

## *I. The Nightmare of Life*

How many people, in our centuries-long autumn, throw away the cup that is still full, not wanting to drink the disgust of life therefrom?

Children, old people and the young go thus into the shadow from which no one returns. Many, ground down, fight among themselves, holding one another responsible for the common distress. Have you ever seen flocks at the doors of abattoirs thrashing about madly while awaiting the slaughter whose odor envelops them? In a similar human confusion, the new world is fermenting.

For a long time—forever—that is the way it has been.

In this book, we are digging in a corner of the charnel-house.

Under the arches of the railway between Levallois and Clichy, on one of those spring nights when the mild and heavy darkness is like the wing of a nocturnal bird, two men are finishing their horrible work in profound peace.

A third, lying at their feet, is no more than an inert mass, like a pole-axed ox.

One of the men commands the other: “Undress him! Put the clothes in this suitcase.”

The other lifts up the corpse and strips it.

The body, still warm, is supple, the task easy; but those movements have reanimated the unfortunate victim; his breast rises, breath escaping in a rattle from his throat.

In the distance, the cracked voice of one of those daughters of misery who are known as “good-time girls” rises up, mingled with the vague croaking of the drunkard who is with her:

Beauties, beauties  
Are faithful to gold,  
Lan laire, lan lin!  
The juice of the vine  
Makes the face red  
In drunkenness!<sup>1</sup>

The murderer drops the body, which renders a last plaint. The girl and the drunkard sing:

Beauty, beauty,  
Come and have a chat!

“Quickly!” says the man in command to the other, lifting up the suitcase in which the clothes have been heaped with one hand, and putting a knife into the wretch’s hand with the other.

The latter, who had reached out to receive payment, shivers, and his teeth chatter.

“Cut his throat!” says the master.

The other bends down without replying. Is it not necessary to go all the way to the end? Stupid as the man who sells himself may be, the bargain must be completed; the wretch whose flesh is creeping must go on, must go on to the end.

The knife is blunt; it’s necessary to put pressure on the throat. The victim twitches again.

Close by, the drunk and the girl sing:

The earth is reeling  
Open a full barrel!

The final word catches like a cry in the throat of the man and the cracked cooing of the woman. Nothing more.

The body writhes in a pool of blood, springing like a fountain from his open throat.

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<sup>1</sup> Like all the other songs cited in the text, this one is rhymed in the original, but I have translated the meanings directly without attempting to reproduce the rhyme-schemes.

The blood has splashed the murderer's face. In his overly large shoes, his bare feet have been wetted. A tremor shakes him, however, the man whose throat has been cut is no more than a cadaver. The silence is profound.

It's not over.

The man giving directions with calm imperturbability hands the other an enormous stone.

"Crush the face!"

He obeys again. The bones of the face crack like a nutshell. Who, now, would recognize the cadaver?

This time, the master pays. The two men separate.

One, suitcase in hand, his pace steady, goes toward the Avenue de Clichy, the beginning of the lighted quarters; the other, trembling beneath the rags that would leave him naked but for the night, which dresses him in shadow, plunges into the road to the fortifications, He stops at one of the dilapidated huts facing the bank.

In the hut, the silence is so great that no one would suspect the presence of living beings.

The man gropes in the shadows. Are they asleep? Are they dead?

He tries to speak, his voice choked by the horror in the depths of his throat, escapes in sobs.

"Marthe! Marthe!"

It is so strangled, that voice, and so terrifying, that the woman utters a cry; he does not hear it.

"Marthe! Is the little one dead?"

"No!"

The man breathes in deeply.

"Where is he?"

"Here; I'm warming him up; he isn't crying any longer."

"I have the money."

"You haven't killed someone?"

"Shut up—we have to save the child."

His wife stifles a groan.

"Courage! You have to live. A little wine will warm him up."

He puts his hands on the child's body and feels that it is icy.

"Hold him close to you—I'll go fetch the wine."

A tavern not far away is showing a sliver of light.

The man knocks on the door.

"The child's ill!" he shouts. "I need wine—good wine. Open up, Monsieur Nemo. The kid might die."

"Who's there?"

"Me, Pierre."

No reply.

Pierre knocks again.

"Open up! I've got money."

At that assurance, the door opens.

The lamp, shining in the face of the man who comes in, displays his blood-spattered rags in all their horror. His shoes have left bloody footprints on the ground.

Seeing himself, he tries to run away, but the tavern-keeper, and strong and swift as a guard-dog, bars his way. Two agents who are drinking there, waiting for daylight, leap on to his shoulders.

Thinking about the dying child, he shakes them off as a wild boar shakes off the dogs, knocking them over, and, grabbing a bottle placed on the table, flees before his adversaries, rudely thrown to the ground, have been able to get up.

This wine, he thought, is the child's life.

The agents, hurt by their fall, had scarcely regained their feet when Pierre had already got back to his house.

"Quickly, Marthe! Make the child drink!"

The chills would never drink again; he was dead.

The hut was so full of shadows that they could not tell exactly how the misfortune had occurred.

"No light! No light!" they said, madly.

It was the agents, guided by Monsieur Nemo, who were bringing a light.

The tavern-keeper knew where his client, who had been insolvent since illness had caused him to lose his job, was living.

The unfortunates did not try to resist. The child was dead; there was nothing more for them to do in the world.

The paltry face of the little creature was livid, his body already stiff; he was definitely dead.

That little one was the last of the brood; the other three had perished by virtue of going to work too young; it was for him that the father had committed murder.

They let the mother lay him down in his crib.

*We too, she thought, grimly, are going to die!*

And like wolves caught in a trap, the man and the woman marched away in silence.

Another nest had fallen from the tree of poverty—but many still remain on its branches, waiting for the new spring.

## II. *The Man with Bright Eyes*

While his accomplice was being arrested, the man who had supervised the murder continued slowly and placidly on his way toward the heart of Paris, suitcase in hand.

Near the Place Clichy, at a display-window that was still illuminated, there was a man as thin as a stray dog, draped in a blouse that had become too large, falling from his shoulders in elegant folds. Glued to the window, his face hollowed by eyes lit up by hunger and thirst, he seemed made of stone; the anxiety of his features revealed a terrible suffering and an intense energy.

Momentarily, the man with the suitcase considered the man glued to their window, between the sinister glow of a street-light and the faded illumination of the café; then, going over to him, he placed a hand on his shoulder. It was either the caprice or necessity of having a docile individual in hand, or to establish a current of public opinion in case his crime became known.

“You’re thirsty, eh, comrade?”

The other, raising his head, only made out the vague outline of his interlocutor, a shadow floating like a lost thought. In the grip of hunger, the somber visage had, as if through the holes of a mask, two eyes as phosphorescent as those of a wolf: two bright eyes, like lamps.

When the hungry man did not reply, the man with the suitcase repeated: “You’re thirsty, eh?”

“What’s that to do with you?”

“You’re in a bad mood. Me, I’m a maniac; I like to save people who are drowning, in life or the river. I save them whether they like it or not!”

“You’re crazy. Leave me alone.”

“No. I sold a painting yesterday. You’re an artist, I can see that. We’ll share it. I have a thousand francs on me; here’s five hundred.”

He put a fistful of gold coins into the hungry man’s hand and drew away, looking back to see what the other would do.

The unfortunate’s first impulse was to throw the money in the face of the overly generous unknown man, but the second was the instinct of a thirsty beast; he ran into the café. *I’m dreaming*, he said to himself, *but before I wake up, I need a drink!*

*That’s good*, thought the other as he moved on. *He’s caught in the trap.*

“Drink!” shouted the starveling, sitting down at a table. It seemed to him that he could drink a whole barrel, a glass as big as the great vat of Heidelberg,<sup>2</sup> or the Ocean. Eyes dilated and mouth open, he repeated: “Drink! Drink!”

One of the gold coins he was holding rolled on to the floor tiles as he set the others down in front of him on the table, where they slid with a slight tinkling sound.

The man would surely have committed a murder for less—perhaps several.

The café had stayed open during the night because of a local festival. Night-birds, newspaper-sellers and street-performers could drink there. Agents, “patriotic sharks” and “bottom-feeders,” came there in disguise to watch one another. Strange things were heard there, sinister and burlesque.

In one corner, two old men are “having a few jars.”

A young coxcomb sitting between two slutty tarts is oiling them up.

At the far end of the bar, a peasant from the Haut-Marne, arrived in Paris that day to buy a trousseau for his eldest, Rose, is sitting between two of his daughters. After several circuits of the fair, he is letting them rest in the café.

An old man, parceled up like a winter onion, is feeding drinks to a little girl who still has an ingenuous expression, in spite of everything.

“Another glass, Mionette?”

In a voice that makes argot sound sad, she replies: “Yes, another, always. Perhaps I’ll find you less nauseating when the booze has tangled my bobbin.”

She’s right, the poor girl, for it’s a horrible pendant that the imbecile has just picked up for a night at the fortune-teller’s—but her purse is empty and the beautiful girl is full of sap, and has to live! It’s necessary to follow the same road as the rest, damn it, since she has to live and hasn’t the means.

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<sup>2</sup> A big barrel, said to be able to contain 200,000 liters of wine.

There is, however, something in her that is in revolt; there are children of both sexes who, seeing the whole of life before them like a cut throat, don't want to enter upon it and kill themselves on the threshold.

"Drink!" cried the thirsty man again, having absorbed all the liquids set before him. Then, another draught having been poured, he raises it to his lips and falls under the table.

"It's not worth the trouble of falling over," said one of the agents, observing the singular drinker. "It won't save him." Calmly, they lift up the human mass inert on the tiles.

A few gold coins were missing at the count; they were only able to confiscate two hundred, without knowing where the rest of the Eldorado had gone.

The Haut-Marnais was long gone, a daughter under each arm.

All the others watched. Passing in front of the café, one dragging the other, were a half-sobered-up drunk and a thin creature in rags, floating like feathers. That skylark of poverty was La Greluchette,<sup>3</sup> the girl who had been singing in the dark alleyway of the fortifications.

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<sup>3</sup> *Greluchette* means "lover," in a contemptuous fashion.