Faith had extended the road of resurrection unto her. A fresh burst of musical laughter had lit with joy the bridal bed; the count spun round, and there before his eyes, finally, created of memory and will, propped up, resting on the lace pillow, supple, one hand stroking her dense black hair, her mouth delicately drawn into a smile all paradise and perfume, as beautiful as death: the countess Vera watched him, a bit drowsily.

"Roger," she called with a faraway voice.

He came to her, their lips met in divine, forgetful, immortal joy.

And they perceived that they were nothing more, really, than one being.

The hours caressed this unknown flight into an ecstasy, where, for the first time, the earth met the heavens.

All of a sudden the Count d'Athol shuddered, stricken by a fatal memory.

"Ah! I remember now," he said. "What has been wrong with me? You are dead!"

Upon these words, the mysterious light of the icon vanished permitting a pale suggestion of morning to filter into the room through the space in the curtains. The candles flickered and died, an acrid

smoke oozing from their red wicks; the fire disappeared in a pile of warm ashes; within moments the flowers faded and withered. The pendulum of the clock slowly came to rest; the opal grew cold and leaden. And as the spots of blood faded on the batiste, the certainty of each object evaporated instantly. Slipping from his longing embrace, the pure and ardent vision rose into the air and vanished. A feeble far-away whisper of goodbye pierced Roger to the bone bringing with it the knowledge that he was alone.

His dream had been shattered in a simple blow, for with a single word he had broken the magnetic thread that had tied their radiant lives. Now everything was death.

Like those tears of glass, illogically bound, and yet so solid that the blow of a hammer on the body will not break them, and yet, which will quickly crumble into an impalpable dust if the needle-like extremity is broken, everything vanished.

"Oh," he mumbled, "it is over! She is lost and alone! What is the way, now, to reach you? Show me the road that can lead me to you!"

Suddenly, like an answer, a brilliant object fell from their nuptial bed onto the black fur with a metallic sound. A frightful ray of earthly day shown upon it! The abandoned man stooped over, seized it, and a sublime smile lit his face when he recognized this object. It was the key to the tomb.

"The Amazing Muttonets"

A Monsieur Henri Mercier.

The thing that produces real marital bliss, the thing that comprises the secret of marital tenderness, the thing that explains the conjugal fidelity of some couples would be a comical and terrifying mystery to anyone whose astonishment would permit him to analyze it. The extravagant peculiarities of Man's sensuality are like the eyes of a peacock's fan for these eyes see only within the soul. Alone, each man knows his own desires.

One radiant March morning in 1793, during the height of the Reign of Terror, Comrade Fouquier Tinville sat in his studio on the Rue des Prouvaires, his eyes wandered through the piles of dossiers that lay upon his desk. He had just signed the list of a batch of aristocrats who were to be "eliminated" the very next day.

Suddenly the sound of voices, those of a visitor and the military guard, reached him from beyond the door. He raised his head listening. The visitor spoke of forcing his way in. The sound of his voice made Fouquier Tinville shudder.

A shout rang out, "I'm Thermidor Muttonet from the Peoples Committee! . . . Tell him that!"

At this name Fouquier Tinville responded "Let 'im in!"

"There, I told you so," howled the man as he stormed into the room. He was about thirty and there was something jovial in his face, even though his appearance seemed to suggest a shifty character.

"Hello, it's me ol' pal. I've got a couple of things to say to you.

"Get right to the point! I'm not on my own time here."

The newcomer took a chair and drew near his friend.

"How many heads are gonna roll the next time round," he asked, pointing to the document that the man had just initiated.

"Seventeen," responded Fouquier Tinville.

"Ah, so there's even a little space between number seventeen and your stamp?"

"There always is!" said Fouquier Tinville.

"For a suspect's head?"

"Speak!"

"Relax! I'm delivering it!"

"His name?" asked Fouquier Tinville.

"It's a woman , . . who . . . she's part of a conspiracy! She . . . How long would the trial take?"

"Five minutes. Her name?"

"So they can guillotine her tomorrow?"

"Her name??"

"It's my wife."

Fouquier Tinville knitted his brows and threw down his pen. "Get out of here, I'm busy," he said; "we'll have a good laugh about it later."

"I'm not joking; I'm accusing her of conspiracy," cried comrade, Thermidor icily.

"On what grounds?"

"There are signs!"

"Which ones?"

"I feel them!"

Fouquier Tinville stared holes in his friend Muttonet. "Thermidor," he said, "your wife is a fervent revolutionary. Her meat loaf last Thursday was good. It was excellent! And those three bottles of Vouray you conjured up from your hidden stash were better than what you sell me. Send her my regards! You know, we're eating together tomorrow night at your place. Enough said, now go away or I'm gonna get mad."

Thermidor Muttonet, in answer to this almost severe rebuke, flung himself to his knees, wringing his hands, his eyes brimming with tears.

"Tinville," he gasped like a man choking from a painful surprise, "we've been friends since childhood. You were like my twin brother. We grew up playing the same games. Do it for old times sake! I've never asked anything of you. Are you going to deny me the first favor I've ever asked of you?"

"What have you been drinking this morning?"

"Why nothing at all," responded Muttonet, his eyes becoming as round as saucers; evidently he hadn't understood the question.

Silence.

"All I can do for you is to keep my mouth shut during dinner tomorrow night and say nothing about all this foolishness. I can't believe that you could even think about such a joke--nor that you've lost your mind--although after what you've been saying, that might just be possible."

"But I can't bear living with Lucrecia anymore!" wailed the begging man.

"You're just dying to be a cuckold, comrade! That's easy to see."

"So you're gonna refuse!"

"To do what? To cut off her head just because you don't get along?"

"The tramp . . .! Come on old man, just for the sake of friendship, put her name on your list, please, just to make me happy!"

"Another word and I'll put your own on it!" growled Fouquier Tinville, seizing his pen one more.

"Well how about that! Let's not get carried away," bawled Muttonet, pale as a ghost as he picked himself up off the floor. "O.K. I'm leaving," and adding in a pointed, hysterical falsetto, "But it's a fine kettle o' fish when your own friend doesn't know you anymore! I swear I didn't think you were capable of refusing me the first paltry favor I ever asked of you. It would've only cost you a few scribbles! We've known each other so long!" His voice became natural, "Just the same, come to dinner tomorrow night--but not a word to my wife. This is just between you and me," lo very serious this time!

Thermidor Muttonet left.

Once alone, comrade Fouquier Tinville, after thinking a few moments, passed his hand across his forehead with a cold smile. Then shrugging his shoulders, having reached some decision, he took his list, inserted it into a large envelope, addressed it, sealed it, and rang for the guard.

A soldier appeared.

"This is for comrade Sanson," he said.

The soldier took the envelope and withdrew.

"Eleven o'clock," murmured Fouquier Tinville as he pulled his gold pocketwatch from his fine Italian waistcoat which was dotted with red, white, and blue arabesques, "Time to eat!"

* * *

Thirty years later, in 1823, amid the volleys of cannon fire that announced the rise of the Empire, Lucrecia, now a plump, smart, sharp forty-eight year old brunette, and her husband, Thermidor, had fled the country and were living in a cottage adjoining a flourishing grocery in Belgium. The house was in the suburbs of Liege; there was even a small garden.

During all these years, and beginning the very day after that scandalous scene, a mysterious phenomenon had occurred.

The Muttonets proved themselves to be the most perfect, the gentlest, the most fervent couple ever bound by the delicious bonds of passionate love. Pigeons, doves, that's what they were like.

They became the model of marital existence. Never did the smallest cloud come between them. Their passion was extreme; their fidelity without example; their confidence reciprocal. And yet, any mortal who could decipher the depths of these two beings would have been very astonished to discern the real causes of their felicity.

For every night, in the darkness, his eyes brilliant and flashing, amidst their loving conjugal embraces, he would say to himself, "You don't know, no! You don't know that I did everything I could to get your head cut off! Ha! Ha! . . . If you knew that you wouldn't give yourself to me with such passion! But, I'm the only one who knows that! And that--that's the source of my rapture!"

This very thought would make his heart pound, would make him smile tenderly in the shadows, would ravish him and make him fall deliriously in love. For then he would see her without a head, and that sensation, because of his very nature, intoxicated him!

And for her part, Lucrecia, swept up by the contagion, would say to herself, with the same intensity of thought, with the same nervous excitement, "That's right, you sanctimonious hypocrite, you laugh! So you're happy are you? You're ecstatic! . . . Ha! Ha! You'll always want me--because you think I don't know about your visit to good ol' Fouquier Tinville. Ha! Ha! And you wanted to get them to cut off my head, you scum! But, ah ha, I know about it, I do! Alone I know what you think--, and you aren't aware of that! Crafty though you be, I know your ferocious ways, and I laugh inside myself, and I'm happy in spite of you, dear friend!"

Thus had the insane sensorial basis of the one conquered, earned and won the other by a negative route. Thus they lived and deluded each other; thus they deluded themselves. And in their inane and monstrous world, each drew upon the terrible and eternal well of their

macabre pleasures. Thus they died, she first, without ever betraying the mutual secret of their strange and taciturn joy.

And the widower, Thermidor Muttonet, without children, remained faithful to the memory of his wife. He died a few years after her.

Well, anyway, what woman could have taken the place of his dear Lucrecia?

"La Torture par l'espérance"

To Monsieur Edouard Nieter

--Oh! une voix, une voix
pour crier! . . .

Edgar Allan Poe

Deep within the catacombs of the Tribunal of Saragosse at the fall of twilight one evening years ago, the venerable Pedro Arbuez d'Espila, the sixth dominican prior of Segovia, the third Grand Inquisitor of Spain descended to a hidden cell; trailing him was the fra redemptor (master torturer) and preceding him were two servants of the holy office who bore lanterns to light the way. The lock of a massive door groaned when they penetrated a putrid and solitary cell. Here a glow from a small window high above revealed the rings that lined the walls, a rack blackened with blood, a furnace, and a jug. Squatting on a bed of dung, bound by shackles and an iron collar about his neck, was a haggard man clothed in rags. It would be impossible to ascertain his age.

This prisoner was none other than the Rabbi Aser Abarbanal, a Jew of Aragon, who, indicted without proof and condemned for usury and pitiless disdain toward the poor, had been subjected to daily torture for more than a year. Still, "his blindness being as tough as his hide," he refused to recant his faith.

He was proud of a lineage dating back many thousands of years and proud of his ancient ancestors, for all Jews worthy of the name are proud of their blood. He was, according to the Talmud, a descendant of Othaniel, and consequently of Ipsiboë, wife of this last Judge of Israel, a circumstance which had sustained his courage throughout his greatest torments.

And so, it was with tear-blurred eyes, contemplating how this steadfast soul was denying its own salvation, that the venerable Pedro

Arbuez d'Espila drew near the quaking rabbi and declared what follows:

"My son rejoice, for your trials here below are drawn to an end. I have permitted, with great sorrow, the use of powerful measures to correct your beliefs. However, my task of brotherly correction has its limits. You are as the restive fig, which persistently refuses to yield of fruit and thus draws bareness upon itself. Yet, it is for God alone to pass judgment on your soul. Perhaps in his infinite Mercy, he will light the way for you at the supreme moment! We must hope as much! There are examples . . . So be it! Rest this evening, you shall not be disturbed. Tomorrow you shall take part in the auto da fé; you shall be exposed to the quemadero, premonitory flame of the eternal Fire. As you know, my son, it does burn--but slowly. Death shall claim you only after two or three hours for we shall take precautions to place moist compresses upon your face and heart to shield you from the holocausts. There shall be only forty-three of you. Consider that, as the last to perish, you shall have ample time to call upon God to offer to him this firey baptism of the Holy Spirit. Put your hope, then, in his Light and--sleep."

When he finished speaking Dom Arbuez embraced him tenderly after giving a signal to have the chains removed from the unhappy man. Then it was the turn of the fra redemptor, who with a low voice begged the Jew to forgive him for the tortures he had endured on his account. He had only done those things in an effort to save his soul. Then flinging his arms about him, the two servants, from beneath their cowls,

each bestowed a silent kiss upon him. The ceremony was over; they left the captive alone and disconcerted in the shadows.

Rabbi Aser Abarbanel, his mouth dry, his eyes glassy from suffering, considered at first without acuity, the locked door. --Locked? In his heart, in his confused mind this word awoke a dream. It was just that he had seen, a moment before, the glimmer of the lamps in the crack between the wall and the door. A morbid idea of hope, due to the collapse of his mind, stirred him. And very slowly, with a thousand precautions he slipped his finger into the slit and pulled the door towards him. A miracle! By an incredible stroke of luck the servant who had closed the door had turned the oversized key a little before the catch so that the bolt scraped against the stone supports of the wall. It had happened in such a way that the bolt had not penetrated the slot. The door swung a second time into the cell.

The rabbi stole a glance outside. Thanks to a pale dimness he distinguished immediately a semicircle of grubby walls pierced by a number of spiral staircases; and higher up, directly across from him, were five or six stone steps which led to a kind of sooty porch. Beyond he glimpsed a vast corridor of which he was able to discern only the first arches.

Stretching forward he crept towards the threshold of the passage. Yes, it really was a corridor but it appeared to be immeasurably long. A wan light, a dream-like glow lit it, and small candles suspended from the vaults brightened, from time to time, the somber air. The faraway depths were nothing but shadows. As far as he could see there

was not a door on either side, but in small insets on the side to his left were small vents secured with bars in the shape of crosses. Through these airholes filtered a pale twilight, it was the light of dusk, for at intervals reddish rays slashed the flagstones. The silence about him was frightful. And yet, yonder in those obscure depths there might be a passage to freedom. The flickering hope of the old Jew was tenacious for it was his last.

And so it was without hesitation that he ventured forth upon the flagstones, clinging to the wall beneath the vents and striving to merge into the shadowy tints about him. He advanced slowly, dragging himself on his chest and stifling his cries when a sore, freshly scraped, would send pain shooting through him.

Suddenly the sound of an approaching sandal reached him in the echoes of the stone alley. A shiver ran through him, fear smothered him. He could see nothing. "So, without a doubt it's finished?" He cowered, half-dead, crouching in a niche, waiting.

It was a servant who hurried along. He passed by quickly, a whip in his hand, his cowl lowered about his head, terrible. He vanished. The seizure which the suffering rabbi had just undergone paralyzed him. For an hour he could not move. Out of fear of greater torment if he were recaptured came the idea to return to his cell. Yet an old hope whispered in his soul that divine word "Perhaps," which is able to comfort in even the worst disasters! A miracle had happened! He could doubt it no longer! So, he began once more to inch towards his possible escape. Exhausted from suffering and hunger, trembling from

anxiety, he went on. And this ghastly corridor seemed to lengthen mysteriously. And there he was, advancing without fail, ceaselessly staring into the shadows yonder where there must be a door to freedom.

And oh! Footsteps resounded anew, but this time they were measured and forbidding. He perceived the black and white forms of two tall hats with wavy edges and two inquisitors appeared emerging from the stygian air over there. They spoke with low voices and seemed to be in some controversy over some important point for their hands flew feverishly through the air.

At this sight Rabbi Aser Abarbanel shut his eyes: his heart beat so fast he thought he would die; a cold, agonizing sweat soaked the rags that covered him. He lay there, gaping, immobile, stretched alongside the wall beneath a vigil light, imploring the God of David.

Now opposite to him the two inquisitors paused in the glow of the lamp. Pausing there, not by chance but as a result of their discussion, one of them happened to look straight at the rabbi while listening to his brother. And seared by that gaze and the distracted expression which he did not understand, the pitiful rabbi experienced once again the bite of hot tongs gnawing at his flesh. So! He had fallen once again into the hands of the torturer! Faltering, unable to breathe, his eyelids fluttering, he shivered under the brush of the inquisitor's robe. But then a strange and yet natural thing occurred; the eyes of the inquisitor were those of a man profoundly preoccupied with the preparation of an answer; he was deeply absorbed by the ideas that he was hearing. His eyes were fixed and he transfixed the Jew without seeing him!

In fact, after a few moments the two sinister forms continued their way with deliberate steps, still chatting quietly, towards the crossroads from whence the rabbi had escaped. They hadn't seen him! It was so incredible that in his horrible state of mind the poor man was stricken by this thought, "Could it be that I'm already dead since no one saw me?" A hideous vision drew him from his lethargy: while considering the wall that he was pressed tightly against, he thought he saw right before him two ferocious eyes staring at him! He threw his head back, lost in a wild trance, his hair standing on his head! But no! No. Exploring the stones with his hand he realized that he had seen the reflection of the inquisitor's eyes which he still carried within his own and which he had cast upon two spots in the wall.

Forward! He had to hurry on toward the goal that he morbidly dreamed to be his salvation, towards the shadows which now lay no more than thirty feet before him. He resumed his painful journey, hurrying along on hands, knees and belly and soon he entered the darkest depths of the frightful corridor.

Suddenly the miserable man felt an icy sting on his hands which were pressed into the floor, caused by a violent draft of air slipping beneath a door at the end of the vaulting. Oh God, if only this door opened to the outside! The soul and heart of the wretch were overcome by a kind of giddy hope! He examined it from top to bottom hardly able to distinguish anything because of the obscurity which enveloped him. He searched the surface of the door, no locks, no bolt.

A latch! He stiffened; the latch gave way under his thumb; the silent door swung open before him.

Halleluiah! he murmured in an immense and thankful sigh. The rabbi now standing upon the threshold, marvelled at the sight that appeared before him.

The door had opened onto vast gardens, under a starry spring night, onto liberty and life. The nearby countryside stretched toward the sierras whose sinuous blue lines were outlined upon the horizon. There he would be safe! Oh, to escape! He would run all night long under the canopy of fragrant lemon trees. Once in the mountains he would be safe! He would breathe once more the good and holy air. The wind rejuvenated him while the Veni foràs of Lazarus echoed in his bursting heart! And to give thanks once more to God who had granted him this mercy, he extended his arms before him and raised his eyes to the firmament. It was ecstasy!

Then he thought he saw the shadows of his arms turn back about him; he thought he felt these shadowy arms encircle him, embrace him, and press him tenderly against another chest. And yes, a tall shape was next to his own. Confident, he lowered his eyes upon this figure-- and thunderstruck, he panted, maddened, dreary-eyed and all atremble, swelling his cheeks and drooling from fear.

Horror! He had fallen into the hands of the Grand Inquisitor himself, the venerable Pedro Arbuez d'Espila, who looked at him, large tears welling in his eyes, like a good shepherd who has found his lost sheep!

The somber priest held the poor Jew to his heart with such a burst of charity that the bristles of the hairshirt pricked the chest of the old priest through his frock. And while the Rabbi Aser Abarbanel, his eyes turning inward beneath his eyelids, gasped in anguish in the arms of the ascetic dom Arbuez, he realized confusedly that each phase of that fatal night was nothing but a planned torture.

Torture by Hope. The Grand Inquisitor in a tone of poignant reproach, and with a confounded look, whispered in his ear, his breath burning and his voice altered through fasting: "And what my child, the evening before your possible salvation, and you might consider leaving us?"

"The Adventures of Tsë-i-là"

Devine, ou je te
dévore.

Le Sphinx

To the north of Tonking, deep within the Empire du Milieu, lie the golden rice fields of Kouang-Si, whose villages with their curling roofs and half-tartar customs stretch towards the central principalities of the kingdom.

In this region the serene doctrine of Lao-Tse has not yet dispelled the fervent belief in the Poussahs--a kind of Chinese folk-jinni. Thanks to the fanaticism of the district's Buddhist monks this Chinese superstition ferments there even more vigorously than within the states that are less removed from Peking. However, the beliefs of the citizens of Kouang-Si differ with the Manchu doctrine in this: it is believed that the gods directly intervene in state affairs.

The penultimate viceroy of this imperial protectorate was the governor Tche-Tang who left behind a record as a shrewd, miserly and ferocious despot.

Thanks to a clever secret this prince escaped a thousand assassinations and was able to die in peace in the midst of his subjects' hate, defying their bloodthirsty wrath until the very end.

Once, perhaps ten years before his death--one midday during a summertime whose intensity caused the leaves to crackle on the trees, setting the dust aflame and reflections bouncing from the pools--the sun poured a fiery rain upon the capital Nan Tchang where a myriad of vast, towering, three-tiered kiosks crowded together according to the meanderings of the streets just as in all the great cities of the Celestial Empire. Within his palace, within the coolest of the great halls of

honor, Tche-Tang was seated upon an ebony throne, a throne encrusted with mother-of-pearl flowers and gold filigree. He rested his chin in his palm, his scepter upon his knee.

Behind him the colossal statue of Fo--the inimitable god--towered above him, and upon the steps was stationed an attentive escort, armed with lances, arches, long-handled axes, and clad in armor fashioned of black leather scales. To his right, rigidly stood his favorite hang-man who fanned him.

Tche-Tang scrutinized the crowd of mandarins, blood princes and important court officers. Each face was impenetrable. Feeling their hate and surrounded by potential assassins, the king, victim of vague suspicions, pondered each of the groups that spoke in muffled tones. Not knowing whom to exterminate, his amazement to be still alive increasing with each passing moment, he meditated sullenly, menacingly.

A tapestry was drawn back giving passage to an officer; he led by the pigtail a young stranger whose eyes were clear and large and whose features were fine and beautiful. The youth was dressed in a robe of fiery silk with a belt of woven silver. He knelt before Tche-Tang.

Upon a sign given by the king: "Son of the Heavens," responded the officer, "this young man has claimed to be nothing more than a lowly resident of the city. His name is Tsë-i-là. However, scorning la morte lente he offers to prove that he comes as an emissary to you on behalf of the immortal Poussahs.

"Speak," commanded Tche-Tang.

Tsë-i-là stood.

"Sire," he said with a calm voice, "I know what I may expect if my words are not true. Last night, in a horrible dream, the Poussahs favored me with a visitation and bestowed a gift upon me that is beyond human comprehension. If you daign to listen you will know that it is not of human origin, because even to hear it will awaken within you a new and secret awareness. By its virtue this secret will immediately endow you with the mysterious gift of reading--upon your closed eyelids--the very names in bloody letters of all those who would conspire against your throne or your life, at the very moment that they conceive of the idea. Thus you will be protected from the terrible and unforeseen; you will grow old in peace, assured of your authority. I, Tsë-i-là, swear by Fo whose image watches over us, that the magical attribute of this secret is exactly as I have told you.

At this stupifying declaration a shudder ran through the assembly. Then there was silence. A vague anguish stirred their ordinarily impassable faces. All examined the young stranger who calmly swore to be the possessor and messenger of a divine enchantment. Several vainly endeavored to smile, but not daring to look at each other, paled in spite of themselves at the composure of Tsë-i-là. Around him Tche-Tang saw a tell-tale irritation.

Finally, one of the princes, doubtless to conceal his anxiety, called out:

"Why don't we just consult some opiated lunatic?"

Then the mandarins, growing bold:

"The Poussahs give inspiration only to the old Buddhist priests in the desert."

And then one of the ministers:

"We must first examine the so-called secret that this young man claims to possess so that we may decide if it is worthy of submission to the king."

To which the irritated officers added:

"And he himself . . . perhaps he is one of those who wait, dagger in hand, ready to strike the Master the moment . . ."

"Silence!"

Tche-Tang raised his jade scepter, and its mystic symbols flashed above the head of Tsë-i-lâ.

"Continue," he said unperturbed.

Tsë-i-lâ brandished a small ebony-ribbed fan about his cheeks as he went on:

"If some torture were able to induce Tsë-i-lâ to reveal his great secret to someone other than the king, I swear that the invisible and omniscient Poussahs would not have chosen him to be their emissary. Oh princes, no! I am neither an opium eater, nor have I the face of a madman. I carry no arms. I have but one thing to add. If I must confront la morte lente it is because such a secret, if it be real and true, merits an equal recompense. You alone, oh king, are to judge, in your equity, if it be worthy of the price I ask for it. --If, at the very articulation of the words which reveal it, you feel within yourself, under your closed eyelids, the gift of its living virtue and wonderment--the gods having ennobled and inspired me with this illuminating revelation--then you shall accord to me your radiant daughter,

Li-tien-Sé, the mandarin's princely insignia, and fifty thousand golden liangs."

Upon hearing pronounced the words "golden liangs" a scarcely perceptible rosey glow flashed across Tsë-i-là's cheeks. This was hidden beneath a flutter of his fan.

This exorbitant recompense provoked a smile among the courtisans and angered the shadowy heart of the king; it sickened both his pride and his avarice. A cruel smile rose to his lips as he watched the young man who continued courageously:

Sire, I await your royal oath by Fo, the god who has no peer, who takes vengeance on perjurers. If my secret appears to you to be legitimate, grant me this recompense; if it appears to be a chimera, then death, according to your wishes.

Tche-Tang rose:

"It is sworn," he said, "follow me!"

* * *

Moments later Tsë-i-là found himself in a vaulted chamber which was illuminated by a lantern suspended above his handsome head. Bound by slender cords to a pillar, he gazed silently at the king whose tall figure appeared in the shadows three steps before him. The king stood, leaning against the iron door of the vault; his right hand rested upon the face of a metallic dragon that protruded from the wall and whose single eye seemed to ponder Tsë-i-là. Tche-Tang's sapphire robe

glimmered; his choker of precious stones sparkled; only his head, rising above the black disc of the lantern remained obscured.

"I am listening," he said.

"Sire," said Tsë-i-lâ, "I am a disciple of the ineffable poet Li-tai-pe. The gods have given me in spirit what they have given you in power. To make my thoughts profound they added poverty. For so many favors I thanked them each day, living in peace and yearning for nothing. But one evening, upon the raised terrace of your palace, above the gardens in the moon-silvered air, I saw your daughter, Li-tien-Sé. She was bathed in the fragrance of the great flower-laden trees and caressed by the evening breeze. Since that evening my brush has traced no more symbols and I sense within myself that she too dreams of the same radiance with which she has penetrated me! . . . Weary of languishing, preferring even the most frightful death to the torture of being without her, I wanted, by some heroic deed, by an almost divine subtlety to raise myself to her, oh king, to your daughter."

Tche-Tang, seemingly by an impatient gesture, pressed his thumb into the eye of the dragon. The two leaves of a door silently opened before Tsë-i-lâ, permitting him to glimpse the interior of a neighboring cell.

Three leather-clad men encircled a furnace where iron pokers were heating. From the vaulting hung a sturdy silken cord which tapered into fine tresses. Beneath shown a small steel cage which was punctured by a circular opening.

What Tsë-i-là saw was the apparatus for la morte lente. After atrocious burns the victim was suspended with this silken cord by a thumb; the thumb of the other hand was bound behind his back to a toe of the opposite foot. The cage was then fitted about his head and once attached, two large and starving rats were closed within. After setting the condemned man to swinging, the executioner would abandon him to the darkness, returning two days later.

At this sight, whose horror ordinarily impressed even the most resolute:

"You forget that no one else must hear these words," Tsë-i-là said coldly.

The doors closed once again.

"Your secret?" rumbled Tche-Tang.

"My secret, tyrant, is that my death would bring about your own this very evening," said Tsë-i-là, a flash of genius in his eyes. "My death?--but that is the one thing, don't you understand, that they hope for up above, those who are anxiously awaiting your return. . . . Would it not be the admission of the nullity of my promises? . . . What a joy for them to laugh silently in their murderous hearts at your disappointed credulity! How could it not be the signal of your fall? . . . Insured of impunity, furious from anxiety, how could their hate hesitate any longer before you, who would be diminished by your stillborn hope? --Call your hangmen! I will be avenged! --But I see: already you understand that if I am killed you will live no more than a matter of hours; and your children with their throats slit as is custom will

follow you; Le-tien-Sé, your daughter, that delightful flower will become a victim of your assassins."

"Ah, if you were a wise prince! . . . Let us suppose that, on the contrary, you return to the throne--your countenance fired by this mysterious clairvoyance. There, surrounded by your guards, your hand upon my shoulder, you yourself having clothed me in princely robes, you send me the gentle Li-tien-Sé--your daughter, my soul--and after having announced our betrothal, you officially order your treasurers to count for me fifty thousand liangs of gold. I swear that at this sight all of your courtisans whose daggers are half-drawn against you in the shadows will falter, groveling and haggard, and in the future no one would dare to entertain a thought that would be hostile to you. --Think it over! You are known to be calculating and cold, clear-sighted in state matters--so it could not be possible that a hopeless dream could suffice to transform, in a matter of moments, the worried expression of your face into one of holy, victorious, and tranquil amazement! . . . What! You are known to be cruel and you permit me to live? You are known to be deceitful and you honor your oath to me? You are known to be avaricious and you lavish so much gold upon me? You are known to be haughty in your paternal love and you give your daughter to me for a word, to me, an unknown passerby? What doubt could remain after this? . . . In what would you want the value of a secret, revealed by the old jinnies of our Heaven, to consist in if not in the overwhelming conviction that you possess it? It is this belief alone that it is a matter of CREATING! I have done this. The

rest depends on you. I have kept my word! The golden liangs and titles, which I scorn, were only demanded so that the others could measure the terrifying importance of my imaginary secret according to the magnificence of the price torn from your infamous duplicity."

"King Tche-Tang, I, Tsë-i-là, bound by your orders to this pillar, exalt, before la morte lente, the glory and luminous mind of the august Li-tae-pe, my teacher. I truthfully declare to you, here is what wisdom demands: let us return heads held high and beaming! Give heart-felt thanks to heaven! Threaten to have no mercy in the future. Order joyous feasts for the people's cheer in honor of Fo, who inspired me with this divine ruse! As for myself, tomorrow I will disappear. Thanks to these salutary liangs of gold, I will go and live in some happy, faraway province. I presume that I will never wear the diamond pin of the mandarins that I shall receive as a sign of your generosity; I have other ambitions. I believe only in harmonious and profound thoughts that endure after princes and kingdoms; being a prince in that immortal empire I have no need to be a prince in yours. You have seen that the gods gave me the firmness of heart and an intelligence equal to that of your entourage, have you not? Therefore, I can bring joy to a young woman's eyes better than one of your great men. Ask Li-tien-Sé, my dream! I am sure that, looking into my eyes she will tell you. --As for you, covered by a protective superstition, you will reign, and if you open your heart to justice you will be able to change the fear that surrounds your closed-in throne into love.

That is the secret of kings who are worthy of life: I have no other secret to give you. --Weigh, choose, and proclaim, I have spoken!"

Tsë-i-lâ spoke no more.

Deeply absorbed by his thoughts, Tche-Tang stood quietly, his large, silent shadow stretched across the iron door. Soon he came to the young man and putting his hands on his shoulders, he looked fixedly into the depths of his eyes as if subject to a thousand indefinable thoughts.

Finally, drawing his saber, he cut the bonds which held Tsë-i-lâ, and then placing his royal collar about the other's neck:

"Come," he said.

He climbed the steps of the cell and with his hand pushed open the door to light and liberty!

Stunned by his triumph in love and by this sudden good fortune, Tsë-i-lâ gazed at the king's new gift.

"What! These jewels too," he murmured, "who would have thought you capable of this? This is more than the promised riches. For what does the king wish to pay with these jewels?"

"For your insults," responded disdainfully Tche-Tang as he opened the door that led upward toward the sun.

"Claire Lenoir"

Memorandum of Doctor Tribulat Bonhomet

Honorary Member of Numerous Academics

Professor of Physiology

Concerning

The Mysterious Case

of the Widow

Madame Claire Lenoir

For my illustrious contemporaries.

T. B.

We were bound for the shores of Brittany towards the end of July, 1866, and the captain of the Wonderful, a commercial brig of the English line, had organized a gala dinner in our behalf. It was near the conclusion of this dinner that I struck up a conversation with my neighbor from across the table, Sir Henry Clifton. He was a man of about thirty with the hale and hearty look of a seaman. His regular features were most appealing and his constant reserve was decidedly winning.

That evening, as I said, we struck up a conversation because I had found his scarce comments as a marine officer to a simple passenger succinct from the beginning of the passage. We were coming from the shores of Ireland and most of the time I had remained in the bottom of the hold plunged into the study of my dear infusoria and testing the old brines.

We exchanged a few words concerning our arrival at Saint-Malo, scheduled for the next day, then--the heady wine and lights having sufficiently troubled our souls--we went up to the till to light our cigars and catch a breath of fresh air.

Sir Henry Clifton was obviously in a state more advanced than "officer grey"; he was of a complementary color; I saw that his account of things was approaching a sentimental expansion.

As for myself, I kept my wits about me and lay in wait for my victim. It was a star-covered night. The northwest wind gently cooled and caressed us; the watch's red lantern illuminated the foam and

silvery froth that churned against the wooden boat. Sporadic cheers from the officers' mess rose up from the between decks and mingled with the immense roar from the hold.

Mindful of his silence, I feared a question concerning my mode of living and--perhaps--about my research! . . . so I instigated a conversation using my infallible methods:

"Yes, I say, my young friend, I know what you're about! Should I tell you? --I've been thinking about it since I had the pleasure of shaking your hand. --I'm going to find you a wife--a legitimate wife, lieutenant."

"A wife! . . ." he responded with a trembling voice.

"And why not, lieutenant," I replied sniffing a mystery, "your occupation as a sailor is not incompatible with a faraway hearth. There are softer knots to be tied than those you are accustomed to tying," I added with an agreeable smile, "but, then, if you are not so inclined,--let's just drop the subject; not another word."

"Monsieur," he said, recoiling a step!

Then probably contemplating the originality of my offer and re-absorbing his ideas:

"Thank you for your good will," and he went on, "and doctor, that is even worthy of a confidence. --It is doubtful that we will ever meet again . . . and well . . . I refuse your excellent proposal because there is already a woman who I can never forget as long as I live."

"Ah, that's a pity! That's a real pity!"

What was diabolical in me was that I was totally at a loss as to what sort of wife I could offer him and my principal preoccupation was only to avoid any questions concerning my infusoria.

"And she's married," murmured Sir Henry Clifton in a low voice as if to himself.

"Is there anything I can do," I asked with a profound but haphazard tenderness"

"Thank you, --my friend, my old friend," he articulated in a tone whose violent emotion was sweet to my soul, "but the poor woman must never see me again." --"See me," he went on bitterly, "her sick eyes would never even recognize me, by now she is undoubtedly blind; yes, yes, it is all over for her poor eyes."

And he lowered his face, still flushed by drink, into his hands.

At these words I slowly drew my cigar from my mouth and cast a horrified look at Sir Henry Clifton. I really didn't know why but the young man had made me think of my beautiful, strange friend, of the unfortunate eyes of my worthy friend, madame Claire Lenoir.

I silently pulled out my watch and rose:

"Until the pleasure of our next encounter my young lieutenant," I blurted out, "you have your secrets and there are moments when one prefers to be alone and I know how to respect . . ."

He shook my hand without raising his head--and I went down to my cabin abandoning Sir Henry Clifton to his dreams under the protection and special inspiration of the night, the wine and the sea.

I hastily went to bed. My suspended hammock gently rocked my imagination in the darkness. I sat up.

It was precisely at the Lenoir's that I was planning to stop over for a couple of weeks after debarking. A letter sent from Jersey had informed them; they must be expecting me.

Had I seen them since their marriage more than three years before?
--No, not once.

Some time ago I had made a lengthy visit, on account of my health, to Luchon, in the Pyrénées. There I had met Claire's family, an upright family of merchants if ever there was one! Circumstances having brought us together I discovered their only daughter to be a gracious twenty-year old who possessed a truly seductive beauty. She had auburn hair, fine features and a complexion like white jade whose transparence was sometimes almost luminous.

Her eyes were a pale green and how large they were! Unfortunately, her walks in the woods among the rocks had exposed them to the sandy, biting, southern wind. Her vision, naturally weak, was profoundly affected and soon the unanimous verdict of the doctors had been a condemnation to a precocious blindness.

But one day as I considered the similarity of name between the Lenoirs of Luchon and my old comrade, doctor Cesaire Lenoir of Saint-Malo, it occurred to me that Claire would call herself Madame Lenoir instead of Mademoiselle without great difficulty.

Why not?

Immediately I wrote to my good friend Cesaire who hastened to Luchon. I cleverly exploited the similarity of name as a pretext to a formal introduction. Cesaire was a man of scarcely forty years; the marriage was soon consummated.

Lenoir took his bride to his customary residence on the outskirts of Saint-Malo, Rue des Mauvaises-Paleurs, 18. His periodic letters indicated that the happiness of his marriage--apart from Claire's threatening blindness--was untroubled and free of worry.

As for Sir Henry Clifton, that lovable, noble child of the seas, how could he have made the acquaintance of the young lady? Could I ascertain--in supposing that he really had been speaking of Claire Lenoir--could I ascertain that she had failed in her wifely duties? No! Such a thought was hideous; it was my imagination.

Besides, Claire, the beautiful Claire, if my memory served me well, was a woman of contemplation and study, a metaphysician. How should I put it? A thinker! An impossible creature! Entranced! A quibbler! A dreamer! --Come now! She can't be the woman the lieutenant had meant to slander with an accusation of adultery.

And so, I smiled to myself as I pulled the sheet over my head. I threw off all thoughts of the young Englishman and went to sleep.

The bell announcing our arrival woke me. We were in the port of Saint-Malo. It was near eleven o'clock and the sun was radiant. I gathered up my cane and valise, went to the bridge and rushed up the pier with the waves of travelers, spattering my boots with sea-foam.

The first thing I did when I set foot upon the soil of my illustrious homeland was to enter a cafe that overlooked the harbor and the distant tomb of a former minister of Charles X, the viscount Chateaubriand. I asked for my customary dose of absinthe, enormous by any standards, and let myself fall into a chair. With a kind of nostalgic distraction I seized the first newspaper that fell into my hands.

It was a local paper, a tattered gazette whose date was already old. It had been lying on the small red bench near me. And now that I think about it, I remember distinctly that the waiter had tried to grab it away from me in order to give me a more recent one. I had resisted his efforts with that mechanical motion common to any man who wants to keep what he has.

Scanning the paper, my eyes rested on a notice situated between news of a scandal concerning the clerical party--wisely reported by the paper--and an article describing an infallible method for warding off the most inveterate earaches.

Here is the notice:

"The Academy of Science of Paris has just confirmed the authenticity of a most surprising fact. It has been determined that the animals destined for our nourishment, animals such as cows, sheep, horses and cats, retain within their eyes, after having been bludgeoned or having their throats slit, the image of the objects that are found there at their last moment. It is a true photograph of the pavingstones, stalls and gutters. Vague forms can be seen, among

which is almost always found that of the man who delivered the blow. This phenomenon lasts until decomposition begins."

What struck me was a kind of personal feeling that welled up within me after reading this article. The fact seemed especially à-propos even if it did have the quality of a miserable provincial joke.

This sensorial depravation might have been owing to the mental, moral, and physical fatigue that I felt as a result of my voyage, and I let myself explore these feelings. Then mechanically raising my eyes, my gaze fell upon a man leaning against the mizzen mast, arms crossed, at a distance of two hundred fathoms. I recognized the noble lieutenant.

Our eyes met at the same moment and spontaneously we looked away as if in pain. Why? Neither he nor I will ever know.

To stifle the leaden thoughts that were rising within me, I leapt up with a bound, drank my absinthe in a gulp, then turning on my heels from the tavern, I set myself to tramping energetically the streets of the maritime neighborhood where the Lenoirs were living. At this hour of the day it was stark and deserted.

The sun was blazing. I stopped from time to time to wipe my brow and look around me nervously.

A half hour later I stood before an isolated country house, the home of the good doctor Cesaire, my best friend. I say "doctor" as a manner of speaking because Lenoir was at heart a regular blockhead, a natural born ninny if ever there was one under the sun! --I rattled

the bell; one of the oldest servants imaginable came to show me in. He was escorted by an enormous red basset that served double duty as watchdog and strangler of "Messieurs les rats."

The servant showed me to the dining room, asked me to wait, and left.

It was an ordinary room on ground level. A fresh perfume of trees entered through the window which opened onto the garden. A family portrait hung on the wall, a lamp sat on the carpet-covered table in the center of the room. Over the mantle, between a pair of antique candleabras, a profound and limpid mirror with a carved oak frame reflected the dresden china of an old clock pendulum. A provincial tranquility penetrated this room with calm isolation. I had remained standing, my hat and cane in one hand, my valise in the other. I drank in the totality of this ringing and silent freshness.

"Well here are happy people," I thought, making a half turn.

This movement had brought me before the mirror; there I saw the door silently open behind me and through it passed a being whose appearance gave me a shock.

It was a woman wrapped in a green velour gown with garnet tassels. Two long locks of auburn hair fell upon her breasts. She wore a pair of gold glasses whose enormous bluish lens, as round as silver dollars, almost hid her eyebrows and the tops of her pale cheekbones.

"So it's you, monsieur le voyageur," said Claire Lenoir with a voice as vibrant and biting as silver. "We went to wait for you last

night at the pier! Set that down and come have a glass of this old Madeira; Cesaire will be down in a moment."

Having set my paraphernalia in a corner, I rapidly took her hands.

"You," I murmured, "is it possible . . .!"

The young woman eyed me with surprise.

"No doubt about it," she said, "No doubt about it at all! Why so much surprise, mon très cher monsieur? I didn't realize I had changed so much!" "Ah," she cried, suddenly bursting into laughter. "I've got it! It's my glasses! It's true; you haven't seen me since the day . . . Well, dear doctor, I've resigned myself to wearing them, at my age, in hope of prolonging the light! . . . Look! You see!"

And raising her large spectacles she permitted me to examine her two eyes.

Their brightness was so glassy, so deep that her look had the coldness of stone. Yes, the sight of those two aquamarines was unbearable.

"Lower them," I ordered her sharply, "a too sudden draft could be dangerous."

Her large eyelids fell once more over the pupils.

"I don't know what's wrong with my eyes," she said obeying me, "but, I judge by the looks I get, that it is better for everyone concerned that I have to wear thick glasses."

There was a silence.

I understood that the moment had come to toss off a compliment, in fact the situation appeared to demand one! But just as I was about to open my mouth someone appeared behind the glass door. It was Lenoir.

As soon as he recognized me his arched, mismatched eyebrows relaxed. He shot in like a bullet from a forty-eight and threw himself into my arms. His unrestrained but silent burst of energy almost bowled me over.

He crushed me in his embrace!

"Well, well," I said, "I am happy to see, mon cher Lenoir, that the years haven't made you suffer. Still stout and hearty," I added with a smile as I assured myself nothing was broken.

He breathlessly called the servants while his wife refilled my glass of madeira. He had all my things taken up to the room that was destined to be mine. Then we went into the drawingroom where we began to chat.

The furnishings, the curtains and the tapestries of this small drawingroom were a somber red. There were two alabaster vases on the mantle and in the shadows was a canvas from the school of Rembrandt. A few sickly, purple dahlias sprang from a cup on the piano and a model battleship complete with rigging and cannons, an example of my friend's handiwork, was suspended from the ceiling and served as a candleabra. The window was open, facing the western sea.

Evening came; the rays of the setting sun lit each of us within the red drawingroom with a somber glow.

We sat and after the first glass of bordeaux we shared a sense of well-being.

Claire ventured upon the topic of literature; there I was on familiar ground.

In the Chinchas Islands during an illness that need not be named I had purchased several volumes to combat the nightly boredom.

Among these were one or two works of an American storyteller, edited in Richmond, South Carolina. This merry fellow, it seemed to me, possessed a smattering of rhetoric! . . . But the thing that struck me was the title of his works. He called them with a certain sufficiency: Histories Sans Pareilles, etc., and as I read all these stories I asked myself in vain what he saw that was so extraordinary about them. They were, truthfully, the very last word in banality--presented, it is true à la bourgeoise--but they were dull and I often went deliciously to sleep reading them. I had come to the conclusion that the title had been chosen by the editor to pique the curiosity of the vulgar minded.

Madame Lenoir appeared to listen with the greatest attention; she seemed to be totally ignorant about whom I was speaking, but as soon as I had mentioned the subject and the title of some of these stories by this bourgeois South Carolinian, she shuddered as if she had awakened with a start and her features took on a most singular expression! --I swear it! By God! --Undefinable, that's the word!

Pausing as if seized by a vague stupor, she glared at me with those aquamarine eyes from beneath her glasses. Then, taking hold of the carafe she refilled her glass and drank a trait of pure water, letting escape a sudden burst of musical laughter. I pondered this illogical staccatto laugh with a kind of suspicious pity, doubtful of the soundness of her mind.

She soon regained a more decent composure and, because of my acute sense of hearing, I was able to discern a soft murmur:

"There are beings whose constitution is such that even in floods of light they are unable to come forth from their obscurity. These are leaden and unholy souls, clothed by chance and appearances, and which exist enclosed within the tomb of their mortal senses."

Within my heart I held this epigram against her. It was obviously addressed to her husband, but in the interest of good taste I didn't want to appear to have understood it.

"There are others," she continued gently, "who know the ways of life and who are curious about the pathways of death. These, for whom the kingdom of the Spirit must come, are disdainful of the years for they are the possessors of the Eternal. From the depths of their holy eyes shines a light more precious than many millions of tangible worlds like our own. --And the world, in its unconscious obedience to the Laws of God, has done nothing but render justice unto itself and pledge itself to Death the day that it was declared: 'Misery to those that dream!'"

And turning to Cesaire:

"When I think of Light," she continued, "my spirit is in unison with that which has made it so that all light can be produced. And when I think 'God' my spirit becomes a reflection of this idea in such a way that I penetrate the essence of God. Yes, I am able to participate in the very nature of God because God is the very essence and ideal of all thought. Thus my spirit is penetrated by God according to the flight of my thoughts towards God--by the proportional increase of the living idea of God. The two terms--God and Spirit--merge within me with the accord of my liberty, and they merge without ceasing to be distinct. Since Christian revelation is the consequence and the application of this absolute principle, I must not treat it as a delusion that has outlived its usefulness. This is so because Christian revelation is founded on basic principles; that is, it is eternal, conditionless, immutable."

"My dear Madame Lenoir," I returned, "I think you are making too much of this idea of God. He is only infinite, only necessary, only inconceivable, only astonishing! Why always drag him into conversations? Remember that Kant had an old servant named Lamb who begged his master to reconstruct the proofs of the existence of a God which had been radically destroyed by the great philosopher. --We each have within us some old servant who asks for a God. Let's be more sensible than Kant. Let us distrust the first inclination. Let us know to respond with . . . a melancholy smile? We must not accept

such givens except with reservations. To speak frankly, the heritage of our first ancestors seems to demand it.

Nonetheless Madame Lenoir placidly responded:

"Why not ask for a God from the infinite? Does it not make real each thought? Of what use would be a so-called infinite that was bounded by its powerlessness to make real a thought of man? And since God, I tell you . . . is the most sublime thought of which we are able to conceive an intimate notion, we are infinitely insane if we force ourselves to destroy this thought within us, a thing that is impossible to do at any rate.

I was silent, not wishing to let what was happening inside myself be seen.

"That's so," returned Cesaire, "but my dear Claire, no one, today, can challenge the evidence of the development of Man and not be subjected to a most serious reckoning. After all, progress does not exclude Revelation."

And turning to me:

"But if one only knew," he added, "to what point the sheer power of the Idea is surprising and terrible in the sphere of Faith! The strength of an imagination, of a dream, of a vision, sometimes surpasses the laws of life. Fear for example, the very idea of superstitious fear, without any external motive, can strike a man down as surely as an electric charge. The things seen by a visionary are essentially material for him, as real as the sun itself, that mysterious beacon of this entire phantasmagorical system of creation, dispersion and transformation!

If I open the medical journals concerning the almost ponderable reality of the Idea, I say, I will find at each instant facts like this: 'A woman whose husband was killed with a knife gave birth five months later to a child who, at seven years of age, was stricken with hallucinatory seizures. The infant would scream, "Save me! There are men with knives coming to kill me!" --The young girl died during one of these seizures and blackish marks, similar to coagulated blood, were found on her body near her heart. In spite of the differences of sex, they resembled the wounds that her father had received seven years earlier, when she was still 'beyond' the world of mortals.'

Call this what you will, I ask in what does the shadow or the idea differ markedly from what you call tangible reality, if the simple suggestion of a strange sensation has the power to penetrate, to infiltrate the essence of our bodies. What! A shadow--a thing no more than a shadow--kills us in spite of everything? Think about it!"

Lenoir articulated these words in a tone that definitely froze the smile upon my lips, and it seemed to me that during our conversation the Night had suddenly come to join us, and that, in her turn, she was going to give her own arguments and take part in the conversation.

Outside the cold blasts snapped like whiplashes on the waves and the simple night was now rolling her starless horror beneath dense clouds. The change of mood had been so rapid that I thought I was hallucinating. It seemed to me that we were becoming extremely pale; the curtains stirred at the windows; we were under the influence of Midnight.

I felt my hereditary malady awaken within the depths of my soul. Unable to bear the sight of the desolate emptiness, I rose quickly and closed the casement window with the shudder of evil foreboding that is for me the forerunner of hellish agonies.

Nevertheless, I dissimilated as best I could my state of mind, and it was with an air of indifference that I responded to Lenoir:

"Do you mean to say that you have a person other than yourself within you doctor? The devil? That would be quite unnerving, I must say, and most injurious to your mental equilibrium."

"But you, yourself, Bonhomet," replied Lenoir after a silence, his flashing eyes falling upon mine, "are you telling me that the exterior and apparent being, the one which you offer to us, the one that manifests itself to our senses, is really the one that you know to be inside you?"

This unexpected question stirred my conscience. I regarded the doctor without responding.

"And," he continued, "this exterior being, the only one accessible and perceptible, doesn't it always have within itself a spectator, a contradictor, its judge?"

"Yes," he said, "that is the ancient theory of Homo duplex; where are you trying to go with that?"

"To this: this interior companion, this occult being is the only real one and it is this one that constitutes the personality. The apparent body is only the répoussé of the other; it is a veil that darkens or lightens according to the trans-lucidity of he who

regards it. The occult being does not permit itself to be perceived and recognized except by the expression of the features of the mortal mask; an organism is nothing but a pretext to the luminous being that penetrates it. No one would think about his body--except perhaps to maintain his life--if he were really alone. Take note: if two men are bound together by any type of sentiment, they end up by forgetting little by little the details of the other's appearance. They no longer see each other; theirs is a more profound relationship, and it is their moral being that they see reciprocally; they know who they are beneath the papable simulacrum."

"That is specious," I murmured to say something.

"And it is this that gives the key to many mysterious contradictions," added the doctor. "The apparent being is even so little the real one that, very often it is not a man that lives within the human form.

"Oh! Oh!," I cried out with a nervous contraction.

"What! Haven't you ever seen the type of animal--sometimes of several animals--that prevail upon a face? Well, observe attentively the familiar movements, the instincts, the tendencies of the individual over whom 'bear' prevails for example, or 'tigre,' and in him you will feel the obscure sight of who-knows-what wild being misled into an alien body. Do you believe there are many men true to the notion of 'man' within terrestrial humanity? Man is but a divine animal, differentiated from the others by the ideal! And the man in whom care for eternal things is not ceaselessly awake in the depths

of his consciousness, that man retains the animal and has not completely left the shadows. In reality that man is not Man and the expressions of his face betray him at each instant in spite of his apparent form. Likewise, Woman, true to her ideal, is she who, reflecting divine hope, like a limpid, profound mirror, raises love and hope beyond Death. Do you think that such beings are numerous in our species? Come now, rest assured, cities are like jungles--and it's not hard to find ferocious beasts there."

"So you believe that the majority of living people . . .," I interrupted. . . .

". . . Are still imprisoned by the imperfect bonds of the Instinct. They are invisible beasts, transfigured by their disguise if you want,"--said the doctor laughingly revealing two rows of teeth that would do honor to caribbean maxillaries, "but who are REAL BEASTS! And the features of their faces, where the illuminating essence of their true organism shines forth, proves this superabundantly. Hence their inborn hate for thought, their unquenchable, organic thirst to bring down, to annihilate, to profane every pure and noble tendency! Hence their grotesque disdain for any sublime art, for any disinterested charity, for all that is not low and impure--like their preoccupations, their acts, and their works! Hence their way of demonstrating the justice of their opinions with power and blood! Hence their absolute inability to understand the true Man, the issue from on high. Yes, I tell you, and mark it well,

the apparent body is not the real being; it changes atoms continually and renews itself each six or seven months; it is not properly speaking. It is only a becoming within the Becoming. Only the form, the idea, the intangible unity is réal and upon this is superimposed an appearance. One of the physical proofs of this is that our faces become beastlike or fill with light at the approach of death. It is striking for those who have eyes to see!"

"But that is simply the Soul, mon ami," I interrupted, . . .
 "and so this would be Homo Triplex you would have to say."

Lenoir only responded with a slight shrug of his shoulders.

"And me, and myself," he cried out suddenly, "look, would you ever believe it? I feel within myself the instincts of a predator! I feel waves of shadows, of furious passions, savage hates, a wild and unquenched thirst for blood . . . as if I were haunted by a cannibal! . . . Yes, it's mad but it is so: and I know many doctors of the insane who would be able to admit as much of themselves if their livelihood did not constrain them to calm, dissimulation and silence. When I leave the spiritual kingdom, I clearly distinguish this hellish nature within me! It's the true one! And all metaphysical speculation then appears to me to be an affiliation of dazzling rubbish, incapable not only of redeeming this horrible almost diabolical form but also of giving me a single moment of stable hope! This is why I fear that coat rack that is called Death. This is why I am not at peace, I tell you . . .! No, I know myself too well to ever be!"

One o'clock sounded. I rose: I had pulled myself together a bit from my attack of nerves. This time Lenoir really had been too excessive, having passed the goal, so to speak, by means of exaggeration. Decidedly, I found his ranting to be more and more inept.

"We'll take up this subject again," I said smiling.

"Yes," he said, preoccupied and still a bit somber.

And pulling a small, portable edition of the Bible from his pocket he ended his oratory exclaiming:

"We'll also take up this book," and he tapped on the cover as if it were his snuffbox.

He opened it mechanically; by chance it fell to the chapter of Moses devoted to adultery and its punishment.

I noticed that at the word "adulteress" Madame Lenoir suffered a long and silent shudder in her chair. Undoubtedly it was only a nervous reaction awakened either by the memory of some childhood sweetheart or the coolness of the evening and the ocean.

As for the lieutenant, as for Sir Henry Clifton, the idea didn't even cross my mind!

Lenoir brusquely closed the Bible and added as if to himself:

"Really! How could one pardon adultery? What rage! The very idea maddens me! I admit it!"

"Yes, I feel that I would satisfy my vengeance to the full--and the loss of paradise wouldn't prevent it--even into the regions beyond death . . . if . . ."

And his gaze turned toward his wife, crashing upon her green glasses and pale face.

Claire rose, taking a flickering candle.

"You're not thinking," she said; "our friend needs to sleep."

With a smile she handed me the candlestick.

A moment later I was drowsily nestled between my sheets laughing bitterly at this fantastic couple.

I will pass quickly over the charming and tranquil existence that we led for ten days or so, after which my poor lifeless friend was laid to rest in his room, flanked by a pair of candles, a funeral shroud pulled over his face.

Alas! He had been suddenly carried away, stricken as if by lightning. It was an attack of apoplexy caused by the immoderate abuse of snuff. I had often warned him of the inconvenience of this drug and of the dangers he risked, so to speak, by playing with it. I had failed.

From the first days having noticed this mania, I resolved to cure him, to save him.

And so, in order to befuddle and break the demon of habit within him, I had attempted to introduce silver nitrate, mercury chloroborate, calcium phosphate, caustic soda and a thousand other inoffensive drugs into his snuffbox. In short, I cared for him with the solicitude of a mother.

He would either succumb or be healed.

But at the very moment that my cares and treatment were about to be crowned with an un hoped for recompense, one Saturday evening about ten days after my arrival, he suddenly became pale after a most lively dinner! His eyes closed. He moved his lips. --He was dead!

A year later I found myself in the Midi. I had explored the Alps stopping over at Digne. A solitary wanderer, I took lodgings at a rural guesthouse, passing the days in the countryside with my instruments.

One evening, harrassed by my research, I returned to the inn very late and asked the porter to send a serving of fish, some pears and a couple of liters of coffee to my room.

The porter appeared to be disturbed by my request.

"Monsieur isn't aware that today is a national holiday? . . . Except for a bedridden old woman there isn't a soul in the house, not even the cook! Everyone's gone to see the fireworks. Monsieur will find a restaurant if he wishes to follow the road that goes to the center of town. --This letter also came for Monsieur."

I gently took the voluminous letter which I read by the candle he raised before me.

The letter came from England. One of my English correspondents, a most original man, wanted to inform me of the positive outcome of

an important lawsuit. He was hoping that I would celebrate my victory with him. In the post scriptum he wrote:

"By the way, a young acquaintance, an English naval officer has just perished in a most tragic accident during a mission in remote Polynesia. The exploratory steamer of which he was a crewman, finding itself near the Marquesas islands and the sinister Pomotou group, had just dispatched a small reconnaissance party commanded by this officer. It was one of those vast and deserted islands, a soaring volcanic tower whose prodigious heights, shrouded in gloom and hidden beneath enormous, intensely green forests, pierced the stormy sky of the open equatorial ocean.

Those waters are cursed by navigators who call them La Mer dangereuse because of the frightful tempests, the sudden, stagnant fogs, and the sinking basaltic sand--a sand much like the dust of anthracite. So many ships have been lost there that all nationalities have abandoned those waters. Only one group, a band of Polynesian pirates take refuge there within sheltering caverns on stormy nights. These Ottysors wander among the rocks in search of prey and lie in wait for shipwrecks.

At the time of the event the small detachment of scouts was skirting the perilous quicksand beneath the island cliffs. Wrapped in the evening shadows they were heading for the shore. The young officer was perhaps fifty feet in advance of the troop when he was suddenly assailed by a large, dark, islander--doubtless one of these

Ottysor-pirates. As he passed a rocky promontory the creature quickly cut off his head, and bathing himself in the blood, he swung it with extended arms and frightful gestures. This all happened before any sort of defense could be made, before a gunshot, even before a shout had time to be given. As the squad moved in for the massacre, he was seen to be wandering slowly away across the deadly sand. A continual salvo was fired lighting up the twilight sky, and the grotesque native, giving up his life before the astonished crew, slowly sank beneath the dunes of these fatal beaches. He disappeared under the choking sand, his fist held high waving the bloody head by the hair--a victorious proclamation to the stars!"

The unfortunate friend was none other than the ship's lieutenant, Sir Henry Clifton. My correspondent was aware that I had made his acquaintance during the crossing from Jersey to Saint-Malo.

At the receipt of this bothersome news, I tried to repress all thoughts of Sir Henry Clifton--but I had heard of these rare, jet-black Ottysors who prey on foundering ships. These ferocious cannibals are veiled in obscure mystery. Sometimes at night their immense cry, a somber warlike wail can be heard on the distant reefs. These are true shadows. Despite numerous assaults none has ever been captured and they have been seen neither to fall or to flee; no one knows what they do with their dead--if they die.

I resolved to banish the incident from my mind because it seemed capable of disturbing my sleep.

"Didn't you say something about a sick old woman," I asked the porter as I stuffed the letter into my pocket, "has she eaten?"

The porter, after attempting to divine the letter's contents from my face, finally answered:

"No--there's her supper."

"Good," I replied, "since she's ill, I'll eat it, that'll do her good."

And I laughed at my cleverness as I ascended the sonorous staircase.

I certainly had not attained two-thirds of the normal and habitual duration of my laugh when my name pronounced by an agonized voice reached me from beyond the nearest door of the landing.

I felt ill at ease and stopped short.

"What is that?" I asked the porter.

"That," he returned, "that is the old woman. It seems she knows you."

"Who is this woman?"

"Madame Lenoir."

"Madame Lenoir," I said softly after a silence! What! The charming, incomparable Madame Lenoir, the wife of my deceased friend . . .? But how is it that she's here, I asked myself.

The boy put his tongue to his teeth and gave a hiss of indifference.

With one hand I knocked three times upon the disturbing door; with the other I held the candle and the bag I kept with me during my excursions.

"Enter," said a voice vaguely known to me.

I raised the latch; a strong smell of paint painfully assailed me. The newly restuccoed walls were a silvery white, absolutely flat and oily. Under the white canopy of the bed sat a woman with a yellowish face, a face as dry as parchment. She was dressed from head to foot in mourning. An enormous pair of bluish glasses covered her eyes. On the mantle could be seen two or three flasks from the apothecary. A candle was smoking on the nightstand.

"I recognized your voice doctor, despite the hour," said the sorrowful, bedridden, old woman without stirring. "I almost lost track of you after Geneva, but this morning when I arrived . . . and I was sure I would see you before I die. Sit down near my bed; there is something I must tell you!"

Compassion welled up within me as I approached the spectre. Only after long hesitation did I recognize the beautiful Claire Lenoir. I studied her mysteriously ravaged features; she seemed to have suddenly aged.

I took her arm and felt her pulse; it was capricious and thready. Taking pity on her madness, I sat beside her.

"Speak! Speak! What did Sir Henry Clifton tell you," demanded Claire Lenoir with a horribly low voice.

"Ah! Ah? Nothing."

"That voyage with Monsieur Lenoir . . . you know what happened between Sir Henry and I, you know!"

"I don't know anything about it," I said, making the sign of the cross.

"Good, so be it!" continued Madame Lenoir, --"I shan't tell you the circumstances of my wretched fall; nonetheless I was loved; I am guilty!"

"Damned creature," I thought to myself.

But I said aloud, "Well, what harm is there in that?"

"I know that the wrong cannot be made right . . . but after that I remained faithful to Monsieur Lenoir . . . until his death . . . faithful even in thought."

"I am not a priest, madame."

"I'm telling you I'm going to die," responded Claire with a pre-occupied voice.

"Oh, my dear Madame Lenoir, it's not possible!"

"Oh no? Well, what is this doctor?" she cried out raising her glasses.

I leaned over her.

"This . . ." I said after a rapid examination, "ah, devil take it, there are some symptoms of . . ."

"Of?" she snapped with a voice that shook my composure.

"Of a disease that it would be foolhardy not to treat immediately!"

But I thought to myself:

"It's certain, it's too late."

"I'll go get the necessary things," I told her.

I promised myself not to return because I knew that my efforts would be ineffectual.

"Stop all this, it's useless," she said. "I know that I'm going to die. I know my condition. In a few moments it will all be over. These are the last glimmers of my reason, so stay where you are! As I said, I have something most unusual to tell you."

What unusual thing could she have to tell me? Nothing obviously. And then too, I didn't want to listen.

"My word, my dear Madame Lenoir," I cried out with a throaty voice, "I really admire you!

"Shut up, shut up," she said brokenly.

I was shocked and embarrassed.

"Lean over so I can speak to you," she commanded.

I obeyed in spite of myself.

"Living," she started, "he knew nothing--nothing, nothing at all! But understand this: he knows now. He died one year ago today. Ten o'clock will sound . . . yes, he will come to take me--by my eyes!"

"Do you remember that first night of my widowhood? Do you remember the room? You were kneeling. You saw nothing. As for myself, I was overcome by sorrow, laying near the bed. I too saw nothing. But this is what happened above our heads! --Monsieur Lenoir opened his eyes! He threw back the cover and silently stood, his fists clenched and raised towards me! His face was that of damnation and his eyes

were two hellish glimmers. He cursed me in the name of godless night, but we could not hear his gnashing teeth and we could not see him because it had to be that our heads were lowered at that moment.

Then he stretched himself out once more and with his own two hands he drew the sheet over his chest. Shutting his eyes, his face again became an impenetrable mask of death. Unaware of what had happened, I rose and tenderly bestowed one last, tearful kiss on his lifeless cheek."

She gave a kind of diabolical gurgle; the blood was rising in her throat. It was the breath of the damned.

"How do you know all that happened?" I asked.

"The following night I dreamt of a large mirror and within this mirror I saw the scene reproduce itself!"

"In a dream," . . . I said to myself, "but madame, why did you cry out that night in the room since you knew nothing, since you had seen nothing?"

"As I kissed him," she answered, "and my ear was still near his mouth, I heard a very low laugh--a kind of yapping that came from his furious lips! . . . I screamed because of my fear and this terrible, fearful wail came from so deep within my soul that you understood its meaning instinctively."

This, I must admit, made me pale in my turn. In fact, the deserted inn, the flickering candles, the idea of an anniversary, and, above all, this living corpse, all this was wearing upon the soundness

of my judgment. The disease of which I have spoken was awake within me, and I could feel it gnawing at me bit by bit, rumbling within my depths like vast and distant waters. I was afraid.

"I saw him again, again in a dream," she went on addressing no one, "it was three and a half months after his death; he was disguised, but it was him--ah, it was really him!"

And the unhealthy smile of the insane wandered across her lips like a will-o-the wisp upon a tomb.

"You are going to pity me because of these dreams," she continued; "you think I am mad, but he was absolutely alike in body, stature, and color to those monstrous beings that are mentioned in accounts one reads of Polynesia."

Thinking of the letter with a start of disbelief, I vainly tried to connect the two ideas, but with a hideous cry smothering itself within my throat, my overwhelmed mind refused to comprehend.

"Yes," she said, "his wild and hairy body stood there, among those deserted beaches and cursed waves. He was darker than ebony and his garments were fashioned from the plumes of ocean birds. The Emptiness that extended around him was peopled with terror and the infinity of dreams.

The phantom was tatooed with firey serpents and his long grey hair fell bristling about his shoulders. He was standing there alone among the forsaken rocks, staring over the ocean into the distance as if waiting for someone, while behind him he furtively sharpened a primitive stone knife. His eyes lit a bloody, agonized hell within

my soul. I did not recognize this impenetrable creature but I sensed that it was my dead husband. Ah, how could I have come to think of him so, to dream of him with such a changed and shapeless form? I woke with a start, and gave a loud shriek. I was drenched with sweat. I never could forget this dream."

She was silent.

There are no words that can express the frightful thoughts, the innumerable feelings, fruit of death-ridden possibilities, that paralyzed and churned within me during these hellish sentences, and although my own voice made me shudder profoundly and although I was unaware of their meaning, I articulated these sentences:

"No one, thankfully, no one can discern the precise point at which begins the objective reality of hallucinations!"

And I added with a forced laugh that made me giddy, "the insane asylums haven't realized that! Do you remember that last conversation we had with that argumentative Lenoir?"

"Ah well, think about it and pray," said the sick woman with a mournful smile, "our prayers are cast by the will beyond nature and escape destruction. As for myself, I hope and I am sure--that after a moment of agony, God will not deny me his forgiveness."

She seized her spectacles with both hands and snatched them from her face. The lens broke in her bloody hands and she twisted their frame with a convulsion.

"I no longer need these to see!" she said.

She spoke with a trembling voice but a hopeful, truly infinite smile played upon her lips. Her courage seemed to harden itself against some terrifying, imminent, supreme test after which her soul would be saved.

Ten o'clock rang out.

Madame Lenoir threw off her long, black mantle and sank back into the bed. Her pitiful head was raised by the pillow and she stared into the emptiness with wide-opened eyes. There was a momentary silence in which she seemed to consider, to penetrate little by little, in spite of herself, the blinding whiteness of the candlelit wall.

Right then the bursts of distant fireworks reached us; the national holiday was at its height. The vague hurrahs of the attentive townspeople could be heard. They were delighted to see the beautiful rockets rising and bursting agreeably in the air.

"Ah," she cried out with a jerk. "Yes, there he is! There! There! Just as Monsieur Lenoir dreamt he would be! Just as I dreamt he was! What . . . there before the frightful ocean . . . a son of Caan made real in death? With what diabolical pains and for whom has he been sharpening that knife? Ah! Vampire! Devil! Assassin! Begone! Leave my poor eyes!"

A rattle shook the miserable woman. Her eyes stiffened suddenly and mysteriously widened in an atrocious seizure.

What she was seeing was obviously so horrifying that she was unable to find the strength to scream. She struggled and then fell back with a heart-rending sob. She stiffened; her eyes still fixed upon the wall.

She had probably given up her soul, but I wanted to examine her to be sure.

I rushed to my bag to get my case of lancets. I searched desperately; I found only lens, instruments, collections of infusoria, magnifying glasses. I leapt across the room like a madman. I returned to her bed, mechanically grasping a powerful magnifying glass that I had found.

I took the candle, moved it towards the dead woman and examined her with the lens. I was trembling nervously.

"It's over," I thought, giving a sigh of relief, "she's dead!"

Suddenly, I don't know why, her stagnant eyes drew my attention.

A most unusual idea suddenly came to me and my heart was penetrated by a curiosity that swept away all apprehension. I wanted to examine the whitish film that covered these shadowy pupils and plunge beneath that veil! A devil within my soul seized my arm, bent my head and drew the powerful magnifying glass magnetically towards the eyes of the corpse, whispering in my ear to calm me:

"Behold!"

From that moment I became tranquil: I felt the old and familiar science take hold of me once again.

I let the glass wander to her pupils but her eyes seemed to present nothing remarkable, if not for their extraordinarily glassy appearance. I was about to give up this experiment when I noticed that the pupils seemed to contain points that resembled blackish pricks.

Immediately I went to the door and locked it. As I returned to the bed I contemplated methods of experimentation.

Then I noticed my opthalmoscope!

"Yes," I exclaimed, "that's just the thing!"

I gritted my teeth a bit as I took the cadaver with its long shroud-like robe into my arms and leaned it against the wall under a large rail.

I was going to suspend it by a rope passed under the armpits and anchor it to the nail, but a sudden thought negated this project. Realizing that anything that might be remaining in these eyes was going to appear reversed, turned upside down within the camera obscura formed by the cavity behind the iris, here is what I did:

There was a way to get around that but I hesitated to make use of it.

Perhaps my fellow doctors will find my scruples to be juvenile, still I could not help but feel a twinge of misgiving at the thought of hanging the cadaver of Madame Lenoir with its feet in the air.

After all, I had known Madame Lenoir to be an honorable property owner and this imposed upon me a certain amount of respect for her mortal remains. And so I seized the corpse once more about the body and drug it about the room, unable to solve the problem until a conciliatory idea came to me. It was so simple that I was astonished not to have thought of it sooner.

I returned the body of Madame Lenoir to her deathbed once more, but I placed it there backwards--so that her head and neck stuck out

and hung down over the edge of the bed. It was as if she were suspended in air above the floor.

Now the mass of her auburn hair hung down at the foot of the bed. Her face was upside down at knee level and her eyes, still opened, seemed fearfully solemn. No doubt about it, if there was something in those eyes, it would now appear in the normal position. I then placed the sputtering candle between us. Its last flames were threatening to vanish.

I fitted an enormous lens into the setting opposite the reflector and prepared to focus the thread of light into the depths of the eyes of Claire Lenoir.

But at the first look that I chanced into those eyes through the ophthalmoscope, I recoiled not knowing, not wanting to know--what I had glimpsed there!

For a moment I could not move and, as for the ideas that cropped up in my mind, I don't think that hell itself has brought forth more hair-raising terrors.

Just then a banquet of fourth of July fireworks burst over the exultant and distant city to the exclamations of a bisexual multitude. It made me tremble and gave a purple glow to the windows.

However, the candle was going to die; I was going to be plunged into darkness!

"No," I cried out, sinking to my knees, "I must see! I must see!"

And I trained my eye on the luminous opening. It seemed to me that I alone among the living was going to be the first to look into the keyhole of the doors of infinity!

Ah! Vision that has changed for me the world into a Tomb!
Vision that has brought madness into my soul!

Ah! How can I describe what I saw?

I was agitated by a burning inquietude that made the opthalmo-scope tremble in my hands and sent the jet of light dancing within the eyes of the cadaver--in her large, inverted, glassy, staring eyes.

There I saw that the ribbon of purple paper that lined the top of the wall stood out like a reverberating frame.

Yes! . . . I saw skies--distant waves, a large rock, stars and the falling night! Was this a man--this phantom? The horror of his silent wail could be perceived by the vile distension of his open mouth. He held by the hair a bleeding head that he seemed to consecrate to the winds of gloom and space! Dangling beside him, his other hand held a stone knife still dripping with blood! He was surrounded by a limitless horizon, a solitude eternally cursed! Beneath his supernatural fury, beneath the vengeance, solemn hatred and anger, I immediately recognized that the face of the Ottysor-vampire bore a striking resemblance to the poor Monsieur Lenoir before his death and that the frightfully gloomy features of the decapitated head resembled that young man of former times, Sir Henry Clifton.

I recoiled, staggering and babbling like a child.

My reason fled me and hideous confused conjectures crowded in upon my stupor. I was no longer but a living chaos of anxiety, a human rag, an intellect dried like chalk and crushed under this gigantic threat; and Science, that smiling old man with clear eyes and a brotherly embrace snickered in my ear that he too was but a glimmer of the Unknown that watches for us and waits.

Suddenly I rushed towards the wall and pressed my hands flat against it; a nameless fear spread my fingers widely apart.

I stopped, my hair bristling, fists clenched and concluded with a meek voice, "but,--then, where are we?"

And as I leaned over the corpse in a frenzied rage of loud sacrilegious ranting to examine once more the fascinating and execrable spectacle, the ophthalmoscope slipped from my hands at the sight before me. Having quickly raised her head, a cold shiver ran through me: I saw two heavy tears well up and slowly trickle across her cheek.

And Death came, veiling the impenetrable, rolling profound shadows over the eyes of Claire Lenoir.

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