

Who Knows?

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My God! My God! I am going to write down at last what has happened to me. But how can I? How dare I? The thing is so bizarre, so inexplicable, so incomprehensible, so silly!

If I were not perfectly sure of what I have seen, sure that there was not in my reasoning any defect, any error in my declarations,

any lacuna in the inflexible sequence of my observations, I should believe myself to be the dupe of a simple hallucination, the sport of a singular vision. After all, who knows?

Yesterday I was in a private asylum, but I went there voluntarily, out of prudence and fear. Only one single human being knows my history, and that is the doctor of the said asylum. I am going to write to him. I really do not know why? To disembarass myself? Yea, I feel as though weighed down by an intolerable nightmare.

Let me explain.

I have always been a recluse, a dreamer, a kind of isolated philosopher, easy-going, content with but little, harboring ill-feeling against no man, and without even a grudge against heaven. I have constantly lived alone; consequently, a kind of torture takes hold of me when I find myself in the presence of others. How is this to be explained? I do not know. I am not averse to going out into the world, to conversation, to dining with friends, but when they are near me for any length of time, even the most intimate of them, they bore me, fatigue me, enervate me, and I experience an overwhelming, torturing desire to see them get up and go, to take themselves away, and to leave me by myself.

That desire is more than a craving; it is an irresistible necessity. And if the presence of people with whom I find myself were to be continued; if I were compelled, not only to listen, but also to follow, for any length of time, their conversation, a serious accident would assuredly take place. What kind of accident? Ah! who knows? Perhaps a slight paralytic stroke? Probably!

I like solitude so much that I cannot even endure the vicinage of other beings sleeping under the same roof. I cannot live in Paris, because there I suffer the most acute agony. I lead a moral life, and am therefore tortured in body and in nerves by that immense crowd which swarms and lives even when it sleeps. Ah! the sleeping of others is more painful still than their conversation. And I can never find repose when I know and feel that on the other side of a wall several existences are undergoing these regular eclipses of reason.

Why am I thus? Who knows? The cause of it is very simple perhaps.

I get tired very soon of everything that does not emanate from me. And there are many people in similar case.

We are, on earth, two distinct races. Those who have need of others, whom others amuse, engage soothe, whom solitude harasses, pains, stupefies, like the movement of a terrible glacier or the traversing of the desert; and those, on the contrary, whom others weary, tire, bore, silently torture, whom isolation calms and bathes in the repose of independency, and plunges into the humors of their own thoughts. In fine, there is here a normal, physical phenomenon. Some are constituted to live a life outside of themselves, others, to live a life within themselves. As for me, my exterior associations are abruptly and painfully short-lived, and, as they reach their limits, I experience in my whole body and in my whole intelligence an intolerable uneasiness.

As a result of this, I became attached, or rather had become much attached, to inanimate objects, which have for me the importance of beings, and my house has or had become a world in which I lived an active and solitary life, surrounded by all manner of things, furniture, familiar knickknacks, as sympathetic in my eyes as the visages of human beings. I had filled my mansion with them; little by little, I had adorned it with them, and I felt an inward content and satisfaction, was more happy than if I had been in the arms of a beloved girl, whose wonted caresses had become a soothing and delightful necessity.

I had had this house constructed in the center of a beautiful garden, which hid it from the public high-ways, and which was near the entrance to a city where I could find, on occasion, the resources of society, for which, at moments, I had a longing. All my domestics slept in a separate building, which was situated at some considerable distance from my house, at the far end of the kitchen garden, which in turn was surrounded by a high wall. The obscure envelopment of night, in the silence of my concealed habitation, buried under the leaves of great trees, was so reposeful and so delicious, that before retiring to my couch I lingered every evening for several hours in order to enjoy the solitude a little longer.

One day "Signad" had been played at one of the city theaters. It was the first time that I had listened to that beautiful, musical, and fairy-like drama, and I had derived from it the liveliest pleasures.

I returned home on foot with a light step, my head full of sonorous phrases, and my mind haunted by delightful visions. It was night, the dead of night, and so dark that I could hardly distinguish the broad highway, and consequently I stumbled into the ditch more than once. From the custom-house, at the barriers, to my house, was about a mile, perhaps a little more--a leisurely walk of about twenty minutes. It was one o'clock in the morning, one o'clock or maybe half-past one; the sky had by this time cleared somewhat and the crescent appeared, the gloomy crescent of the last quarter of the moon. The crescent of the first quarter is that which rises about five or six o'clock in the evening and is clear, gay, and fretted with silver; but the one which rises after midnight is reddish, sad, and desolating--it is the true Sabbath crescent. Every prowler by night has made the same observation. The first, though slender as a thread, throws a faint, joyous light which rejoices the heart and lines the ground with distinct shadows; the last sheds hardly a dying glimmer, and is so wan that it occasions hardly any shadows.

In the distance, I perceived the somber mass of my garden, and, I know not why, was seized with a feeling of uneasiness at the idea of going inside. I slackened my pace, and walked very softly, the thick cluster of trees having the appearance of a tomb in which my house was buried.

I opened my outer gate and entered the long avenue of sycamores which ran in the direction of the house, arranged vault-wise like a high tunnel, traversing opaque masses, and winding round the turf lawns, on which baskets of flowers, in the pale darkness, could be indistinctly discerned.

While approaching the house, I was seized by a strange feeling. I could hear nothing, I stood still. Through the trees there was not even a breath of air stirring. "What is the matter with me?" I said to myself. For ten years I had entered and re-entered in the same way, without ever experiencing the least inquietude. I never had any fear at nights. The sight of a man, a marauder, or a thief would have thrown me into a fit of anger, and I would have rushed at him without any hesitation. Moreover, I was armed--I had my revolver. But I did not touch it, for I was anxious to resist that feeling of dread with which I was seized.

What was it? Was it a presentiment--that mysterious presentiment which takes hold of the senses of men who have witnessed something which, to them, is inexplicable? Perhaps? Who knows?

In proportion as I advanced, I felt my skin quiver more and more, and when I was close to the wall, near the outhouses of my large residence, I felt that it would be necessary for me to wait a few minutes before opening the door and going inside. I sat down, then, on a bench, under the windows of my drawing-room. I rested there, a little disturbed, with my head leaning against the wall, my eyes wide open, under the shade of the foliage. For the first few minutes, I did not observe anything unusual around me; I had a humming noise in my ears, but that has happened often to me. Sometimes it seemed to me that I heard trains passing, that I heard clocks striking, that I heard a multitude on the march.

Very soon, those humming noises became more distinct, more concentrated, more determinable, I was deceiving myself. It was not the ordinary tingling of my arteries which transmitted to my ears these rumbling sounds, but it was a very distinct, though confused, noise which came, without any doubt whatever, from the interior of my house. Through the walls I distinguished this continued noise,--I should rather say agitation than noise,--an indistinct moving about of a pile of things, as if people were tossing about, displacing, and carrying away surreptitiously all my furniture.

I doubted, however, for some considerable time yet, the evidence of my ears. But having placed my ear against one of the outhouses, the better to discover what this strange disturbance was, inside my house, I became convinced, certain, that something was taking place in my residence which was altogether abnormal and incomprehensible. I had no fear, but I was--how shall I express it--paralyzed by astonishment. I did not draw my revolver, knowing very well that there was no need of my doing so.

I listened a long time, but could come to no resolution, my mind being quite clear, though in myself I was naturally anxious. I got up and waited, listening always to the noise, which gradually increased, and at intervals grew very loud, and which seemed to become an impatient, angry disturbance, a mysterious commotion.

Then, suddenly, ashamed of my timidity, I seized my bunch of keys. I selected the one I wanted, guided it into the lock, turned it twice, and pushing the door with all my might, sent it banging against the partition.

The collision sounded like the report of a gun, and there responded to that explosive noise, from roof to basement of my residence, a formidable tumult. It was so sudden, so terrible, so deafening, that I recoiled a few steps, and though I knew it to be wholly useless, I pulled my revolver out of its case.

I continued to listen for some time longer. I could distinguish now an extraordinary pattering upon the steps of my grand staircase, on the waxed floors, on the carpets, not of boots, or of naked feet, but of iron and wooden crutches, which resounded like cymbals. Then I suddenly discerned, on the threshold of my door, an armchair, my large reading easy-chair, which set off waddling. It went away through my garden. Others followed it, those of my drawing-room, then my sofas, dragging themselves along like crocodiles on their short paws; then all my chairs, bounding like goats, and the little foot-stools, hopping like rabbits.

Oh! what a sensation! I slunk back into a clump of bushes where I remained crouched up, watching, meanwhile, my furniture defile past--for everything walked away, the one behind the other, briskly or slowly, according to its weight or size. My piano, my grand piano, bounded past with the gallop of a horse and a murmur of music in its sides; the smaller articles slid along the gravel like snails, my brushes, crystal, cups and saucers, which glistened in the moonlight. I saw my writing desk appear, a rare curiosity of the last century, which contained all the letters I had ever received, all the history of my heart, an old history from which I have suffered so much! Besides, there were inside of it a great many cherished photographs.

Suddenly--I no longer had any fear--I threw myself on it, seized it as one would seize a thief, as one would seize a wife about to run away; but it pursued its irresistible course, and despite my efforts and despite my anger, I could not even retard its pace. As I was resisting in desperation that insuperable force, I was thrown to the ground. It then rolled me over, trailed me along the gravel, and the rest of my furniture, which followed it, began to march over me, tramping on my legs and injuring them. When I loosed my hold, other articles had passed over my body, just as a charge of cavalry does over the body of a dismounted soldier.

Seized at last with terror, I succeeded in dragging myself out of the main avenue, and in concealing myself again among the

shrubbery, so as to watch the disappearance of the most cherished objects, the smallest, the least striking, the least unknown which had once belonged to me.

I then heard, in the distance, noises which came from my apartments, which sounded now as if the house were empty, a loud noise of shutting of doors. They were being slammed from top to bottom of my dwelling, even the door which I had just opened myself unconsciously, and which had closed of itself, when the last thing had taken its departure. I took flight also, running toward the city, and only regained my self-composure, on reaching the boulevards, where I met belated people. I rang the bell of a hotel where I was known. I had knocked the dust off my clothes with my hands, and I told the porter that I had lost my bunch of keys, which included also that to the kitchen garden, where my servants slept in a house standing by itself, on the other side of the wall of the inclosure which protected my fruits and vegetables from the raids of marauders.

I covered myself up to the eyes in the bed which was assigned to me, but could not sleep; and I waited for the dawn listening to the throbbing of my heart. I had given orders that my servants were to be summoned to the hotel at daybreak, and my valet de chambre knocked at my door at seven o'clock in the morning.

His countenance bore a woeful look.

"A great misfortune has happened during the night, Monsieur," said he.

"What is it?"

"Somebody has stolen the whole of Monsieur's furniture, all, everything, even to the smallest articles."

This news pleased me. Why? Who knows? I was complete master of myself, bent on dissimulating, on telling no one of anything I had seen; determined on concealing and in burying in my heart of hearts a terrible secret. I responded:

"They must then be the same people who have stolen my keys. The police must be informed immediately. I am going to get up, and I will join you in a few moments."

The investigation into the circumstances under which the robbery

might have been committed lasted for five months. Nothing was found, not even the smallest of my knickknacks, nor the least trace of the thieves. Good gracious! If I had only told them what I knew--If I had said--I should have been locked up--I, not the thieves--for I was the only person who had seen everything from the first.

Yes! but I knew how to keep silence. I shall never refurnish my house. That were indeed useless. The same thing would happen again. I had no desire even to re-enter the house, and I did not re-enter it; I never visited it again. I moved to Paris, to the hotel, and consulted doctors in regard to the condition of my nerves, which had disquieted me a good deal ever since that awful night.

They advised me to travel, and I followed their counsel.

II.

I began by making an excursion into Italy. The sunshine did me much good. For six months I wandered about from Genoa to Venice, from Venice to Florence, from Florence to Rome, from Rome to Naples. Then I traveled over Sicily, a country celebrated for its scenery and its monuments, relics left by the Greeks and the Normans. Passing over into Africa, I traversed at my ease that immense desert, yellow and tranquil, in which camels, gazelles, and Arab vagabonds roam about--where, in the rare and transparent atmosphere, there hover no vague hauntings, where there is never any night, but always day.

I returned to France by Marseilles, and in spite of all its Provençal gaiety, the diminished clearness of the sky made me sad. I experienced, in returning to the Continent, the peculiar sensation of an illness which I believed had been cured, and a dull pain which predicted that the seeds of the disease had not been eradicated.

I then returned to Paris. At the end of a month I was very dejected. It was in the autumn, and I determined to make, before winter came, an excursion through Normandy, a country with which I was unacquainted.

I began my journey, in the best of spirits, at Rouen, and for eight days I wandered about, passive, ravished, and enthusiastic, in that ancient city, that astonishing museum of extraordinary

Gothic monuments.

But one afternoon, about four o'clock, as I was sauntering slowly through a seemingly unattractive street, by which there ran a stream as black as the ink called "Eau de Robec," my attention, fixed for the moment on the quaint, antique appearance of some of the houses, was suddenly attracted by the view of a series of second-hand furniture shops, which followed one another, door after door.

Ah! they had carefully chosen their locality, these sordid traffickers in antiquities, in that quaint little street, overlooking the sinister stream of water, under those tile and slate-pointed roofs on which still grinned the vanes of bygone days.

At the end of these grim storehouses you saw piled up sculptured chests, Rouen, Sevres, and Moustier's pottery, painted statues, others of oak, Christs, Virgins, Saints, church ornaments, chasubles, capes, even sacred vases, and an old gilded wooden tabernacle, where a god had hidden himself away. What singular caverns there are in those lofty houses, crowded with objects of every description, where the existence of things seems to be ended, things which have survived their original possessors, their century, their times, their fashions, in order to be bought as curiosities by new generations.

My affection for antiques was awakened in that city of antiquaries. I went from shop to shop, crossing in two strides the rotten four plank bridges thrown over the nauseous current of the "Eau de Robec."

Heaven protect me! What a shock! At the end of a vault, which was crowded with articles of every description and which seemed to be the entrance to the catacombs of a cemetery of ancient furniture, I suddenly descried one of my most beautiful wardrobes. I approached it, trembling in every limb, trembling to such an extent that I dared not touch it, I put forth my hand, I hesitated. Nevertheless it was indeed my wardrobe; a unique wardrobe of the time of Louis XIII., recognizable by anyone who had seen it only once. Casting my eyes suddenly a little farther, toward the more somber depths of the gallery, I perceived three of my tapestry covered chairs; and farther on still, my two Henry II. tables, such rare treasures that people came all the way from Paris to see them.

Think! only think in what a state of mind I now was! I advanced, haltingly, quivering with emotion, but I advanced, for I am brave--I advanced like a knight of the dark ages.

At every step I found something that belonged to me; my brushes, my books, my tables, my silks, my arms, everything, except the bureau full of my letters, and that I could not discover.

I walked on, descending to the dark galleries, in order to ascend next to the floors above. I was alone; I called out, nobody answered, I was alone; there was no one in that house--a house as vast and tortuous as a labyrinth.

Night came on, and I was compelled to sit down in the darkness on one of my own chairs, for I had no desire to go away. From time to time I shouted, "Hallo, hallo, somebody."

I had sat there, certainly, for more than an hour when I heard steps, steps soft and slow, I knew not where. I was unable to locate them, but bracing myself up, I called out anew, whereupon I perceived a glimmer of light in the next chamber.

"Who is there?" said a voice.

"A buyer," I responded.

"It is too late to enter thus into a shop."

"I have been waiting for you for more than an hour," I answered.

"You can come back to-morrow."

"To-morrow I must quit Rouen."

I dared not advance, and he did not come to me. I saw always the glimmer of his light, which was shining on a tapestry on which were two angels flying over the dead on a field of battle. It belonged to me also. I said:

"Well, come here."

"I am at your service," he answered.

I got up and went toward him.

Standing in the center of a large room, was a little man, very short, and very fat, phenomenally fat, a hideous phenomenon.

He had a singular straggling beard, white and yellow, and not a hair on his head--not a hair!

As he held his candle aloft at arm's length in order to see me, his cranium appeared to me to resemble a little moon, in that vast chamber encumbered with old furniture. His features were wrinkled and blown, and his eyes could not be seen.

I bought three chairs which belonged to myself, and paid at once a large sum for them, giving him merely the number of my room at the hotel. They were to be delivered the next day before nine o'clock.

I then started off. He conducted me, with much politeness, as far as the door.

I immediately repaired to the commissaire's office at the central police depot, and told the commissaire of the robbery which had been perpetrated and of the discovery I had just made. He required time to communicate by telegraph with the authorities who had originally charge of the case, for information, and he begged me to wait in his office until an answer came back. An hour later, an answer came back, which was in accord with my statements.

"I am going to arrest and interrogate this man, at once," he said to me, "for he may have conceived some sort of suspicion, and smuggled away out of sight what belongs to you. Will you go and dine and return in two hours: I shall then have the man here, and I shall subject him to a fresh interrogation in your presence."

"Most gladly, Monsieur. I thank you with my whole heart."

I went to dine at my hotel and I ate better than I could have believed. I was quite happy now, thinking that man was in the hands of the police.

Two hours later I returned to the office of the police functionary, who was waiting for me.

"Well, Monsieur," said he, on perceiving me, "we have not been

able to find your man. My agents cannot put their hands on him."

Ah! I felt my heart sinking.

"But you have at least found his house?" I asked.

"Yes, certainly; and what is more, it is now being watched and guarded until his return. As for him, he has disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"Yes, disappeared. He ordinarily passes his evenings at the house of a female neighbor, who is also a furniture broker, a queer sort of sorceress, the widow Bidoin. She has not seen him this evening and cannot give any information in regard to him. We must wait until to-morrow."

I went away. Ah! how sinister the streets of Rouen seemed to me, now troubled and haunted!

I slept so badly that I had a fit of nightmare every time I went off to sleep.

As I did not wish to appear too restless or eager, I waited till ten o'clock the next day before reporting myself to the police.

The merchant had not reappeared. His shop remained closed.

The commissary said to me:

"I have taken all the necessary steps. The court has been made acquainted with the affair. We shall go together to that shop and have it opened, and you shall point out to me all that belongs to you."

We drove there in a cab. Police agents were stationed round the building; there was a locksmith, too, and the door of the shop was soon opened.

On entering, I could not discover my wardrobes, my chairs, my tables; I saw nothing, nothing of that which had furnished my house, no, nothing, although on the previous evening, I could not take a step without encountering something that belonged to me.

The chief commissary, much astonished, regarded me at first with

suspicion.

"My God, Monsieur," said I to him, "the disappearance of these articles of furniture coincides strangely with that of the merchant."

He laughed.

"That is true. You did wrong in buying and paying for the articles which were your own property, yesterday. It was that which gave him the cue."

"What seems to me incomprehensible," I replied, "is that all the places that were occupied by my furniture are now filled by other furniture."

"Oh!" responded the commissary, "he has had all night, and has no doubt been assisted by accomplices. This house must communicate with its neighbors. But have no fear, Monsieur; I will have the affair promptly and thoroughly investigated. The brigand shall not escape us for long, seeing that we are in charge of the den."

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Ah! My heart, my heart, my poor heart, how it beats!

I remained a fortnight at Rouen. The man did not return. Heavens! good heavens! That man, what was it that could have frightened and surprised him!

But, on the sixteenth day, early in the morning, I received from my gardener, now the keeper of my empty and pillaged house, the following strange letter:

"MONSIEUR:

"I have the honor to inform Monsieur that something happened, the evening before last, which nobody can understand, and the police no more than the rest of us. The whole of the furniture has been returned, not one piece is missing--everything is in its place, up to the very smallest article. The house is now the same in every respect as it was before the robbery took place. It is enough to make one lose one's head. The thing took place during the night Friday--Saturday. The roads are dug up as though the whole fence had been dragged from its place up to the door. The

same thing was observed the day after the disappearance of the furniture.

"We are anxiously expecting Monsieur, whose very humble and obedient servant, I am,
PHILLIPE RAUDIN."

"Ah! no, no, ah! never, never, ah! no. I shall never return there!"

I took the letter to the commissary of police.

"It is a very clever restitution," said he. "Let us bury the hatchet. We shall nip the man one of these days."

* * * * *

But he has never been nipped. No. They have not nipped him, and I am afraid of him now, as of some ferocious animal that has been let loose behind me.

Inexplicable! It is inexplicable, this chimera of a moon-struck skull! We shall never solve or comprehend it. I shall not return to my former residence. What does it matter to me? I am afraid of encountering that man again, and I shall not run the risk.

And even if he returns, if he takes possession of his shop, who is to prove that my furniture was on his premises? There is only my testimony against him; and I feel that that is not above suspicion.

Ah! no! This kind of existence has become unendurable. I have not been able to guard the secret of what I have seen. I could not continue to live like the rest of the world, with the fear upon me that those scenes might be re-enacted.

So I have come to consult the doctor who directs this lunatic asylum, and I have told him everything.

After questioning me for a long time, he said to me:

"Will you consent, Monsieur, to remain here for some time?"

"Most willingly, Monsieur."

"You have some means?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

"Will you have isolated apartments?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

"Would you care to receive any friends?"

"No, Monsieur, no, nobody. The man from Rouen might take it into his head to pursue me here, to be revenged on me."

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I have been alone, alone, all, all alone, for three months. I am growing tranquil by degrees. I have no longer any fears. If the antiquary should become mad . . . and if he should be brought into this asylum! Even prisons themselves are not places of security.