

Chapter One *Precautions and Confidences*

Touched with Pensiveness...
Thomas de Quinceyⁱ

The chain of dark events that I have taken it upon myself to record (in spite of my white hair and my disdain for vainglory) appears to me to comprise a sum of horror capable of troubling the minds of experienced lawyers. I must confess, at the outset, that I am only delivering these pages to a publisher as a concession to sustained pressure from devoted and proven friends. I dread the prospect of immersing myself for a second time in the sad necessity of attenuating—by means of the efflorescences of my style and the resources of a rich fluency—their unusual and suffocating hideousness.

I do not think that Fear is a universally profitable sensation. Would it not be the act of a madman to spread it recklessly in the minds of others, motivated by vague hope of profiting from the scandal? A profound discovery is not to be hastily thrown under the trampling feet of the procession of human thought. It requires appropriate seasoning in advance of mental digestion. Any great news, carelessly announced, can alarm—often to the point of madness—a large number of pious souls, overexcite the caustic faculties of wasters, and reawaken the antiquated neurosis of *demonic possession* in timorous minds.

It is certainly true, however, that to make people think is a duty that takes precedence over an abundance of scruples. Having weighed it all up, I shall speak out. Everyone must answer to his own conscience. Besides, my century reassures me; for every feeble mind that I might overstrain, there are many strong minds that I might enlighten. When I say *strong minds*, I am not speaking lightly. As for the veracity of my story, no one, I wager, will recklessly poke fun at it; for, even admitting the possibility that the following account is rooted in a falsehood, the mere idea of their possibility is just as terrible as a conclusive and accepted demonstration of their authenticity. When one thinks about it, are not all things possible in our mysterious universe?

When I say *mysterious* rather than *problematic*, I am not (if I may be permitted to repeat myself) speaking lightly.

Any digression on this subject, sketched in haste and without being properly tested, would be idle.

Now, my readers may certainly be assured that I am not scheming to obtain any purely *literary* honors. In truth, if there is any objective beyond the personal that I despise even more than the conventional expressions of high-flown language, it is that of the *literateurs* and their henchmen. I don't give a fig for all that!

Having been reduced to introducing myself to the public, the first thing I ought to do, to get it out of the way, is to describe myself.

I have often asked myself why people sometimes burst out laughing or seem disconcerted when they see me for the first time, but cannot figure it out no matter how hard I think about it. It seems to me, without being boastful, that my appearance ought rather to inspire thoughts along the following lines: "How pleasing it is to belong to a species that has produced an individual like that!"

Physically, I am what might be described in scientific terms as a *second epoch Saturnian*;ⁱⁱ I have a tall and bony figure, and a slight stoop brought on by thinking to excess. The tormented oval of my face advertises my wisdom and forethought.ⁱⁱⁱ Under my bushy eyebrows, grey eyes shine forth penetratingly from their cavities, like Saturn and Mercury. My forehead is high, the barrenness of my temples announcing that they no longer sup the convictions of others because their nourishment is complete. My head is slightly hollowed out at the sides, like those of

mathematicians. Hollow temples are crucibles!^{iv} They distill ideas so that my nose can judge their quality and offer its verdict.

My nose is considerable in dimension—large, even. It is an invasive nose, an atomizing nose, hooked in the middle like the arch of a foot—which, in anyone but myself, would indicate a tendency to dark obsession. The nose, you see, is the expression of the human capacity for reason; it is the organ that goes before, which enlightens, which proclaims one’s presence, which scents trouble and which points the way. The visible nose corresponds to the *impalpable nose* which everyone carries within himself from birth. If, therefore, as a nose develops, one part grows imprudently to the detriment of the others, it corresponds to some lacuna of judgment, to one particular thought nourished to the detriment of others. The corners of my pale, pinched mouth are the folds of a shroud; it is set so close to the nose so that it may take advice before speaking lightly—like a crow picking nuts, as the saying goes.

Without my chin, which gives me away, I might be taken for a man of action; but a senile Saturn, skeptical and lunatic, has chopped it off with a stroke of his scythe.^v The color and texture of my skin is as durable as that of my peers in its symbolic contemporaneity. My ears, delicately lobed and extended, like those of the Chinese, advertise the scrupulousness of my mind.

My hand is sterile: the Moon and Mercury dispute the lines in its palm. The gnarled and spatulate middle finger has scars on the second joint, which do not affect its operation. The edges of my hand are vague and wan; clouds formed by Venus and Apollo have rarely confused that sky; my willful thumb rests upon the hazardous hill where Venus indicates her tendencies. The palm, however, is definitely that of a manipulator; the fingers can fold upon it like a woman’s, with a certain coquettishness, touching the various arenas of their perfect education. I am, at any rate, the only son of the petty Doctor Amour Bonhomet, well-known for his dismal adventures in the Mines.^{vi}

Ever since I first became aware of who I was, I have worn the same kind of clothes, appropriate to my personality and gait, to wit: a wide-brimmed felt hat, like those worn by Quakers and the Lake Poets; a large double-breasted overcoat, always buttoned, like the grandiose phrases in which my thoughts are habitually couched; an old walking-stick with a red knob; a large diamond solitaire—a family heirloom—on my Saturnian finger. I am a match for the ancient Romans in the precious quality and delicate whiteness of my linen; I have the honor of possessing the same feet as King Charles the Great in my Souwaroff boots,^{vii} with which I trample down the soil very well: I nearly always have my suitcase in my hand, for I travel abroad more than Ahasuerus.^{viii} I am proud to believe that I wear the face of my century, that I am, in fact, its *archetype*.^{ix}

In brief, I am a doctor, a philanthropist and a man of the world.

My voice is sometimes shrill and sometimes (especially when I speak to women) rich and profound—and it can go from one to the other seamlessly, as I please. I have neither wife nor parents, thus having no attachments to society of any kind—so I must hope, at least. I live on an annuity, provided by the little wealth left to me. My visiting card is formulated thus:

DOCTOR
TRIBULAT BONHOMET
EUROPE^x

These are my particular moral principles:

The mysteries of positivist science have had exclusive command of my attentive faculties since the sacred moment when I first came into the world, often to the exclusion of every other human preoccupation. Infinitely tiny things, like those my beloved master Spallanzani named *Infusoria*^{xi} have been the ultimate object of my research from a tender age. To provide for the needs of my profound studies, I have eaten through the enormous legacy of my ancestors. Yes, I

have dedicated the mature fruits of their centuries of sweat to the purchase of lenses and other apparatus requisite to denude the arcana of the temporarily invisible world!

I have compiled the names of all my predecessors.^{xiii} *Non est hic locus*^{xiii} to dwell too long on the enlightenment that I believe I have added to theirs; posterity will deliver its verdict on that subject, if I ever publish. What it is important to establish is that the analytical, magnificatory minuteness of my mind is so essential to my nature that the entire joy of life is, for me, concentrated in the precise classification of the most wretched *Tenebrio* beetles,^{xiv} according to the bizarre entanglements—like some very ancient handwriting—formed by the nerves of such insects, narrowing phenomenal horizons which still remain immense in the retinas which reflect them! Reality thus becomes visionary—and I feel that I am entering a new level of the Domain of Dreams, microscope in hand!

But I am jealous of my discoveries, all of which I keep concealed. I have a mortal hatred of vulgar people, squalid as they are. When anyone questions me on this subject, I play dumb.^{xv} I try to pass for a mere fleck.^{xvi} And I take great delight in thinking that I could disconcert those faces if I were to tell them what surprising and previously-unknown things my instruments have allowed me to glimpse!

Let's leave it at that; perhaps I've already said too much...

My religious ideas are restricted to the absurd idea that God created man, *and vice versa*.

We do not know where we come from; Reason remains in doubt. I should add, to be frank, that Death astonishes even more than her sad Sister;^{xvii} one can't make head nor tail of it. All inquiry into its mysteries results, inevitably, in a kind of analysis that inverts the logic according to which we satisfy ourselves, grudgingly, with a *course of life* which is obviously provisional and local.

As for ghosts, I'm not at all superstitious. I give no credence to insignificant twaddle about *signs*, which is so much ballyhoo, and I don't believe that the dead monkey about with us. Just between ourselves, though, I don't like cemeteries or other overly dark places—or people who exaggerate! I'm only a poor old man, but if Pluto^{xviii} set me on the steps of a throne at birth, and if it only required a word from me, now, to wreak havoc among all these fanatics, I'd say that word—*just like peeling an apple*, as the poet says.

Nevertheless, I have to confess that I'm subject to a hereditary ailment that has long made a mockery of my reason and will-power! It consists of an *apprehension*: an anxiety, without any precise source; an anguish, in a word, which seizes me like a panic attack, making me savor all the bitterness of an abrupt infernal disquiet—frequently on account of derisory futilities! Doesn't it make one grind one's teeth to feel one's soul poisoned as mortally as that? Jut thinking about it makes me sick.

Having a cultured mind, I have the most enlightened views on everything, but—and this is odd—although I know how to explain, for example, the noise of the wind, both acoustically and physically, by reference to sudden extremes of heat and cold, when I actually hear the wind, I'm afraid. Amid the thousand shudders of Silence—produced by the simplest causes—I become pale. Whenever the shadow of a bird crosses my path, I stop and, putting my suitcase down, I mop my brow—a disconcerted traveler! Then, I am oppressed by the weight of a nervous dread of Heaven and Earth, the living and the dead. It's pitiful! And I surprise myself by saying, in spite of myself: “Oh! Oh! What can it mean—this caravanserai of apparitions, queuing up to disappear incontinently? Is the Universe meaningless? Is the all-devouring Universe—an infinite chain in which everyone's feet are consumed by the jaws of the next—destined to fall victim to the voracity of some Aeon?^{xix} What will be its earthworm? Tell me, noise of the wind, bird which passes by... and you who know the answer, O Silence?”

Such are the inconceivable, fervent, poetic and—in consequence—grotesque whims that haunt me and trouble the lucidity of my ideas. It's merely an illness; I'm an *anguisher*. I've treated myself with douches, quinine, purgatives, astringents and hydrotherapy—I'm better now, much better. I have begun to reassure myself and to recognize that Progress is not a dream—that it is

spreading throughout the world, illuminating it and, ultimately, elevating us towards spheres of choice which are uniquely worthy of the leaps of our most disciplined imaginations. That is no longer questionable, today, among men of good taste.

I still have fits, though...

In the world, I conceal this emotion as a matter of politeness. If I happen, at some party, to spend too long chatting to a woman she never knows—fortunately, I can see it in her eyes—that at a given moment, at the very instant when I am letting some innocent bonbon melt in my mouth, smiling, with a soft and syrupy voice, droning on about *fanatics*... she never knows, I tell you, that at that very moment, the rusty, profound and lugubrious knell of midnight is reverberating within me—or *that the Midnight in question sounds more than a dozen strokes!*

Now, I have an inveterate habit, adopted years ago as a veil for my chosen endeavors. It allows me to go into any society, to chat with men, women and children and to be well-received. I hardly dare to name it, so fearful am I of misplaced mockery. I am talking about the habit of *matchmaking*. The brochette of my decorations has no other source.

As to why I adopted this habit, it's extremely simple.

To begin with, let's mention my weakness for Voltaire, the author of the immortal *Micromegas*, where a fair number of my countless discoveries are, so to speak, prefigured. Even so, my admiration for that invaluable writer is by no means servile; everyone must strive, in fact, to develop in himself a profound contempt for his teachers and all those who, having raised him, have sought to inculcate their own ideas in him.

What I admire in Voltaire is that ability lauded in Pozzo di Borgo^{xx} and Machiavelli—my favorite teachers—which consists in trampling underfoot all respect for his peers while maintaining an exterior appearance of obsequious humility: a perfect disguise to which the term *supreme* would be wholly appropriate! I recommend, in passing, that kind of charity. It is the only one worthy of being taken seriously; it serves to hide one's real objectives. Now, I am not anxious, on my own account, to make known my devotion, body and soul, to the *Infusoria*. Visits, questions, consultations and compliments have prevented me from bringing the desirable concentration to my vertiginous studies. On the other hand, as it is necessary that I talk, when I happen to find myself in company, I am eager to talk to everyone about that which most interests him, in order to avoid any questions about the nature of my scientific researches, and isn't it nearly always marriage—his own or other people's—that preoccupies the most risible sons of Woman? Everyone knows that.

And that's how, without overtaxing my imagination, I have slid into the intimacy of so many people, and how—miraculously aided by Chance—I've made numerous marriages!^{xxi}

Most of the unions accomplished under my auspices have been favored by Heaven—even though, many a time, in my haste, I have brought couples together with their feet off the ground, as they say. Well, it always comes out right in the end. Except once—and it is the astonishing couple I riveted together in that union that I now intend to bring to everyone's attention.

Ought I to say, all things considered, that it was not happy, that marriage whose definitive and unnamable crisis gave way to my most deadly discovery? I would be an ingrate, vis-à-vis Destiny, if I had the impudence to think so for a second! Science—*true* Science—is inaccessible to pity; where would we be without it? In addition, even though the affair was the source of ample damnation for me—of a nameless terror which turns over in my brain to the point at which I am scarcely able to write, so that I, Tribulat Bonhomet, professor of diagnostics, have come to doubt my own existence and that of other things much more clearly evident—I maintain my opinion of Voltaire! I do not repent what I did! I wash my hands of the responsibility of having completed that catastrophe! And I take pride in still being one of the finest minds to have escaped the hands of the Most High. All truly modern men—all the minds which sense that they are *in the movement*—will understand what I mean.

I shall limit myself to a succinct statement of the facts, as they presented and represented themselves. Let whomsoever desires attempt to explain the story; I shall not overburden it with

any scientific theory. The general impression it creates will thus depend on the intellectual capacity furnished by the Reader.

ⁱ The notes in the *Oeuvres Complètes* suggest that Villiers reproduced this quotation and the one at the head of Chapter 2 from the account of Thomas de Quincey's work contained in Baudelaire's *Les Paradis Artificiels* (*Artificial Paradises*) never having read the original.

ⁱⁱ The reference to a *second epoch* makes it clear that the primary reference of this description is to the Comte de Buffon's catastrophist account *Epoques de la Nature* (*Epochs of Nature*) (1778), in which the *Saturnian period* was that before the upheaval which allegedly produced the contemporary distribution of the continents. What Bonhomet means, therefore, is that he is a member of a generation destined to bring about a dramatic transformation of human thought. Given that French literature already contained a famous example of an inhabitant of the planet Saturn in Voltaire's *Micromegas*, however—and that Villiers refers explicitly to that story later in the chapter—he must have been aware of the second meaning. The Saturnian in Voltaire's *conte philosophique* is a skeptical giant adopted as a traveling companion by an even larger visitor from Sirius.

This particular play on words extends through several more Saturnian metaphors, providing a cardinal example of Villiers' predilection for such games. In the terminology of the alchemists, Saturn signified lead, so a saturnine temperament is dull and heavy. The mythological and astrological Saturn became identified with all-devouring time in late Roman times, owing to a confusion of Cronos, the name of the Greek equivalent of Saturn, with Chronos, the Greek word for time; this symbolism was further extrapolated by palmists, whose references to the mound of Saturn and the Saturnian finger are exploited in the following paragraphs. The notes in the *Oeuvres Complètes* observe that Villiers' friend Paul Verlaine had published his *Poèmes Saturniens* (*Saturnian Poems*) in 1866, shortly before the serialization of *The Vampire Soul* and that both poets probably obtained their understanding of the Saturnian character from the work of the palmist Adolphe Desbarolles, author of *Chiromancie Nouvelle* (1859), which seems to be the source (albeit somewhat garbled in the borrowing) of Bonhomet's analysis of his palm.

ⁱⁱⁱ There is an untranslatable double pun here; the French *tablatures* and *projets* refer to physical forms—slabs and projections—as well as to *knowing* and *scheming*.

^{iv} This has a much better ring in French: *Tempes creuses, creusets!*

^v This Saturn is better known in English as *Father Time* but I have translated Villiers' reference literally because it is part of a series.

^{vi} It is unlikely that the elaborate wordplay of this description bears any closer relation to contemporary cheiromancy than that in the preceding paragraph bears to contemporary phrenology, although it obviously draws upon its terminology and fundamental assumptions. The reference to Venus and Apollo is, of course, to their role as symbols of Love and Art, Bonhomet being somewhat lacking in both areas of sensitivity. Although there is an obvious sexual pun in the reference to Amour Bonhomet's lack of success "in the Mines," Villiers must also have been mindful of the fact that he was the only son of a lunatic who wasted his life and fortune in the fruitless excavation of imagined buried treasures. This emphasizes Bonhomet's status as Villiers' contradictory alter-ego.

^{vii} I have reproduced Villiers' spelling of the name Souwaroff, although it is usually given in French as Souvarov. The reference is to the Russian general Alexandre Souvarov, who had a reputation for eccentricity as well as memorable boots.

^{viii} Ahasuerus was the Wandering Jew of legend, who was cursed to remain forever on the move.

^{ix} Villiers puts the word *archetype* in capital letters to stress its importance, although he had been content with *le type* in the serial version. Villiers was, of course, writing long before Carl Jung introduced the "archetypes of the collective unconscious" so the principal implications he would have attached to the term are Plato's notion of an *archetype* as a *transcendental idea* of which all existent members of a category are

mere echoes, John Locke's notion of an *archetype* as a *thing in itself*, to which our idea of it approximately conforms and the commonplace meaning of an original model or proof of which subsequent products are copies.

^x This visiting card, and much else in Bonhomet's self-introduction, recalls that of one of his two major predecessors as a bourgeois type specimen, the protagonist of Henri Monnier's *Mémoires de Joseph Prudhomme* (1857). The notes in the *Oeuvres Complètes* suggest that the address *Europe* is an ironic reflection of the address Victor Hugo put on letters written during his exile, which read, simply: *Océan*.

^{xi} *Infusoria* was the general term given to all microscopic organisms in the mid-19th century, because they were most conveniently found in infusions of decaying organic matter. Bonhomet's dedication to them is, therefore, as much a preoccupation with death and decay as with the invisibly minute. The Italian naturalist Lazzaro Spallanzani (1729-1799) was one of the great pioneers of microscopy.

^{xii} Villiers became obsessed for many years with the genealogy of his family, because he was dismissively told when he objected publicly to the portrayal of one of his supposed ancestors in a popular play that he had no real cause for complaint because his claim to be descended from the famous Villiers de l'Isle-Adams of old was fictitious. Although he knew that he could not win a case for libel, he was desperate to have his day in court so that he could prove that he really was a Villiers de l'Isle-Adam—although it is not entirely clear that the 18th-century Villiers from whom he was unambiguously descended had really been entitled to reclaim the aristocratic suffix.

^{xiii} *Non est hic locus* means “This is not the place...”

^{xiv} Beetles of the genus *Tenebrio* are known in English common parlance as darkling beetles; in French, the word *tenebrio* can also refer to a kind of goblin, so there is another untranslatable double meaning here.

^{xv} Villiers capitalizes the equivalent metaphorical phrase (*JE FAIS LA BÊTE*), perhaps to emphasize the further significance implicit in the literal meaning: “I act like a beast.” The serial version, however, had *idiot* instead of *bête*.

^{xvi} *Chiragre*—which I have translated as *fleck*—is a very uncommon term in French, referring to a kind of spot found on the hand.

^{xvii} *Mort* (*Death*) and *Naissance* (*Birth*) are both feminine nouns in French—hence their representation as “sad sisters.”

^{xviii} Unlike Bonhomet's other references to Classical Gods, this one has no astrological implications because the planet Pluto had not yet been discovered. The God of the Underworld is here being credited with deciding the estate into which each human soul is born.

^{xix} This Aeon is not a period of time but a kind of spirit.

^{xx} Charles-André Pozzo di Borgo (1764-1842) was an Italian diplomat who became a privy councilor to Tsar Alexander I and played a key role in the downfall of Napoleon, thus earning himself a reputation—at least in France—as a Machiavellian manipulator.

^{xxi} Again, there is a perverse echo of Villiers' own preoccupations in this habit of Bonhomet's. Villiers sought on several occasions to alleviate his family's financial difficulties by marrying for money, employing a professional matchmaker on at least one occasion, but he never succeeded. To make matters worse, his great friend and steadfast rival Catulle Mendès was much more successful with women than he was. On the one occasion Villiers attempted to marry for other reasons (in 1866 he wanted to propose to Théophile Gautier's younger daughter, Estelle, shortly after Mendès had married the elder, Judith), his family put a stop to it, considering her insufficiently well born.