

Arnould Galopin: *The Man With the Blue Face*

(c.1907)

*He went staggering, like a lugubrious child,
Like a madman. The crowd opened in front of him...*
Léon Dierx¹

I

He appeared abruptly at the corner of the street and advanced, seemingly wearily, his chin on his chest and his face hidden by a huge black silk bandana.

A woman who nearly bumped into him uttered a piercing scream and fled, fearfully.

Almost at the same moment, confused exclamations rose up on all sides:

“Him!”

“Him again...!”

“Oh, the horror!”

“The monster!”

There was a long murmur, a moment of recoil, and, instinctively, all the faces turned away.

For a few seconds he remained motionless, fixing on those who surrounded him two yellow eyes, moist and shiny; then he uttered a long sigh and resumed walking, slowly, under the jeers.

As he went past an outbuilding in the process of demolition, someone threw a lump of plaster after him, which shattered at his heels in a cloud of white dust, and a bold street-urchin went to far as to tug on his overcoat.

The man turned round and looked at the child, who remained nailed to the spot, terrified, his mouth open and his fingers splayed.

A crowd had gathered, overexcited and tumultuous.

“If we hadn’t arrived, he would surely have hit him,” said one woman, with a threatening gesture.

“Certainly,” said another. “Only the day before yesterday, you know, he ran after my little boy. Even when we got home, the poor kid was shaking. His blood had ‘turned.’ As they say.”

“But why isn’t he locked up? They locked up that beggar in the Rue d’Orléans, you know—the one whose face was burned and had two red holes instead of eyes.”

“That’s true...and he wasn’t as ugly as this one, and never moved from the one place...he was always outside the door of the orphanage. Those who didn’t want to see him only had to pass by on the other side of the street...while one encounters this individual everywhere.”

“Doubtless he lives in the neighborhood?” someone asked.

“Yes, quite near here, next door to the fodder-merchant, in the little house at the corner of the Passage Tenaille.”

“We need to get rid of him,” growled an old gentlemen afflicted by a tic, punctuating the sentence with a swish of his cane and a wink.

“The Commissaire says that he can’t do anything.”

“Oh, we’ll see about that! Yes, we’ll see. After all, it’s scandalous. Truly, it can’t go on.”

The man was already some way off. His tall, curbed silhouette gradually dissolves into the pale luminosity of the dusk, and for a long time after he had disappeared, the crowd remained grouped on the sidewalk, cursing the unknown man whose brief appearance had disturbed them so strangely.

For the month or so that the man they called “the Horror” had been living in Montrouge, he had been going out regularly at nightfall, like the bats. He went along deserted streets, timidly sticking close to the houses, seeking as far as was possible to hide in the shadows. The first time he had been seen he had

¹ The lines are from Léon Dierx’s poem “Lazare” [Lazarus] (1867).

provoked a sentiment of anxious curiosity, a kind of indefinable malaise, as if people experienced something strange and abnormal at the sight of him, which frightened and disconcerted them. Then, at length, fear had given way to aversion and aversion to disgust. They were afraid of the man, and they detested him at the same time, because he troubled the quietude of peaceful folk and was obstinate in living as other people did, when he seemed condemned by nature to lead the existence of ancient lepers. For two pins, they would have demanded that he cover his head with a veil and advertise his presence with a rattle.

He had become a kind of public enemy; a dull rage seethed at his approach, and but for the policemen, he might have been lynched, so forceful was the hatred against the man, who could not, however, be reproached for anything but his ugliness. There are physiological miseries that overexcite the nerves and which, after having caused a frisson, end up making hair stand on end. They become an obsession, and at the sight of them, instead of an exclamation of pity, it is a cry of fury that escapes, for modern altruism adapts poorly to certain complications and does not like to be subjected to too rude a proof. It is understood that everyone loves his neighbor, and is sometimes disposed to help him and console him, but only on condition of not forcing hearts to overly heroic devotions.

Darkness had fallen completely when “the Horror” arrived back at his home, a small two-story building with a cracked façade and disjointed shutters, situated almost on the edge of the Avenue de Maine.

The building, which was protected against collapse to the left by worm-eaten beams, backed on to an outbuilding on the right, in which bales of hay and straw were visible, symmetrically stacked. An interior courtyard connected the outbuilding to the meager house, but now that the latter was inhabited, a kind of partition had been hastily erected, formed of disparate and half-rotten planks, linked together at the top by a crosspiece of new fir-wood. Two windows overlooking the courtyard had been blocked by means of brackets, and the black marks of shutters could still be seen on the wall.

The hovel belonged to a neighboring fodder-merchant; it had been abandoned for some time and its owner had decided to demolish it when a man of about fifty, who said he was a physician, had asked to rent it one day, and had signed a three-year lease. “It’s for one of my friends,” he had said. “A scientist who desires to be tranquil...” The name of Martial Procas had been entered on the receipt for a year’s rent paid in advance, and the man had gone away.

Two days later, a large removal van stopped in front of the building, and the movers had not taken long to clutter the sidewalk with broken furniture, packages, bales and a large quantity of bizarre instruments and objects like those seen in laboratories: retorts with curved stems or convoluted rims, bell-jars tapering at the base, spherical or ovoid flasks with narrow necks, pear-shaped aludels made of clay, stacked inside one another. Then there was a profusion of test-tubes—straight, bent and U-shaped—cupels, crucibles, bottles, filter-funnels, eudiometers and siphons.

Passers-by stopped, intrigued by such a mass of mysterious things, and gazed with suspicious eyes at the invasion of glassware.

Finally, the movers took two copper furnaces out of the vehicle, a small iron bedstead, a Norman dresser, a faded red velvet divan, a few chairs, a large oak table that resembled a work-bench...and that was all.

The men waited for someone to come and tell them where to put it all, and when the tenant did not show himself, they went to install themselves in a wine-shop, after having asked a small boy to come and tell them “as soon as the parishioner arrived.”

It was necessary to believe, however, that the “parishioner,” as they called him, was in no hurry to occupy his new dwelling, for he did not make his appearance until the moment when the street-lamps were beginning to light up.

Although it was May and quite warm, he arrived in a closed cab—one of those archaic fiacres that one encounters by night in the courtyards of railway stations, driven by rubicund and unkempt sexagenarians. After paying the coachman, he pulled a black felt hat down over his eyes, put a hand over

his face and plunged rapidly into the vestibule of the house. One might have thought, on seeing him, that he had suddenly been struck, and, stunned by the blow, was fleeing in order to escape an invisible enemy.

The movers, having been alerted, appeared, grumbling, their tread heavy and unsteady.

“Oh, it’s not right,” said one.

“The fellow’s decidedly making fun of us,” said another. “Just wait—we’ll sort out his glassware, and properly. If there are breakages, too bad—it won’t be our fault, since it’s dark.”

A dry, slightly nasal voice emerged from the vestibule.

“Don’t break anything, my friends, I beg you. There’ll be a good tip.”

The movers looked at one another, and started laughing stupidly, nudging one another with their elbows.

The chief of the crew, a tall fellow with tattooed arms coiffed in a red bonnet, replied in a drawling faubourgian accent: “Don’t worry, Bourgeois, we’ll take care of your vessels. As long as there’s a good tip, it’s okay. Come on, lads! Let’s begin with the furniture. We’ll see to the glassware later.”

And with gestures with which they strove to alleviate their bad manners, the men loaded their shoulders with the meager furniture that was heaped pell-mell in the street.

That took scarcely a quarter or an hour, and then they “attacked” the glassware, getting down to work with a meticulous care that they exaggerated in a ridiculous manner.

Meanwhile, the tenant had not yet shown himself. Hidden in a room on the first floor, he rapidly interrogated every time he heard the stairs creak: “What are you bringing up?”

“The bed.”

“Good...on the first...the room to the left.”

A few moments later, he asked again; “What are you bringing now?”

“Glass trinkets.”

“The room to the right downstairs, on the ground floor.”

Sometimes his voice sounded very nearby, sometimes it was slightly muffled, coming from the depths of a room or a corridor, but the movers were never able to see who was speaking to them. When they draw nearer to the place where the singular individual was, they heard a rapid rustle, and saw a shadow that brushed the walls and disappeared behind a door. One of them, who was wearing espadrilles, succeeded in unearthing the “parishioner,” but the latter, taken by surprise, abruptly turned his back and stayed in a corner, bending down slightly, as if he were arranging something.

When everything was brought in, set down and fixed, the man asked again: “Where are my microscopes? I can’t see them.”

“What’s he talking about?” asked one of the movers.

“I don’t know,” his comrade replied. “I think he’s asking for his myrosopes.”

“They’re in a black wooden box,” said the invisible man, without emerging from the corner where he was lurking.

“Oh yes! I know what you mean,” said the chief of the movers. “We’ll bring it up, Bourgeois. The box is downstairs in the hallway. Beg pardon! Sorry—we forgot it.”

Coins were then heard clinking, and the tenant announced: “I’m putting your money on the mantelpiece of the room on the right.”

The movers came forward rapidly, but when they arrived the man had disappeared.

The chief counted the money, clicked his tongue in satisfaction, and then bowed ironically and said: “It’s all there...and generous. Thanks a lot, Boss, and *au revoir!* No, I can’t say that, since I haven’t seen you...but that’s okay, you’re very good all the same. Let’s go! Until next time!”

There was a sound of hob-nailed boots on the stairs, sonorous stumblings, and then the door slammed shut.

The man listened for a few moments, standing still at the top of the stairs. When he was quite sure that the movers had gone, he came down very rapidly, shot the bolt of the main door, and lit a candle. Then he threw himself down on the old red divan that lay in the midst of a frightful mess, put his head in his hands, and started sobbing.

II

Who was that dolorous individual? Where did he come from? Why did people abruptly turn away when he approached? There must, in consequence, be something terrifying and horrifying about him?

Yes. He was ugly: atrociously ugly, with an ugliness that surpassed anything imaginable. Not that his face was ravaged by some kind of lupus, labored by a repulsive tumor, or covered in nasty wounds; he was not subject to any deformity; no accident had contorted his features. What rendered him ignoble and monstrous was simply his color.

It was blue...entirely blue. Not an apoplectic blue extracted from violet dregs of wine, but a raw, violent, almost bright blue, intermediate between Prussian blue and ultramarine.

I have lived in hospitals for a long time. I have seen all the deformities and all the monstrosities that nature is sometimes pleased to heap on poor humanity, but I have never encountered a monster more repulsive than the one whose heart-rending narrative I have undertaken to relate.

Nothing was as impressive at that face, which seemed to be that of a decomposing cadaver, but which, however, was illuminated by two yellow eyes in which the dolor of life gleamed, and the exasperation of no longer being counted among the living. Only the pen of an Edgar Poe could render such a frightful vision. It caused a frisson and a fascination at one and the same time.

And yet, the man had once been handsome! His long curly hair, with tawny reflections and his profound velvety eyes had caused more than one woman's head to turn when he was lecturing at the Sorbonne on the arid subject of bacteriology—for some of them had acquired the habit of going to his lectures as they might go to a five o'clock tea party, and on the tiers of the amphitheater there was a striking contrast between those socialites in sparkling outfits and the hard-working students, paled by late nights, buttoned up in their miserable frock-coats.

Embarrassed by that feminine invasion, Martial Procas' students had ended up grouping together at the back of the auditorium, where they indulged from time to time in indecent practical jokes, the most anodyne of which involved crushing ampoules of sulfur or blowing iodoform powder over the hats and corsages of the beautiful auditors.

Those petty annoyances did not deter Procas' admirers. They were perfectly well aware of being out of place in that intellectual environment, but they came anyway, in ever-increasing numbers, elbowing one another like fish-wives in order to get as close as possible to the young master's podium. A few took notes, for the sake of appearances, and their slender fingers laden with rings could be seen running rapidly over cloth-bound notebooks; others, franker and a trifle cynical, contented themselves with gazing at the professor with eyes like sleepy doves, and swooning extravagantly after some demonstration that would have required preliminary scientific studies to be comprehensible.

Those lectures, mortal for the profane, seemed to delight the young women in the audience—"the tangents," as the student maliciously labeled them, because they had the habit, when the lecture was over, of approaching Procas and brushing him slightly. Nothing put off those "bacteriomaniacs." Procas could have been talking Hebrew or Hindustani, and they would still have been numerous in their presence on his course.

Soon it became a frenzy, and in the evenings, at the salons, no one was talking about anything but the young professor.

"What, my dear, you weren't at Monsieur Procas' last lecture? Oh, what an admirable session you missed! He spoke to us for an hour about pathogenic microthingsies. It was delightful! I'd never have thought that one could be interested in microbes in that fashion."

And among those enthusiastic socialites there was soon no topic of conversation but bacilli; some of them even set up little laboratories at home, and bought test-tubes, microscopes and jars—but refrained, of course, from any study. They only talked a great deal about bacteriology, as the young women of our day waxed ecstatic about Nietzsche and found him "exquisite" without ever having read him. They became "microphiles" as they had once become Nietzscheans, without knowing why, out of snobbery.

Nevertheless, something other than snobbery infiltrated the admiration that those women professed with regard to Procas. Unlike the author of *Zarathustra*, he was not a distant figure "burning with the fire

of his own thought,” someone impassioned with individualistic ethics, a superman intensively cultivating vital energy and striving to found a morality of the will. He was a visible, palpable individual, who would not even have needed to be a scientist to trouble hearts. And women were all the crazier about him because he seemed indifferent to the advances they made to him.

His latest volume on *Phagocyte Cells*—seven hundred pages in Jesus octavo, with colored plates—had the success of a novel of adventure. The first edition sold out in a fortnight and it was necessary to reprint it, to the great amazement of the publisher, who had never see a scientific work take off like that. It then became a matter of good taste to have *Phagocyte Cells* on one’s drawing room table, and a portrait of the author on the piano.

If Martial Procas had not been a timid individual, he would have been able to possess the most audacious of his admirers—those who came to find him to ask for a dedication—one after another, because those visits were always preceded by a little letter mauve or lily-pink letter, which left no doubt as to the intentions of the signatory; but Procas, brought up in modest circumstances, the son of a petty optician in the Faubourg Saint-Denis, felt ill-at-ease in the presence of a worldly woman, and always affected a coldness under which, nevertheless, a great intimate emotion was palpating.

“I must pass for an imbecile in women’s eyes,” he often said, “but what do you expect? It’s stronger than I am. I’ve ventured into society a little, but I’m still a savage...”

As much as he felt himself a master at the Sorbonne, with a Petri dish in his hand, triumphant and superior, he was hesitant and gauche in his apartment in the Rue Soufflot. He only had to offer his lips to accumulate kisses, but he scarcely dared to offer his hand, and did not even seem to perceive the brutal pressure that slender trembling fingers imprinted thereon.

That timidity, which was mistaken for disdain, did not fail to give rise to critical gossip. Soon, his listeners were all convinced that they had a rival.

If, in the course of his lectures, Procas turned his head more frequently toward one brunette, or smiled as he looked at a blonde, eyes charged with hatred immediately flashed thunderously at the privileged individual, and the quivering bacteriomaniacs murmured “It’s her!” between their pretty teeth.

Then, they took stock of the one they believed to be the elect, with ironic smiles wandering over their lips, and when the lecture ended there were whispered conversations in the corridors, punctuated by busts of insolent laughter, expressions of disgust and little fits of significant coughing.

After a few months, all of Procas’ listeners had fallen out mortally; each of them believed that they saw in another a preferred rival; but the most enraged of all were the women in decline, those who could not believe in the outrage of the years, who were striving in vain to hide annoying nasty crows’-feet beneath skillful make-up. They were truly intrepid, and abandoned all their occupations—if they had any—in order to play detective.

Unfortunately, as they were unaware of the savant deductive method of Allan Dickson,² they could not discover the slightest “flagrante delicto” and were reduced to spying on one another—which gave rise to singular misunderstandings and led to a few minor scandals about which two or three families blushed.

And while this feminine surveillance was exercised around him, Procas calmly continued his research into pathogenic bacilli. Perhaps he would have lived impregnably in his ivory tower if he had not accepted a few invitations.

He went to two or three salons—always the same ones, for nothing weighed upon him so much as a first welcome. Intimacies did not take long to become established; he found some of his admirers there; the flirtations began. Procas was on the fatal slope. From flirtation to love there is only one step to take, and that heart, which had thus far beaten for science alone, finally knew the torment of amour.

The woman who was able to capture that savage was an American named Margaret, who was familiarly nicknamed Lovely Meg. We shall dispense with painting her portrait by employing, in order to

² Allan Dickson was a detective invented by Galopin, who appeared in a number of short stories published in the first decade of the century, some of which were subsequently integrated into the portmanteau novels *La Ténébreuse Affaire de Green-Park* (1910) and *L’Homme au complet gris* (1912), the latter of which (to be published by Black Coat Press) included an episode that introduced him to his obvious model, Sherlock Holmes.

depict her, the precious and scholarly terms that always make a heroine the sweetest, most captivating and most ideal of creatures. We shall simply say that Margaret was beautiful. Furthermore, she was knowledgeable, having undertaken challenging studies at the University of Baltimore, and she was certainly the only one of Procas' listeners capable of understanding the professor's scientific explanations.

She really was the woman of whom he had always dreamed, the companion who might be a collaborator as well as a lover, with whom one could still talk when one has finished laughing. It did not take him long to fall madly in love and, for fear that someone else might take her, he married her. Poor innocent, who thought that a "yes" might be sufficient to enchain a woman's heart!

For a month, there was a triumph of love, a folly of caresses, an intoxication. Procas no longer lived except for Meg, and his passion was all the keener for having been so long contained. Like all true lovers, he was ferociously jealous. He made a luxurious nest for her, in which he intended to keep her for himself alone, far from the tumult of society and the gazes of the crowd.

At first, Meg accepted that role of captive goddess, which flattered her romantic temperament. A skeptic by atavism, like all American women, she did not imagine that there really could be men as tender as the heroes of fiction. It seemed amusing to be pampered and coddled like a little girl, but at length she wearied of that claustal life and of the poor lover who was always kneeling before her. She even reached the point of finding him perfectly ridiculous, and made him understand one fine morning that she would like to replace the honeymoon with a little sunlight.

Procas resigned himself to it, with death in his soul. He was obliged to go out, to show himself in society again. Then his wife demanded that he resume his bacteriological research, doubtless to put an end to an intimacy that was becoming troublesome.

We shall not undertake to recount here how Meg, who had an incessant need for money and for whom her husband's resources were no longer sufficient, went about augmenting her luxury. The woman is only due to play an episodic role in our story; she is no more, in sum, than a shadow, a figure who passes by and must soon fade into darkness.

One day, Procas, who was still very smitten and whose mind had never even been brushed by suspicion, learned abruptly of Meg's infamy. The proofs were there, cynical and overwhelming. The woman who was his entire life, to whom he had sacrificed his ambitions as a scientist, his dearest dreams, had deceived him odiously. Letters forgotten in a writing-desk whose drawer had been left ajar had told him of the atrocity, the frightful truth.

A dull rage rose within him.

Suddenly, he became motionless, his pupils dilated, his gaze fixed. His lips moved, but nothing came out except a vague whimper, inarticulate sounds that resembled the wailing of a tiny baby. He put his hands to his breast; his breath was short and staccato; his face, pale at first, colored abruptly; it became red, almost purple; the whites of her eyes were bloodshot; one might have thought that the blood impelled toward the face by a violent pressure was about to spring forth of all the pores in its skin. Pink foam trickled from his mouth. Then, vacillating like a tree shaken by the wind and felled, he suffered one last shudder and collapsed backwards, his gaze anguished, uttering a sinister cry that resembled the gurgle of a man whose throat has been cut.