

Georges Espitallier: *The Nickel Man*

(1897)

I. A Singular Scientist

Pilesèche was a man devoid of ambition.

His present situation was sufficient for him, even though it was humble; he was a mere laboratory assistant to a physiologist who enjoyed both renown and a very bad character—in consequence of which the poor laboratory assistant was more accustomed to being shoved around than kind words.

Népomucène Grillard—for, after all, it is appropriate to provide a portrait of the master before setting out that of the servant—belonged to the category of scientists who are surly and disagreeable to their fellow men. Born a peasant, his boorish behavior had conserved the rustic imprint of his origin. He had isolated himself, struggling against a life that was not easy at the outset, and developed an innate combative instinct. His obstinacy had triumphed over obstacles, but he had not tried to rid himself of his native rudeness, and, as his scientific notoriety had increased, that lack of amenity had seemed to grow, because he did not feel any need to repress it.

His first impulse—the best, it is said—was always to receive anyone who approached him with an initial attack. The burlesque odyssey of his academic visits, when he had thought of trying to obtain a chair in the Institut, was legendary in the vicinity of the Sorbonne. By dint of effort he had then succeeded in putting on an almost smiling face when he passed the threshold of the scientist whose vote he was trying to win in the great struggle, but after five minutes of conversation, the animal inside him found itself unleashed, and, trampling the flower-bed of his future colleague, gradually increasing the pitch of his dry falsetto voice, he would take a stand opposed to his interlocutor's theories, pouring out irony by the bucketful and arguments by the mouthful, and the conversation would end in a dispute, with a loud noise of slammed doors that left him, the last man standing, alone on the academician's landing.

He cut his visits short before arriving at the contest, and renounced forever the hope of ever putting on the coat with green palms.

If he was aggressive with his colleagues, it is easy to deduce what his relationship was like with the students who aspired to learn science in his shadow. His laboratory was an inferno; gradually, a void had formed around the scientist, to whom only the timid Pilesèche remained faithful.

The latter would perhaps have preferred an easier master, but he was a creature of habit, and in any case, he had never had sufficient energy to detach himself from bonds to which he gradually became accustomed. He was a kind of eccentric, a great timid child devoid of will-power, whose only passion was for study, with a certain nonchalance in the fashion in which he devoted himself to it.

The physiology on which he worked possessed him entirely, but when he had poured out his contingent of ideas in the common endeavor, it never entered his head that he had anything to do with the result; never, even in the depths of his soul, did he make any kind of claim to their paternity. Népomucène Grillard appeared to him to be a divinity looking down from on high upon feeble humanity, and one does not collaborate with the gods; one serves them.

In any case, having no needs and satisfied with very little, Pilesèche went through life full of an insouciance that was painted all over his person. He had long, unkempt hair; its gray color might have been natural, but was more probably due to an abundant dust generously spread all the way to the dirty collar of the worn and discolored frock-coat that enveloped, without really dressing, his long bony body. The rest of his costume was in keeping.

Along with his athletic appearance, the man had a timid, adolescent expression; his gestures were gauche and maladroit. For anyone who considered him at a glance, he might have passed for a scholar or a Bohemian; he was both at the same time.

There are bilious individuals who live for a long time, to the misfortune of their contemporaries, but it is nevertheless necessary to recognize that exaggerated movements of bile are not favorably to the principles of sound hygiene. For that reason and many others, Népomucène Grillard, when he reached the age of sixty-five, felt himself declining—physically declining, that is; his mentality was not afflicted, nor his energy, nor, most of all, his character. And yet, the aged scientist had embarked on a whole series of experiments that he would not have wanted to leave incomplete.

As time was pressing, he had the imprudent temerity to test some of his physiological discoveries on himself, which was the surest fashion of hastening his end, for the human body is not an experimental field in which the infinitely small can deliver battle without causing damage to the substratum of that microcosm.

The scientist had also launched himself into the new sciences that claim to approach the problems of hypnosis and life after death, and which solicit so many people nowadays. All that overwork had ended up ruining his constitution, to the point that one day, it was necessary to take to his bed.

With his bulldog manners, Monsieur Grillard had never managed to keep a domestic servant for more than a week, and when he fell ill, he could not abide any other care than that of his laboratory assistant, to which he was accustomed. It was necessary then for the latter to comply with all the old man's caprices and not impose his presence on him more than was necessary.

Occasionally, he risked an observation, such as: "It's imprudent to remain alone at night, my dear master; allow me to stay with you..."

"Leave me alone," the other replied.

"You have to eat; make a little effort, or you'll die of starvation."

"What are you doing? Besides, starvation or something else, what does it matter? I feel that I'm at the end of my tether."

"Oh, my dear master, you're not there yet. You're going to get your strength back—but it's necessary to look after yourself."

"Go away. Stop harping on and leave me in peace. You can't tell me anything, damn it! I know better than you are how I am..."

Sometimes, Pilesèche exerted himself on another subject, perhaps even more scabrous.

"You have a nephew, Monsieur; you need to think about asking him to come..."

"A fine fellow, who makes music!"

"Pardon me, but I'm told that he's given up music for sculpture. I imagine he thought that the change might give you pleasure."

"Ha ha! Music or sculpture, it's all one: I don't like the arts. What is there in them that's positive? Can one find theorems that regulate those strings of sensations? And those statues, fixed and frozen—are they worth as much as a morsel of flesh palpitating under my scalpel? Get away—you can talk to me about all that when the arts are sciences."

Thus rejected, his efforts wasted, the poor assistant, undiscouraged, brought up the subject of an orphan niece, with whom the scientist scarcely occupied himself except for paying her boarding-school fees, even doing good in an egotistical fashion.

"She's in a convent, isn't she?" Grillard interrupted. "Let her stay there!"

Pilesèche was, therefore, quite astonished when the old man, one day, softening his voice, summoned him to his bedside and made him party to his intentions.

"I sense that I don't have much longer to go, and, before dying, I want to see my nephew Népomucène. He's an animal, but he's my nephew, and I want to give him my instructions. Go look for him tomorrow evening and bring him here. If you don't find him, search—I don't want to see you without him, you hear me?"

"What if I were to bring him tomorrow morning?"

"How painful it is never to be understood! Not before tomorrow evening, I tell you. I'm not in the habit of repeating myself!"

A few moments later, the scientist called out: "Pilesèche, prepare me an electric bath!"

An electric bath!

The assistant did not believe in the efficacy of that medical treatment, which Monsieur Grillard had improved for his own usage, but how could he oppose his master's will?

"Are you going to contradict me incessantly?" the old man growled.

In order not to excite his bile any further, Pilesèche heated up the water and, uncovering a long vat that was normally used for galvanoplasty, he poured in the liquid, slightly sharpened with a little acid to increase its electrical conductivity.

While taking his bath, Grillard had the custom of lying down on a rattan trellis placed in the bottom of the vat and serving as an insulator. He gripped the cylinders in both hands. The electric current thus ran through his body, while on slight electrolytic reactions occurred on the surface of his skin. He felt a frisson running over his sickly limbs. It felt like ants swarming throughout his being, which at least procured him a temporary relief.

That evening, he made a new demand. He took it into his head to increase the conductivity of his body by having it coated in plumbago. Pilesèche tried in vain to resist, but it was finally necessary for him to grip the heavy brush steeped in a pot where the black lead was thinned down, and to start daubing the maniac, who had stripped off his last garment.

Grillard stood on the floor, trembling, his hands leaning on the bed, and there was no more lugubrious sight than that skeleton, scarcely covered by parchment-like skin, gradually coated with a layer of black, as shiny as wax.

When the grotesque operation was terminated, Grillard signified to his assistant that he was to go away and leave him alone.

"But what about your bath?" said the latter.

"I can take it perfectly well on my own."

And as Pilesèche was accustomed by habit to passive obedience, he left, while the old man, his back bent, supporting himself on the walls, headed toward the half-full vat.

As he went past the slate-topped table mounted in sliding grooves, however, he stopped, listened to make sure that the door of the apartment had closed behind Pilesèche, and, seizing a piece of chalk with one hand and some pieces of paper lying on the table with the other, he began rapidly transcribing a previously-prepared inscription, the letters of which followed one another in complete incoherence.

Having done that, the ambulant black phantom finally reached the galvanoplastic vat. He poured into it the contents of a bottle full of a glittering crystalline salt, lit a reflector lamp placed nearby, and lay down in the bath, after having opened the tap of a small reservoir, whose water began to flow into the vast in a thin trickle, with a monotonous murmur.

The old man had placed himself in the vat in his usual position. Thus extended, with his knees brought back toward his meager breast, only his face, tilted backward, emerged from the water. He searched with his gaze for a brilliant point that the lamp picked out on a silver ball suspended in front of him. Motionless, his eyes jaundiced by icterus and immeasurably wide open in fakiristic contemplation, he waited...

Silence had fallen, lugubriously. Nothing could be heard but the purr of the stove and the susurrus of the trickle of water that was solely causing the level in the vat to rise. Gradually, the water covered the scientist's closed mouth. Only the nostrils, eyes and forehead appeared above the liquid surface. Already, however, all consciousness had disappeared from the inert and rigid body. Népomucène Grillard had put himself into complete catalepsy by staring fixedly at the luminous dot trembling on the polished surface of the silvery ball.

The water was still rising, its meniscus climbing to assault the projections of the emaciated face.

And the electricity did its work on the molecules of that exsanguinated flesh, gently and slyly depositing solid particles appropriated from the decomposing salts: an impalpable dust of nickel, which clung on to the layer of plumbago and gradually covered it...

II. A Sinister Discovery

On the 31 December 1890, St. Sylvester's Day, at eight o'clock in the morning, the Rue de la Montagne-Sainte-Geneviève was crowded, in spite of the glacial fog, with businessmen and housewives who were running in quest of breakfast, their heads swathed in wool, clutching the traditional milk-jug in their numb fingers.

Two eccentrics, rather incongruous in their appearance and costume, were striding over the damp and sticky paving stones; they did not seem excessively out of place, however, in the midst of the other passers-by, the stiff slope in question not normally being the rendezvous of the flower of the aristocracy.

One of the two, his figure clasped in a black velvet jacket, had a simple scarf wound around his neck; it was the only concession he made to the rigor of the temperature, for he was holding his hat in his hand in spite of the season, proudly throwing back his long back hair, lustrous and well-groomed, with a leonine gesture.

The other, by contrast, was very negligently clad, with no attention to detail; that was Népomucène Grillard's laboratory assistant, and the succinct portrait previously painted dispenses us with describing the costume he was wearing.

"So, my dear Pilesèche," said the man in the velvet jacket, continuing the conversation, "my uncle has suddenly felt his familial fibers vibrating?"

"He has, at least testified the desire to see you," the other replied, not without a certain reticence.

"I'm still amazed, not being accustomed to such tenderness on his part."

"The sentiments are modified, Monsieur Bémolisant, and soften at the approach of death."

"And you think that the old man is there?"

"I believe that it would be very difficult for him to get better. I think he's worn out. He's developed an extreme nervous sensitivity, and I've been able to observe profound disturbances in his organism of late. However, he might live for a few weeks yet; yesterday evening, when I left him, Monsieur Grillard was not exactly worse; he merely manifested the desire to be alone, and dismissed me rather abruptly, I have to say..."

"In order not to misrepresent his amiable character. You're an angel of forbearance, Monsieur Pilesèche, and in your place, I would have broken his retorts over his head a long time ago."

"Are you astonished, then, that he has quarreled with you?"

"What do the doctors say?" asked the other, after a brief pause.

"The doctors? You can hardly doubt that he's refuse their intervention, and you know how determined he is..."

"How stubborn, you mean. Yes, yes, I know my dear uncle, although he banished me from his presence a long time ago. I know that one can't easily get him to give in. He's doubtless a great scientist, but what an insupportable fellow!"

Pilesèche pursed his lips with an indulgent gesture. "Everyone has his little faults; I'm used to his and I'm no less affected for that by the sad state to which I see him reduced. Oh, since a month ago the laboratory no longer exists. Even before being bed-ridden, the poor man had no heart for anything. Experiments begun were left incomplete. There was only his most recent research...you know, his research on the occlusion of living beings?"

"The occlusion of..." said the other, nonplussed. "He was working on the occlusion of living beings. What on earth can that be?"

"You don't keep up with the reports of the scientific societies?"

"Eminently unhealthy nourishment, Monsieur Pilesèche—no, I don't read them. The occlusion...ha ha! My dear uncle definitely had a very accentuated crack in the brain. At his age, it's pardonable."

"You can laugh, but I assure you...the results are precise and I myself..."

"What you too? Well, you're a bit touched yourself, my friend. Anyway, it's not astonishing. The great man's laboratory assistant...and it's contagious. But come on, explain it to me: what is this occlusion, of which I've never heard?"

"Artist as you are, you must have heard mention of some recent very singular discoveries. In the course of digging in perfectly virgin ground, incontestably undisturbed for several centuries, it sometimes

happens—rarely, I admit—that is breaking blocks of stone, one sees emerging from one of them a toad, which yawns and stretches: a living toad, awakening after a centuries-long sleep...”

“And you’ve seen that yourself?” said Bémolisant, incredulously.

“No, I haven’t seen it myself,” the laboratory assistant replied, mildly, “but our experiments prove the possibility of the phenomenon. We’ve reproduced it artificially; we’ve hermetically sealed up toads, frogs, even cats...”

“For centuries?” the artist interrupted, holding his ribs.

“For a few days—but that’s sufficient to demonstrate the conditions in which a living being can remain like that, without dying.”

“You’re amazing!”

“No, no, it’s quite simple. It’s quite evident that if you content yourself with enclosing your subject brutally, whatever it might be, it will die quickly, asphyxiated. But in the multitudinous phases of hypnotic sleep, there’s one, still little known, that resembles death but isn’t. It isn’t catalepsy, properly speaking, in which the subject doesn’t cease to breathe and the blood still circulates; it’s like a paralysis of the entire organism, a complete suspension of life...”

“And the animal can live without air, without light?”

“It lives...if one can call the complete arrest of all the vital functions living.”

“And what do you do to enclose it in its pebble?”

“The prison doesn’t matter, so long as it’s hermetic; the one that Monsieur Grillard normally employs is a metallic envelope deposited by galvanoplasty.”

“It’s only scientists that have such ludicrous ideas!”

“Pooh! Have you forgotten your theories about music, then? Do you think that the six-thousand-note scale with which you once wanted to endow us wasn’t at least as singular?”

“So I wasn’t understood by the men of my time, and in order not to lower my art by vile concessions to the level of my contemporaries devoid of ears, I renounced music...”

“You see...”

“Now I do sculpture...decadent sculpture...you’ll see! A revolution, my dear, a revolution! The primitives were nothing, the Byzantines nothing more; the art has never been understood like this...”

“You were talking about cracked brains a little while ago, Monsieur Bémolisant. I have reason to believe that, by virtue of atavism, you...”

“Oh! I’m misunderstood before I’ve even spoken!”

They arrived at the coaching entrance of an old house of rather sordid appearance, and, after darting a distracted glance at the lodge, deserted for the moment, they climbed the somber staircase whose sticky handrail adhered to the fingers.

The fourth floor landing, to which insipid and nauseating odors rose up from the rest of the house, was illuminated by wan daylight falling vertically through a glazed skylight open in the roof.

Pilesèche took a large key from his pocket and introduced it into the lock of a door painted in yellow ochre.

“My uncle lodges a long way up,” said the artist, out of breath after his climb.

“That’s because of the laboratory; one can’t find appropriate premises to let everywhere.”

“And then, admit it, landlords don’t like having such a constantly grumpy tenant...”

They went into a gloomy vestibule, which gave access on one side to a small kitchen, and on the other to a room decorated with the name of the drawing room and furnished with four rickety armchairs. At the back was the door to the laboratory, the biggest room in the apartment: the only one in which Népomucène Grillard lived, and which was really useful to him.

The two newcomers were walking on tiptoe, as is appropriate in the apartment of an invalid. Pilesèche gently lifted the latch of the laboratory and pushed the door. The vestibule was suddenly invaded by a violent flood of light and empyreumatic odors.

The laboratory was illuminated from above, like a painter’s studio. The raw daylight fell upon tables overloaded with an inextricable tangle of glassware: flasks of various shapes, test-tubes and reagents of all colors in recipients of every form. There was a microscope, and countless items of bizarre apparatus,

in chaotic disorder. An enormous chimney-hood, on which iron-clad furnaces, earthenware crucibles and pot-bellied retorts were strewn, completed the encumbrance of the fin-de-siècle alchemist's lair, while various guinea-pigs, cats, frogs and toads were scratching in their cages or beneath bell-jars scattered here, there and everywhere.

The scientist's laboratory also served as his bedroom, but the iron-framed bed, on which a meager mattress was thrown, attested that Népomucène Grillard was no sybarite.

The newcomers approached it with muffled footsteps, in order not to trouble his slumber. Wasted effort! They were astonished—on might almost say frightened—to find the bed empty.

Pilesèche opened his eyes wide in bewilderment, but no exclamation could escape his gaping mouth, so tightly was his throat constricted by that unexpected spectacle.

"Come on, let's pull ourselves together," said Bémolisant, the first to recover the power of speech, passing his hand over his forehead. "If he's not here, he must have gone out, improbable as the supposition might seem. The concierge will have seen him go past. I'll go and question her."

The artist ran downstairs and presented himself at the lodge, where the concierge was in the process of warming up her milk, with his back turned.

"Has Monsieur Grillard gone out?" asked Bémolisant, out of breath.

"Out! Oh, the poor old man. He's not in any state to go for a walk. He's in bed. It's a month, now that he hasn't been down and I haven't seen him. Monsieur Pilesèche gives me news of him every say, for you can imagine that, with his everlasting bad mood, I don't risk going upstairs to offer him my services."

The good woman had turned round, hands on hips. "You can go up confidently. He's at home, in bed...unless Monsieur Pilesèche is putting one over on me," she added, laughing thickly.

Bémolisant had no desire to persist. While going back up as hastily as he had come down, it occurred to him that the sudden disappearance was going to seem singular to many people, to say the least.

Pilesèche was waiting for him at the door, his expression utterly distressed, pale and worn out, his arms dangling. "I've found him, alas," he moaned, in a cavernous voice.

"He's hanged himself, perhaps?" the other queried, anxiously.

"No, worse than that."

"Well, what? You're killing me with your reticence..."

"Come..."

Taking hold of his jacket, the laboratory assistant led him to a corner of the laboratory, where Bunsen piles and galvanoplasty vats were scattered. One of them had unusual dimensions; it was full of a green-tinted liquid in the middle of which one could make out the black form of a human body.

"There he is," murmured Pilesèche, strangled by emotion.

"He's drowned himself!"

"No...he's *metalized* himself."

"What do you mean?"

"Like the toad, Monsieur Bémolisant, like the toad!" He shook his arm.

"But he's dead, at any rate?" said the nephew.

"Oh, it's probable. The human species doesn't have a long life, alas."

They both stood there, immobile and mute before the strange spectacle.

Suddenly, Bémolisant, moved by a sudden inspiration, uttered a stifled exclamation. "But my friend, there's something you haven't thought of..."

"What's that?"

"We're going to be accused of having killed him."

"Oh my God! But that's absurd!"

"It's less absurd than supposing a sick man capable of steeping himself in a galvanic bath all on his own. Think about it! No one has seen him for a month; he's been sequestered. He's found in that state; there's been a violent death. We're the only ones who've been in here; it's us that will be accused. You and me—both of us."

The other was stunned. "You're right," he moaned, wiping his forehead. "What are we going to do, then?"

“I don’t know. Perhaps he’s left a note, a piece of paper announcing his fatal resolution. That will suffice to get us off the hook...”

“Alas, he’s capable of not having done anything, in order to play one last trick on us.”

“Let’s look anyway.”

Their eyes troubled by anguish, they looked everywhere, on the tables and in the drawers.

Nothing.

Suddenly, however, their eyes fell upon the blackboard, which bore the following singular inscription:

READ CAREFULLY:

*bfoomgtqkl ovyesqnuesrsngbnljuefrplfyessn
ugnxmlpretkynqitcpsgsknptfzpfifpcfyesk fj
gpbutigoskeneruteexrbdbvetvangnugtjpsutu
dvipps.*

“It’s a cryptogram! To mock us one last time for our ignorance. Can you decipher it, at least?” demanded the laboratory assistant.

“Oh, as to that, no.”

“Then we’re back with the sword of Damocles hanging over our heads.”

After a moment of silent meditation, in which their minds were heavy with pitiful thoughts, Bémolisant said, with a somber expression: “Pilesèche, the moment has come for grave decisions.”

At that remonstrance, the other straightened up, ready for anything.

“It’s necessary for the corpse to disappear,” the artist concluded, his voice whistling.

“Ah!”

It will disappear; we’ll take it away. And later...” His voice attained the extreme limit of tragic falsetto; one might have thought that it was escaping his brain through his cranium. “...Later,” he continued, in the stifled tone of a traitor in a melodrama, “well, we’ll be able to explain the disappearance. The most urgent thing is to get rid of the evidence.”

The two men leaned over the vat. The laboratory assistant opened the tap.

The liquid ran out slowly, and its soft, musical susurrus contrasted strangely with the sinister situation. Gradually, the contours of the body emerged in their black envelope; one might have thought it a statue emerging from the mold, still covered with a layer of powdered oxide.

Unconsciously, as if he were still in the middle of one of his habitual experiments, the laboratory assistant rubbed the cheeks with the palm of his hand, where the metal whitened, polished without difficulty.

“It’s nickel,” he said, finally.

The body, clad in its metallic pellicle, was holding two nickel cylinders in its hands, attached to the negative pole of the pile.

“He’s heavy,” murmured Bémolisant, trying to lift him up.

“How are we going to get him out?” asked Pilesèche.

“How, above all, are we going to get him past the concierge without arousing suspicion?”

“Oh, my head’s splitting. I’m not made for conspiracies!” He let himself fall on to a chair, his head bowed—but Bémolisant shook him rudely

“Come on, a little nerve, damn it! Are we little girls?”

“You talk about it so casually...I’ve never been accused of any crime until now.”