

I. Black Snow

Perhaps it was foolish to set forth to walk all the way to the harbor when the sky was so full of low cloud, all the more so as the cold north-westerly wind that had been blowing that morning had dropped, leaving a dead calm suspended ponderously over the island. Any of the local fishermen, consulted for his expert prognosis, would have shaken his head sadly and advised me to stay indoors if I didn't want to end up soaked to the skin, or, at the very least, to order Jean-Jacques to harness the sociable and provide me with a modest shelter from the anticipated deluge.

I knew all that, but I set off anyway. The painting had not been going well, and I felt that I had been stranded in the Underworld all morning, in the midst of the clustering shades avid to hear the music that my Orpheus was playing—so avid that the actual silence surrounding me had come to seem oppressive and, by some strange effect of kinesthesia, suffocating. I felt that I needed air, light and an interval of meditation, such that a carriage cannot provide, even when Mnemosyne's roads are in a better conditions than they tend to be on a dull afternoon in October.

I had not even put on heavy boots, although I had exchanged the slippers I had been wearing in my studio for polished shoes, as if I were heading for some kind of organized social event, where I might meet potential clients. One can never show too much polish to potential clients, from the glittering wit of the head to the shine of shoes that seem to be crying out to dance. Not that I do dance, of course; it would not fit in with the dignity of my current image. But one ought to seem able and prepared even for what dignity forbids, if one wants to maintain the kind of image that befits a true artist.

In a way, I was going to an organized social event: a reception of sorts. It would be a very select gathering, and the person for whom it was being held had no idea that any kind of reception would be waiting for him, but still, it was intended as a welcome, hastily arranged, in a slightly oblique fashion by no means typical of her, by Myrica Mavor, my agent. She was also the agent of the expected new arrival, who was coming all the way from the capital's Martyr's Mount in order to be my closest neighbor—and, Myrica doubtless hoped, my most piquant rival.

Myrica was a great believer in the stimulus of rivalry. Exactly what involvement she had had in the purchase of the late Monsieur de Toustain's house on behalf of her client I did not know, but I was sure that she was mixed up in it. Perhaps she had been trying to persuade Charles Parenot to relocate to the island for years—it would not be the first time she had urged one of her clients to do that—and had finally found the means to wear him down by promising him proximity to the greatest artist in the province.

On the other hand, I thought, *perhaps not*. If the allure of joining a select community dedicated to the highest principles of esthetics, at whose mysterious hub Myrica's patter had doubtless placed me, had not been sufficient bait, the mere fact of acquiring accommodation within a stone's throw of my personal factory of genius was unlikely to have tipped the balance.

Nor can the stone's throw be taken literally, I noted, as I passed by what been Toustain's house along the road that formed the promontory's spine, and glanced backwards at my own. *Even with the aid of a sling, a man without sin would not be able to cast a stone that far. A giant with a Medieval longbow might have been able to land an arrow on the roof, but even with a modern rifle...*

I cut off that thought. I was beginning to think like Myrica, in terms of enmity and rivalry. I did not want to do that. The idea of having another painter within sight of the dining-room window was not entirely appealing, but there was no reason at all why Charles Parenot should not be the most amicable of neighbors, and even a friend.

The Toustain house, as I continued to think of it—there would doubtless be time enough to adapt to the idea of “the Parenot house”—was dingy at present, having not been well-maintained externally. Whether it had been well-maintained internally I had no idea, never having crossed the threshold, but I suspected not. Unusually, for a man of his apparent quality, Toustain had only ever had one servant, an old crone who had died six months before him, and whose appearance had been so rebarbative that no one

could possibly suspect that he had not long survived her because he was grief-stricken at the loss of a secret mistress. More likely he had poisoned himself with his own cooking.

Normally, in spite of or because of the fact that I went past the Toustain house every time I went into town or returned therefrom, I never spared it any kind of glance, let alone the appraising inspection of a professional eye, but this time, I turned my head to study it in a quasi-clinical fashion, searching for an accurate adjective with which to sum it up.

Gloomy, I thought, and not merely because the sky is so low and leaden, or because I know that a man was carried out of it in a coffin not long ago—a coffin that not a single mourner followed to the cemetery, or even the traditional stray dog.

I did not feel the slightest twinge of conscience. There had been no reason for me to step into that void, just because Toustain had left me a small and tokenistic legacy, of no considerable value, commercially or esthetically.

In any case, I thought, a gloomy appearance in by no means suited to it. Monsieur de Toustain always seemed a dark and gloomy man, and even when the windows of his house were illuminated by vacillating candlelight, the edifice retained his personality, and never radiated any conspicuous warmth.

The house was separated by more than two hundred long paces of bare heathland—no trees grew on the promontory, probably because the salt of the spindrift made its soil inhospitable to everything but coarse grass and heather—but there was no habitation nearer to mine. Once, there had been two fisherman's cots in a sheltered declivity at the extremity of the headland, where a small inlet permitted boats to be safely beached, but they had been abandoned long ago—more years than I cared to count. It was not that the fish were no longer there to be caught, but the economy of the island had shifted away from an attempted self-sufficiency that had never been better than marginal to the much more profitable business of servicing the summer visitors with whom it had become inexplicably fashionable. The artists' colony, whose establishment on the continental fringe was understandable, in terms of psychic geography, had been here long before then, but it was not until the aristocrats began to spend "vacations" here—vacations from what, I sometimes wondered, since, by definition, they did not work—that service industries had really begun to thrive.

Thus, the reclusive Monsieur de Toustain had been my nearest neighbor throughout the sixteen years since he had arrived on the island, and during that time he had been the perfect neighbor for an artist like me—which is to say that he had kept entirely to himself. If our paths had happened to intersect, as they inevitably did on occasion, since I had to walk past his house in order to go into town, we had greeted one another with scrupulous politeness, and even exchanged a few conventional remarks on the weather, but he was as taciturn as he was polite, and there was never a cross word between us, or any serious attempt at meaningful communication.

Apparently, he appreciated that near silence as much as I did. Otherwise, why would he have inserted a clause into his will bequeathing his books to me? Not that he had a large or precious collection, but some of the books had interesting engravings—that was presumably the reason that he had thought of leaving them to a painter—but it was still a gesture of kindness, from a man not habituated to such gestures, for which I really ought to feel a modicum of gratitude.

According to his notary, Maître Guillot, who had given me the good news with a strangely unctuous glee, and had supervised the transfer of the three crates of books from one house to the other with undue ceremony, it was the only individual bequest Toustain had made. All his other worldly goods had been left to the Island Council, to be sold for the benefit of the poor and needy. The books would not have made much difference to the benefit the poor and needy received—if they received anything at all once the members of the Council had dipped their sticky fingers into whatever sum remained after the auctioneer had taken his own cut—so I saw no need to feel guilt about having kept the books, even though they were still in the crates in which they had been delivered, because I had not yet been able to face the Herculean task of rearranging my cluttered shelves with sufficient ingenuity to make room for them.

It was not long after I had turned left on to the corniche that the snow began to fall. At first I was astonished that it was snow and not rain. Although some ancient fisherman or old Nicodemus Rham

might have been able to contradict me, I did not think that Mnemosyne had seen snow in October within living memory. I had observed it in late November two or three times, but the present fall was beating that record by more than four weeks.

After the surprise came a measure of relief. The snow was relatively light, and it melted as soon as it hit the ground, which had not yet chilled to freezing point; it did not give the appearance that it would begin to accumulate significantly until I was safely ensconced in the Sprite. The molten snow was damp, of course, on my clothing as well as the road, but it seemed, at least to begin with, a discreet dampness far less annoying than the kind of abrupt soaking that substantial raindrops cause. The flakes were falling in clusters, but they were not dancing and swirling as snow inevitably does when the air is turbulent; they were all falling perpendicularly, in parallel, with an apparent military discipline that made them seem purposeful.

Then, too, the white snowflakes made the atmosphere seem a little less oppressive. It was not so much that the sky was so very gray, but the fact that the air itself seemed to have lost some of its quality, to have taken on a slight and strangely indefinable bad odor—a whiff of brimstone.

Given that I had spent the morning painting a scene set in a gloomy underworld, the poor light and oppressive atmosphere had not hindered me as much as they might have done had I been endeavoring to paint a cheerful portrait, and might even have seemed to collaborate with the effect I was trying to achieve, but the last thing I wanted was for the island to turn into an Underworld scene, in an effort to inspire me with a clearer notion of Hades' mythical realm than I had yet been able to conceive. That would have been taking the pathetic fallacy to ridiculous extremes, as well as being rather hard on all the other residents.

I was already striding out purposefully, so I could only have hastened my pace by running, and I was not about to do that, and more than I was likely to take up dancing, so I simply plugged on, estimating that I should not be too bedraggled when I reached the Sprite, and that twenty minutes standing in front of a roaring fire, turning round judiciously now again, should restore me to comfortable dryness, even if I were looking somewhat short of my best.

I did not realize quite how far short of my best I would look until I reached the outskirts of town, and used my right hand to brush away the snowflakes that were accumulating on my coat. Automatically, when I had cleared all that the hand could reach, and the fingers were beginning to feel numb with cold, I glanced down at it, wondering whether I ought to reach into my pocket for a handkerchief in order to wipe it dry.

The hand was dirty.

I am a scrupulous man, and I knew full well that my hands had been perfectly clean when I set out, and that my coat had been very carefully brushed—not by me, admittedly, but brushed nevertheless, and Jean-Jacques is as scrupulous as only the proudest of manservants can be. I could not, therefore, help leaping to a suspicion, if not a conclusion, that many people would have thought too absurd even to consider: that the snow, in melting, had made my hand dirty as well as wet.

Absurd or not, it was an easy hypothesis to check. I inspected my clean left hand, and then extended it, palm up, to catch a few dozen clusters of drifting snowflakes. Then I held the hand close to my eyes, and watched the snowflakes melt.

Each cluster, as it turned to water, left a sprinkling of tiny but unmistakable black dots on the skin, which looked for all the world like particles of soot.

“Black snow!” I exclaimed, aloud.

I was exaggerating: the flakes still falling around me looked perfectly white, no different from snow that I had seen falling hundreds of times before on Mnemosyne, though never in October. This time, however, *was* different; this time, the white flakes had black hearts, and the long celebrated similes “as white as snow” and “as pure as the driven snow” had suddenly taken on a delightfully ironic ambiguity.

The old proverb is true, then, I thought. *There really is always something new under the sun. Or, at least, under the clouds.*

I looked up as I added the rider. Dense cloud was still covering the entire sky, as dull, uniform and depressing as the stone paving of the ancient Temple of Minerva—the only deity whose desertion in

recent centuries I sometimes regretted. No movement was visible in the clouds, because there was no contrast that could have revealed movement, but I had a strange sensation, perhaps due to some mysterious psychological quirk rather than the expertise of my painter's eye, that the vapor was nevertheless unquiet: that the wind that had dropped at ground level might still be blowing, lazily if not turbulently, in the strata of the atmosphere that humans and hawks can only reach in the nacelles of balloons.

The pathetic fallacy really did seem to be going over the top, in an ironic echo of my painterly endeavor—but I knew how ridiculously vain it would be to think that the climate of an entire region, home to tens of thousands of people, might change simply to reflect the artistic difficulties of one man, even a genius. Vanity I had, in the modest dose appropriate to my vocation and my image, but not the kind of vanity that leads to insanity. The fact that the gloomy weather had arrived, out of season, while I was endeavoring to represent the ultimate in gloom by imagining the realm of Hades, could only be a coincidence, a little irony of fate.

Whatever is driving this snow, however, I added, continuing my train of thought, *is definitely not pure.*

But I stopped myself then, lest I turn thoroughly Roman and begin seeing omens. We are supposed to live in an Age of Enlightenment, or even, some scholars insist, a "Post-Enlightenment" Era in which enlightenment is so taken for granted that no one any longer feels the need to boast about it, and would seem behind the times if he did. That, of course, is the view people take in the Capital, rather than Mnemosyne, where superstition still rules many of the minds that art does not, but the Capital sets the tone, and the intellectuals of Mnemosyne, do not like to seem any less Enlightened than the stalwart captains and pilots of Lutece.

Naturally, having never gone in for false modesty, I pride myself on being the most enlightened of them all, as a result of which, I could not allow myself to consider any natural event literally ominous.

On the other hand, though, *black snow!* If that couldn't qualify as an omen, what could?

Once again, I had to remind myself that the snow still looked white, the blackness not being at all evident while the flakes were still falling—but that hardly affected its qualification to be seen as an omen by anyone who was in the habit of seeing omens. Quite the contrary, in fact.

Omen or not, the circumstance seemed so extraordinary that I quite forgot that I had decided to walk to the Sprite in order to have an interval for meditation, in which I could take stock of my situation: a situation that was on the verge of commencing to seem ever so slightly uncomfortable. It was too early yet to suspect that I might fail in my endeavor, but things were not proceeding as smoothly as I might have hoped, and certainly had hoped when, being unusually short of requests for portraits and hearing the whisper of ennui stirring in the depths of my brain, I had accepted, at Myrica Mavor's urgent insistence, the Marquis de Mesmay's commission to paint a triptych illustrating the career of the mythical Orpheus.

Precisely because I had never done anything similar before, it had seemed an intriguing challenge, and I had had no doubt, when the Marquis and I shook hands on the deal, that I would rise to it heroically and meet it triumphantly. The thought that I might not be up to it had never entered my head.

Now...well, I still would not grant it official entry to my head, but the snagging suspicion had crept in anyway, through some unsuspected fissure in my supposedly-impregnable wall of self-confidence.

The very idea that Axel Rathenius might have accepted a painterly task that was beyond his artistic reach was, of course, as unthinkable as...well, as unthinkable as black snow... but still...

The fact remained that I had come out to walk to the Sprite—beneath a sky so dismal that any child or moron could have judged that *something* was likely to descend upon me before I reached my destination, even if only a lunatic could have offered an exact prediction—because I had wanted space to meditate on the problems of painting the Underworld, and I was not doing that. Indeed, I seemed to be doing anything but that, allowing myself to be distracted by Toustain's bequest, the gloominess of his former dwelling, and the eccentricities of the weather. Clearly, I was out of sorts, not quite myself. I had to shake it off, pull myself together...and above all, stop thinking in clichés.

For the time being, however, I used the back of my left hand to brush the dirty snow off the right sleeve that my right hand had, inevitably, been unable to reach. Then I reached into my pocket, very gingerly, to take out a handkerchief with which to wipe both hands.

Then, of course, I had a dirty handkerchief. There are some situations from which a fastidious man simply cannot emerge unscathed.

Fortunately, I had reached the Sprite. Before going upstairs I went into the tap-room in order to borrow a towel and a clothes-brush from the proprietor's wife, Madame Auger, who was at her invariable post behind the counter. While she went to fetch it I nodded a greeting to old Nicodemus Rham, who was sitting in a corner with a glass of red wine. There were half a dozen other men in the room I knew by sight, but no one to whom I owed a greeting. No one was talking about the weather, presumably because no one there was yet aware that it was snowing, let alone that the snow was dirty. My clothes, of course, were uniformly black; they did not show the snow because it had melted, and they did not show the sooty deposit it had left behind, because it matched them.

I tidied myself up as best I could before going upstairs to the upper floor, where I knew that Myrica's little reception party would be gathered by the bay window in the far corner, so as not to be far away from the fireplace, and asked the proprietress to send the serving-girl up with a hot toddy. Her eyes expressed the surprise that her mouth dared not express.

"It's cold outside," I explained. "We have bleak winter ahead of us, it seems."

Madame Auger nodded sagely. A bleak winter would not be bad for business, given that there was always a good fire blazing in the Sprite—two, if the upper room were in use—and when the nights became twice as long as the days, the humble folk of Mnemosyne still sought company, and still told tales around the fire, as if the Age of Enlightenment were something that only affected the upper stories of finer houses.

The fishermen, stevedores and domestics who formed the regular custom of the tap-room had a habit of referring to the first floor as "the summer palace," as if the mere presence of the occasional Lutetian aristocrat could create a palace out of bare floorboards and poorly-papered walls, and reduce a population of artists to the ranks of mere court jesters. Given that the one regular summer visitor possessed of real political power, the fearsome Duc de Dellacrusca, never set foot in the Sprite, the designation seemed more hopeful than appropriate.