

THE PERFUME OF LUST

I. The Smoking-Room of the City of Rio

This is the story that was told to me aboard the *City of Rio*,¹ in the course of a voyage from San Francisco to Hong Kong, by Vincent Tricard, a representative of the Maison Loupe, of Bordeaux (mustard, gherkins, etc.)

He told me that he got it direct from Toby—Robert Toby—himself.

It is, therefore, as you can see, a second-hand story.

As much for that reason as because of various accessory details—which will be revealed in due course—and the quality of the individual (as for Toby, I've never met him), I'm unable to estimate the measure of veracity that the story might contain.

Tricard was a likeable fellow, a dark-haired southerner with an easy-going manner, whose nature easily linked me to his acquaintance. In any case, on the American boat, we were the only Frenchmen aboard, except for one second-class passenger, a cook who was going to Honolulu.

Knowing the steamers of most of the navigation companies by name, Vincent Tricard excelled in the comparison of their merits and faults, their speed and their respective comfort. He had, I think, traveled to all the lands, black, red, yellow and white, where mustard is consumed. Thus, he abounded in anecdotes, reeling off memories with the same facility as samples, a precious traveling companion not only because his chatter was a distraction, but also because of his real knowledge of the peoples and customs of numerous countries.

Of the multiple adventures whose incidents he retraced for me, with a more intense interest in developing the heroic or comical side of them than retaining them within the bounds of plausibility, the most extraordinary was that of Robert Toby; that is why I shall try to transcribe it here.

I only obtained the full details little by little, for in this instance, contrary to the manner he usually adopted toward me, Tricard showed himself, at least to begin with, exceptionally reserved. However, I don't think the chronological order of his confidences is of any importance, and I shall take no account of it subsequently.

The first time that Tricard broached the subject was on the second or third day after our departure from San Francisco, because I remember that after "tiffin" the "boys" began to install the punkahs of which the dining-room ceiling had been denuded until then.

As the heat was increasing, we had not watched the Chinese working for very long and had gone up on deck, hoping to find a little freshness. But there, under the rear canopies, the temperature was unbearable; the sun was overheating the thick canvas and was doubled by a terrible reverberation. The sea, a harsh blue, was reminiscent of a recently-cast metal sheet. There was no breeze. A few Americans were lying on *chaises longues*, quite indecently, without jackets or waistcoats, their congested faces damp with sweat. The last detail took away any desire to imitate them.

There remained the foredeck.

Now, the ships of the P.M.S. Steamship Company are particularly sought out by Chinese passengers in steerage, because the company guarantees that in case of decease during the crossing they will not be

¹ The S.S. *City of Rio de Janeiro* was a real ship, launched in 1878 and acquired by P.M.S. in 1881, which travelled regularly between San Francisco and Hong Kong with ports of call in Honolulu and Yokohama. Danville records that he began writing the present novel in 1900 in Honolulu, perhaps during a stopover in a voyage made in the ship in question. He would not have known then, but would certainly have known by the time he finished writing the novel in 1902, that the *City of Rio* sank in February 1901 when it struck a reef outside San Francisco Bay; 135 people perished in the disaster.

immersed; furthermore, they always repatriate a considerable number in their coffins, which takes up room. So, they are often obliged to moor a part of the cargo along the forward bulwarks, in such a way that only a narrow corridor remains between the merchandise and the fittings of the spardeck—a corridor that one finds, as often as not, invaded by a host of Celestials, these living, heaped up almost everywhere, some lying on mats and others crouching down, playing with their bicolored dominoes.

That was the way it was that afternoon: heaps of galvanized iron juxtaposed with pieces of wood, crates of vegetables and boxes in which melancholy horses, devoid of an appetite, were huffing into their troughs, scattering wisps of hay and roundels of sliced carrot. As for the Chinese, they were, as usual, occupying the rest of the available space.

The scant air furnished by the velocity of the vessel was thus fouled by various emanations, and there was no means of attempting to take a walk, in the course of which one would have tripped over the fellows at every stride, who didn't budge unless one stepped on top of them.

Fortunately, having arrived at the smoking-room, we discovered that, in spite of its exiguity, it remained an agreeable little corner, fully exposed to the wind, and which, with all the windows open, and with "long drinks" in front of us, ice and cigarettes, we would have felt quite comfortable—I could even say completely comfortable—if it hadn't been for the continual racket of the Chinese players whose shrill and screeching voices hadn't been resonating incessantly like the chatter of a flock of magpies.

In spite of that inconvenience, sometimes augmented by gusts of complex odors when the boat yawed, the place remained possible, and Vincent Tricard and I were to return there frequently at that hour, the hour of the siesta. It was, in any case, much too hot for it to be reasonably feasible to sleep. The other passengers judged the matter differently, to which we owed being rarely disturbed. Sometimes, however, a few gentlemen from the Far West, in shirt-sleeves, came to sprawl on a banquette, in order to start snoring conscientiously, joined toward evening by others of their kind, who generally started a poker game.

Perhaps those circumstances contributed to urging my companion further and further forward along the road of confidences, which began as follows.

Once the smoking-room had been discovered, Vincent Tricard sat facing me in one of the swiveling armchairs with a fixed pivot sealed at the tables. We were alone. He began by smoking, talking about insignificant things—the weather, among others.

"More comforting than the mists in the region of Newfoundland, eh, this Pacific sun?" he said. "I've never got used to that filthy fog."

"Yes," I replied. "The deck drowned in a dense vapor that masks the masts and the sea, the calls every minutes, the 'eyes'—the two men in waxed garments, somber and immobile statues suddenly looming up near the prow, permanently sounding the surrounding opacity—and every lurch seeming like an effort of the enormous vessel to get away, while the trepidations of the pistons and the propeller, the heavy noise of the engines, which never slow down, warn you that a thousand human lives are being launched at top speed into the unknown, perhaps gliding toward another monster as invisible to us as we are to it. Yes, that spectacle has all that could be desired to procure the most blasé individuals a frisson that leaves an impression, at least the first time."

"Evidently," he said, "but for me, it's combined with another impression."

"A...mental influence? A special nervous reaction?"

"An influence...a special reaction, if you wish...a strange influence, even."

The face of the representative of the Maison Loupe, of Bordeaux, had darkened. Usually jovial and loquacious he fell silent after those last words and no longer seemed to be any more preoccupied by my presence thereafter than that of Bobbie, the captain's dog, a black and white rat-catcher incessantly on the hunt, ferreting right and left, which passed between our legs at that moment. For my part, not unduly concerned to know what appeared to have impressed Vincent Tricard so lugubriously, I respected his silence, and, as Bobbie had gone on to other tasks I looked out of the little window at the trajectories of the flying fish that were skimming the crests of the waves, silvery gliders scintillating in the sunlight, to transform themselves at the end of their course into heavy black stone birds swallowed up by the water.

One might have thought that every turn of the propeller chased them from the flanks of the ship like flocks of frightened swallows.

A quarter of an hour went by, only filled with the sounds of the ship and the ocean, low-pitched sounds dominating the cries of the Chinese around us, the clink of coins and dropped dominoes.

Then Vincent Tricard got up, rang for the boy and, when the latter arrived, ordered two Manhattans.

As soon as the liquor had been poured over the ice piled in the glasses, he drank his in a single draught, and began:

“You must have found me bizarre, no? Oh, don’t protest—me, who generally doesn’t engender melancholy... It’s always the same; every time I think about it, I...and I’ve reflected, you see; it’s better to confide it to someone.”

“Believe that I don’t...”

He didn’t allow me to continue. “It’s decided! To think that for ten years—that’s a long time, isn’t it?—I’ve been keeping it to myself... Well, no; it’ll end up choking me. After all...”

He didn’t finish the sentence he’d started, but went on: “You don’t understand? I must seem more and more idiotic.”

“But...”

“Wait! That cocktail has done me good. Permit me to have a second before telling you...the thing.”

II. The Red Fog and Leaden Toby

Where were we?

Oh yes, the fog!

That's the thing: it's better, in fact, to go back to the beginning, and the beginning dates back, as I told you, about ten years, perhaps even a little more...or a little less...I no longer remember, exactly.

I only remember that we were five travelers—commercial travelers, that is—four Frenchmen and a Belgian, on the *Normannia*, a German steamer of the Hamburg-New York line, built in England, which has had adventures since.² It became Spanish during the Cuban war and I think it ended up under the French flag of the Transatlantique.

Naturally, we all had places at the same table, and we were always together, because at that time, as the ships didn't yet stop over in Cherbourg, there weren't many passengers speaking our language, and it was an astonishing hazard that brought five of us together there. I was content with that, of course, but later, damn it, I'd rather have been alone all the time with no many how many sauerkraut-munchers, instead of...

Enough!

There was Choupot, who must now be associated with a *compradore*³ somewhere out there in China; Filette, the Belgian, who's died since of fever in the Congo; Moizeau, who's still on the move; and the famous Bob, who was our doyen: Toby, Robert Toby. You must know his name: Toby, the sole survivor of the wreck of the *Dauphiné*?

Oh, the wreck of the *Dauphiné*...! If anyone had ever told me that I'd know what I know. Let's go! I'll continue, because otherwise I'll get embroiled in all the details of that damned story, and you see, it's necessary that I tell it once and for all, that I rid myself of it...yes, rid myself of it entirely.

You mustn't think that five cheery fellows like us were bored aboard the *Normannia*. Every evening, there was champagne, spirits and hands of manille, and mote rounds of spirits, until, toward eleven o'clock, sometimes quarter past, we were thrown out of the bar...when I say the bar, I'm mistaken; there was no bar there, it was the smoking-room—nearly eight times as big as this one—which served as a bar.

One night, as we were coming out, the fog arrived all of a sudden, so quickly that no one had time to cry out. Oof! A dirty fog in which one couldn't even see the forward lamps—it's necessary to say that the smoking-room was placed in the middle of the boat—and we hadn't taken two steps on the deck than a pitch capsized all five of us. Oh, no great damage done, and besides which, I think we were a little tipsy.

Then the siren started to howl.

You know what that's like, eh?

I don't like that noise, to be sure, but it never produced such an effect on me before.

Then I said: "I know someone who won't be sleeping in his cabin tonight—me."

The others writhed with laughter, except for Bob, who said: "Hey, if you're going down to fetch a blanket, fetch mine up too. I'll stay with you."

"Good night, brave lads!" The others were joking, you understand. But it didn't make me go to bed—definitely not! Why? I've often asked myself that, since.

When I came back up with my plaid, Toby's, and a flask of rum that I'd brought to keep the damp at bay, what do I see? My Bob, who, instead of having chosen, from the heap of chairs moored for the night, what we needed to lie down tranquilly between the funnels, sheltered from the wind, is standing up,

² The *S.S. Normannia*, built in Glasgow and owned by the Hamburg America line, was hit by a tidal wave in January 1894 while traveling from New York to Algiers, and was indeed subsequently purchased by the Spanish Navy in 1898 for use in the Spanish-American War, before passing to the Compagnie Générale Transatlantique in 1899 as part of a debt payment. It was still in service when the present novel was published, but was scrapped in 1906.

³ A comprador or compradore, was an indigenous manager—female in this case—of a European business establishment in South-East Asia. The term means "buyer," and compradores were responsible for purchasing local goods to be loaded on to ships for transportation to Europe.

clinging to the rail, in spite of the fog, the spray and a damnable north-westerly breeze that whipped your face!

I shouted to him: "Have you gone mad, Toby?"

"Go and see the point!" he replied.

"Eh?"

"Well, what?" he was speaking very calmly, in a funny voice. "I asked you to go and see the point."

The point is pinned up at midday; you know that as well as I do, so you can judge the effect that the question had on me, posed at that hour, especially in the tone he'd taken.

I think: *Right! There's a chap who's had too much to drink and can't hold his liquor.* I look at him. *He doesn't seem drunk at all, the clown!*

He didn't turn round, standing very straight, staring at the line in the water where the light stops before the mist, not seeming to care about the pitching or the rolling, and the *Normannia* was pitching terribly. Every time, she dipped her nose in the ink, one couldn't see the prow steeped in foam because of the mist, but one could sense it going down, I can assure you.

I reflected again: *Perhaps I ought to go down to my bunk after all...*

I gave up on that: the blasts of the siren were cutting through me, you could hear them everywhere.

I don't know what was the matter with me.

Is it because I was a bit tipsy, and that one can get ideas when one's drunk? I felt that I couldn't stay in my cabin with that diabolical music! I resigned myself, unavoidably, thinking: *Bah! What does it cost me to flatter his mania? If he's a bit drunk or a bit crazy, too bad! I don't want to sleep down below. I don't want to!*

I advance toward Toby, though, and try to reason with him.

"You're not thinking, old man. Where do you expect me to find the point? The smoking-room's closed now."

"Go to the glass in the first-class companion-ladder."

I was tempted to reply, *if you want it as much as that, go yourself*, but, I repeat, I was already troubled by the champagne, the spirits, the fog and the blasts of the siren, and his voice, which didn't seem to me to be natural, ended up taking away what remained of my common sense.

I could only see one thing, which was that I didn't want to sleep down below, and in truth, since it was necessary to stay on the deck, I thought I might as well pander the Bob's whim. Then again, his presence reassured me. One isn't proud at moments like that.

I clung on to the hand-rail, and nearly fell down the stairs several times, but I finally brought the point back to Toby.

"Now can we go to bed?"

Well, I hear him murmuring something like: "425...425...that gives seventeen and a half...seventeen knots and a half...It's almost midnight. If we haven't had too much difficulty maintaining that speed in the fog, *we're getting close...*"

I hear the last phrase and, giving up on convincing him, and also feeling, given that I'm shivering every minute when the siren starts moaning again, the need to have someone nearby, I stick myself against him and I ask him: "We're *getting close* to what?"

He shrugs his shoulders.

Surely, I ought to have left him there, not persisting, but no. There are times when one's stubborn. I shouted at him: "Come on, Bob, explain yourself!"

In reality I was beginning not to feel very well. Leaning over the side, the lights that were filing over the water were dazing me, and I sometimes thought I could make out the forms of giant icebergs advancing toward us—that was the fog.

More quietly, I said: "Are you talking about reefs?"

He continued to remain silent.

Then, crazy ideas passed through my mind. What did Toby mean by that? There was no land visible... A reef...? Impossible! The place where the *Dauphiné* had been wrecked...?

Then there was the stupid fear, the plain, baseless fear that nothing justifies, the fear that grips you by the throat and stops the blood in your veins. I drank my flask of rum in large gulps, and when it was empty, I threw the flask overboard. I didn't hear it fall, the wind and the waves were making such a terrible din.

The alcohol immediately lit me up like a punch-bowl in my head. The flames began to spin like suns in the midst of the waves, growing and spitting out sparks, and in its turn, the fog caught fire. Yes, the fog turned red and began undulating to the left and the right, following the rolling of the boat, and from back to front, according to the pitching.

Toby didn't move, but he seemed to me to be very big and very heavy.

I thought: *Soon, this is going to end badly! That red fog is going to set fire to the ship, or Bob, who's made of lead, will become so heavy that we'll sink...*

The ideas a man has when he's drunk, eh?

But the worst thing was when my fear came back...and I had no more rum! Toby continued to grow, or rather to weigh more heavily on the deck, which was at times down to sea level—as for that, that might be true, because the wind had freshened a lot—so much that I could see, at those times, the fire descending above us into the funnels, threatening the gangway, and then the foam washed through the scuppers.

Then I shouted to Toby: “Say something! You can see that what you can't tell me is weighing on you, weighing too heavily! Lighten yourself...go, on, lighten yourself...”

He didn't understand the craziness that was pushing me, of course, but he took my words figuratively, as a manner of speaking, didn't he? A figure of speech! No, it wasn't one, and I know—I'm an honest man, Monsieur!—that if I hadn't spoken, I was holding my knife open in my pocket, in order to empty him of what was weighing him down so heavily...what was weighing him down too much...

Although, as I've already said, the worthy Vincent Tricard, representative of the Maison Loupe, of Bordeaux, was a southerner by birth and temperament, and hence inclined to dress up the most banal adventures with a dramatic quality, I have never doubted the confession that escaped his lips then, for I suppose that the force inciting him, reluctantly, to confidences resided in that painful memory.

What was “choking” him, the thing of which he wanted finally to “rid himself,” was, I think, the memory of that homicidal intention, soiling his career as “an honest man.” That exaggeration of a metaphor, which, in the daze of drunkenness, had brought him to imagine that a similar burden of memories risked dragging his friend and the *Normannia* into the same disaster, that amplification of an image, must have engraved itself unwittingly in his soul, and had pursued him with an incessant remorse until the liberating moment when, with the aid of the cocktails and the gin, he had relieved himself.

And indeed, immediately after the instant when his clenched fist, punctuating it by thumping the table, on which the crystal of the glasses quivered, had confirmed the disturbance of his narrative, Vincent Tricard fell silent. The fellow's bronzed face had cast off the mask of ferocity and crime that had for a few seconds, transformed the visage of the placid traveler into the face of a bandit. Again, sitting facing me, was a tranquil sales representative, a slightly vulgar traveling companion, and I was already resigned to never knowing the famous Robert Toby's extraordinary story.

It is, in fact, probable that that disinterest would have deprived me of the continuation of that strange adventure if Tricard had not subsequently, on multiple occasions, taken care to revive my weakening curiosity, to sharpen it, by employing in the course of our conversations numerous allusions to Bob, his journeys, and above all the mysterious point attached to his shipwreck.

Robert Toby thus became a fantastic and troubling being, whose name irritated me, at the same time as my desire increased to be informed as to the deeds of that individual, who gradually took on the proportions of a legendary hero in my mind. But the more precise my attempts in that direction became, the more Vincent Tricard's reserve was augmented; he opposed a defiant mutism to my discreet questions. Perhaps he was reproaching himself for having said too much.

It was therefore necessary for me to employ cunning and patience to persuade Tricard to unveil for me what he was dissimulating with so much care, and I only extracted his secret in fragments, obtained with difficulty, at irregular intervals.

The most that he granted me, and which permitted me to connect certain morsels together that had been previously incoherent and sparse, was not in the little smoking-room of the *City of Rio*; it happened one evening in Honolulu, a port of call where a shortage of coal caused us to lay over for two days, and where, having perceived that my traveling companion talked more willingly under the influence of alcohol, I had ignobly got him drunk in a noxious "saloon bar," his divagations only having for witnesses a few gentlemen of color perched on high stools and accompanied by "flower girls" who understood as little French as their companions. Then, another time, one night in Kyoto, he told me the rest.