

PREFACE¹

For several years, when attending somewhat aristocratic funerals, it rarely happened that we failed to notice, among the mourners, a man whose unusual appearance intrigued us a great deal. Tall, seemingly more than sixty years-old, he always wore the most correct attire: a black suit, a white tie, linen gloves. To that, it must be added that his pale complexion, his sunken cheeks, his somber eyes and his excessive thinness made him the most tomb-like personality it was possible to imagine.

On leaving the church, whatever the length of the journey, and whatever the weather, no one slipped away sooner than he from the dead man's group. Not joining the intimate friends or the family, he was always the first, and the most in a hurry, to get into one of the official mourning carriages forming the cortege. We eventually noticed something else: in the more modest convoys where mourners followed the hearse on foot, we never noticed the presence of that lugubrious individual. We inquired about him in vain. Few people had noticed him, and in the small number who had paid attention to his strange regular attendance or his strange appearance, no one knew him.

One day, upon leaving the Père Lachaise,² by chance we found ourselves seated next to him in one of the carriages that had brought us, and which, following the usual practice, was supposed to take us back to our domiciles. Believing that the right opportunity had come to question this living puzzle, we struck up a conversation by pointing out to him that, on more than one occasion, in a similar circumstance, we had the pleasure of encountering him. That attention that we showed him didn't seem to please him, and as if he wanted to teach us a lesson about indiscretion, he responded dryly:

"I wouldn't know how to be present without emotion at the funeral services of a friend. I always bring memories and preoccupations there, which hardly allow me to notice the faces around me."

We're going to see about that, I said to myself.

Asking that sentimental grave-digger some details about the private life of the dead man, we weren't long in being sure that the man to whom he had come to render our last respects, was in every way a stranger and unknown to him. That being true then, was he a gentleman who followed the dead as an amateur, as there are, on the sidewalks of Paris, *gentlemen who follow women*? But if so, how could this unusual taste be explained? Was he a man fulfilling a vow? Was he dominated by some kind of notion about devotion to the dead? Was he, in a Christian way, trying to remind himself constantly about the thought of death? Or, perhaps, was he a vampire?

We could have spent a lot more time going over these diverse suppositions if, suddenly breaking off the conversation, the inexplicable personage had not, almost without a transition, put us onto the subject of politics. At the end of several sentences, he had found a way to show himself as a most exalted Republican.

This time, we were sure of the fact. A man who, without any preparation, without knowing us, began to tell us his extreme political opinions, could be nothing other than a police informer. To make death the business of the police, that refinement seemed monstrous to us! What's more, as we responded with only extreme reserve, probably realizing that he had been found out in every way, our questioner didn't seem to need to prolong the encounter. Past the Rue de la Roquette, as soon as the carriage arrived at the Place de la Bastille, he had it stopped and left us saying goodbye with a rather noticeable coldness.

Some weeks later, we were in the waiting room of our doctor, waiting for the end of a consultation begun before our arrival, when we suddenly saw the same pall-bearer who had given us so much to think

¹ In this "Preface," Rabou uses the editorial "we," since the source of the information supposedly comes from an anonymous publisher. The editorial "we," also called the "royal we," is used by writers, editors, etc., to avoid being too specific.

² The largest cemetery in Paris located in the 20th arrondissement. It takes its name from the confessor to Louis XIV, Père François de la Chaise (1624–1709) and was opened on 21 May 1804.

about come out. We had every reason to believe that he recognized us, because, turning around immediately, he went back into the doctor's consulting room, probably advising him to be discreet in case we asked some questions about him.

"Pardon me, Monsieur," he said to us, when coming back shortly thereafter, "for prolonging your wait, but I had a question I needed to ask the doctor about his prescription."

Then he took leave with unusual courtesy and left the office.

The doctor, who was also our friend, seeing us enter, began to laugh and said to us:

"So you know Defunctis?"

"That man who left here is named Defunctis? That's probably a nickname, which he earned by his mania for following funeral corteges?"

"No, not really," the doctor replied. "That's actually his name, and if you doubt it, you can refer to the *Almanach Royal* of 1789. You will find his father listed there under that name among the Commissioners of the Châtelet."³

"Let's say, then, that his affiliation with the police no longer surprises me; him being the son of a Commissioner of the Châtelet, he has followed his father's business."

"Defunctis affiliated with the police!" the doctor exclaimed. "The poor man! He has conspired against all the governments for the past thirty years, and he has spent a good third of that time in jail as a political prisoner. That was his true mania; the other bizarre behavior that struck you only resulted from it."

After we had told the doctor about our multiple encounters with his lugubrious patient, he said, laughing:

"That's very true. He follows funeral corteges; but have you noticed that he never follows them on foot?"

"Well!" we said with a bit of impatience, "whether a first- or a second-class burial, does it seem any more pleasant to you?"

"No," said the doctor, laughing even louder, "but the idea is really original. Because of that, I would be very annoyed if that unfortunate man found a persecutor in you. Contrary to the suggestion he came to give me not to say anything to you, I'm going to tell you everything, since a secret, already divulged in part to a gentleman, is a great deal safer in his hands when it's told him in its entirety, and when it's careful to be placed under the safeguard of his integrity."

Our curiosity thus excited, the doctor continued:

"I must start by telling you that this poor devil, whose ardent political preoccupations could certainly have deranged his brain a little, has, in addition, suffered for some years from a chronic stomach illness. That explains his cadaverous appearance, and it's evidently in jails, where he's made repetitive long stays, that he must have contracted that annoying affliction."

"But first of all," we asked, interrupting him, "a chronic stomach illness... What do you mean by that?"

"Gastralgia is a neurosis of the intestines or of the stomach, where, in addition, the exact location is rarely found. Involving, in a more or less serious way, the digestive functions, most of the time that type of proteiform disease remains rebellious against all remedies. To relieve the sick person, when we want to treat him without charlatanism, we can seldom advise anything except a mild and limited diet, clean air, travel, moderate exercise, on foot or on horseback, or a carriage outing, but most of all, avoiding all strong emotional excitement. From this, it is concluded that the case of our good Defunctis could very well be incurable, the least acts of exertion causing him constant irritation."

"Yes, then, in order to cure him, one would have no other method except to proclaim the Republic; but that doesn't explain to us his unusual habit of following funeral processions."

"Pardon me," the doctor answered, "but moving about either on foot, on horseback, or in a carriage, could have an excellent effect on our sick man. The first time I gave him that advice, he said to me:

³ Court and police headquarters in Paris begun in 870, moved, restored, or enlarged, in 1130, 1190, 1506, 1657, 1684 and demolished after the Revolution of 1789.

'Doctor, you are advising that very casually. A carriage, a horse, those are the remedies of rich people. But do you think that a Brutus⁴ like me, ruined in the service of his convictions, has the means to rent carriages by the hour to lounge around daily in the Bois de Boulogne?'"

"The Devil!" we said, struck by sudden enlightenment. "I now understand his method, although it is very unusual and rather bizarre."

"Without a doubt," said the doctor, "but you have to admit that it is ingenious. Funeral arrangements have good berlines,⁵ comfortable and with good suspensions. And for two or three hours, every day, to arrange to take a free carriage ride, isn't so unskillful. Only, to think up such an idea, and most of all, to practice it for so long and with so much perseverance, it's my opinion that a little crack in the brain of our patient might be necessary."

With that explanation from the doctor, about which, in addition, we promised absolute discretion, our balloon had, in a single moment, been deflated. We were dealing with neither a police agent, an ascetic Christian, or a vampire. In a very middle-class way, we had run into an unusual man who, disdainful of the ease of the omnibus, had, at the expense of the mourning families, resolved the problem of a cheap outing.

Several months passed without our having otherwise thought about the unusual Monsieur Defunctis, when, last July 27, at the Montparnasse Cemetery, as we had just made a pilgrimage to a beloved tomb as was our custom, turning into a pathway, we found ourselves face to face with him. He was holding in his hand two wreaths of green leaves mingled with *immortelles*⁶ and, in addition to his usual formal funeral attire, he wore a large crepe band on his hat. We had never before seen him so haggard and as gaunt, which made us think that his illness had become more serious.

"Monsieur," he said to us, "I hastened to meet you in order to give you my thanks. The doctor didn't leave me ignorant of the fact that he thought it prudent to be candid with you. But at the same time he reassured me, confirming to me that I could count on total discretion on your part."

"But, Monsieur, that discretion has very little merit," we replied. "What interest could I have in frustrating you in a... hygienic practice that has taken nothing that isn't perfectly innocent?"

"As you put it very well, Monsieur; I harm no one. I try to associate myself as unobtrusively as possible into the mourning family group, and, at the same time, I take care of the needs of my health that, unfortunately, give me increasing and considerable worry. But my action has something bizarre about it. It could become fodder for an amusing story and when certain people are ready to lose twenty friends for a good joke, couldn't a poor unknown person like me be easily destroyed for the pleasure of telling about an eccentricity?"

"Monsieur," we replied, "if the recommendations of our friend, the doctor, hadn't been all-powerful for me, with a man like you, whose misfortunes, unshakeable and disinterested convictions he told me about, my conscience would always have made me show myself perfectly in agreement and sympathy."

Great nervous susceptibility on the part of our questioner could be explained just by the single fact of his illness. Thus we noticed that we had made tears come into his eyes.

"Thank you, Monsieur," he told us, shaking our hand. "Your words do me good and I needed to hear them in a day so full of sad memories for me."

"You have someone who is dear to you here?" we asked.

"Yes, Monsieur, today is a gloomy anniversary for me: July 27, 1816, but also July 27, 1830!⁷ When Providence has permitted the crime, it also arranges the expiation."

⁴ Allusion to Defunctis' efforts to overthrow the government, just as Brutus thought that, by killing Caesar, he would save Rome from dictatorship.

⁵ A make of expensive, luxurious, and popular carriages built in Germany.

⁶ Several varieties of long-lasting flowers placed on graves.

⁷ Allusion to the period following the Bourbon Restoration in France: 1815-1830, when events and anger among French citizens moved from an attempt to establish a constitutional monarchy based on the British system to, finally, the restoration of the House of Bourbon.

Seeing that we had not understood him, despite the deep emotion which this remembrance seemed to bring forth, Defunctis added:

“Come with me, Monsieur, to see the tomb that I came to visit. You are not one of us, as I couldn’t help but notice during our first encounter, but you have a good heart, and whatever their political affiliations, generous men never refuse to be interested in victims.”

We walked for some distance and, in one of the side paths of the cemetery, there appeared a small mound surmounted by a truncated column, a monument raised in 1848 to the Sergeants of La Rochelle. Stopping in front of a modest tomb, ornamented with some flowers and granted in perpetuity,⁸ Defunctis said:

“It’s here, Monsieur. Read.”

We read the following epitaph:

*JEAN-FRANÇOIS CARBONNEAU,
Died for Liberty - July 27, 1816
Exhumed by the cares of his family and friends
March 7, 1840*

“Carbonneau,” we said, “wasn’t he one of the three patriots of 1816? Tolleron, Plaignier and Carbonneau?”⁹

“Ah! You know their names!” exclaimed Defunctis with a gesture of pride and joy. “Yes, Monsieur, three unfortunate men who, by police machination, even before proofs of their claimed conspiracy could be presented, were sent to the scaffold as being guilty of the crime of *lèse majesté*. Carbonneau was my friend. He had a heart of gold and died like Cato.¹⁰ Ever since his remains were returned to his family, never has a July 27 passed that I haven’t come to place a remembrance here.”

That said, Defunctis attached his two wreaths to the tomb, then reverted to a brusque and commanding tone:

“I need to be alone,” he said to us.

We went some steps away and then we saw him kneel, and for some minutes, his bald head uncovered, he prayed fervently. When he had again rejoined us, he continued:

“Pardon me, Monsieur, for having sent you aside, but I was afraid that it would be hard for you to kneel, following my example, on that tomb of an executed man.”

“It was only a moment ago that you judged me a better man when you told me that in good hearts, there is always sympathy for victims. Besides, the Patriots of 1816 were a great deal less strangers to me

⁸ Burial sites in France are granted for a limited time and may be rented for 10, 30, or 50 years. If grave sites are abandoned, the contents are boxed, tagged and moved to an ossuary in the Père Lachaise in Paris.

⁹ The Affair of the Patriots of 1816 happened during the reign of King Louis XVIII. Tolleron, a 30 years-old carver, Carbonneau, a 34 years-old, clerk, and Pleignier, a boot-maker, joined a society called The Patriots of 1816, the purpose of which was to overthrow the Bourbons. The Minister of Police, Élie Decazes, was regularly informed about the activities of the Patriots and decided to use them to bolster the failing Monarchy in the eyes of the public. He used an agent named Schlestein to manipulate and incite the three men towards a more radical opposition. On April 25, Schlestein virtually gave them the blueprint of a plot to blow up the palace of the Tuileries, where the King resided. The next day, Tolleron, Carbonneau and Plaintiff were arrested, along with 25 other people. On June 27, a trial was held at the Court of Assizes of Paris. Twenty sentences were handed down: eight persons were sentenced to deportation; eight to six, eight and ten years of detention; Tolleron, Carbonneau and Plaignier were condemned to death. All appeals were dismissed. On July 27, the three were guillotined. After the execution, the bodies were buried in the Sainte-Catherine cemetery then transferred to the new Montparnasse cemetery, opened in 1824.

¹⁰ Rabou does not specify if he means Cato The Elder (The Censor) (234-149 BC) or The Younger (95-46 BC), his great grandson. From the context, he must mean The Younger, who fought against Caesar and the Triumvirate, in a vain attempt to preserve the Roman Republic. As a last holdout, after the war had been lost, Cato the Younger evacuated all his remaining supporters who would leave, then committed suicide.

than you seem to believe, and Monsieur Carbonneau is mentioned in a book for which I am the publisher.”

“Really?” said Defunctis with admiration. “What is that book?”

“*The Secret Bureau*, and on that subject, I even have some information to ask you.”

“At your service!” my questioner answered.

“In your long battle with the government of the Monarchy, did you ever know a political prisoner named Carbonneau, but not the same man who perished on the scaffold along with Plaignier and Tolleron?”