

Charles Nodier (1780-1844) was one of the great pioneers of French Romantic prose; his salon at the Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal, begun in 1824, for which he coined the term "Le Cénacle," brought together many of the key figures in the Romantic Movement and spun off other cénacles in which it was anchored, including Victor Hugo's. A prolific journalist and pillar of the Romantic periodical La Revue de Paris, his most famous works in the genre of weird fiction include the hallucinatory novella Smarra (1821), the mock-folkloristic fantasy Trilby, ou le Lutin d'Argail (1822), the surreal fantasy Histoire du Roi de Bohême et ses sept châteaux (1830) and the delusory fantasy La Fée aux miettes (1832). "Une Heure, ou la vision" first appeared in Les Tristes, ou Mélanges tirés des tablettes d'un suicidé in 1806; this translation is original to the present volume.¹

Charles Nodier: *One o'clock; or, The Vision*

I had a heart full of bitterness and I sought solitude and the night. My walk had scarcely extended beyond Chaillot's gardens, and I usually only began it after eleven o'clock in the evening had chimed; but I was obsessed by such sad thoughts, my imagination was nourished by so many dire reveries, that often, in the state of involuntary excitement that is familiar to souls in pain, I had had to repel I know not how many illusions at which a moment's reflection would have caused me to blush.

One day, I had gone, later than usual, to the accustomed place; and, either because the more obscure darkness had deceived my design, or because the succession of my ideas, more unequal and more fortuitous, had caused me to lose sight of the goal of my nocturnal course, the bell of the village church was striking one o'clock when I perceived that I was no longer following my familiar route, and that my distraction had taken me into a unknown path. I hastened my steps toward the place from which the sound had come. At a turning in a narrow passage, a shadow rose up before my feet and disappeared into the hedge. I stopped, shivering, and I saw a long stone in the form of a tomb. I heard a sigh; the foliage trembled.

The following day, preoccupied with that adventure, I sought the same place at almost the same hour; the apparition was reiterated, and the phantom brushed me in passing; its footsteps resounded on the stone; the dry grass rustled behind it, and at intervals, I saw it fleeing, like a dark cloud, between the nearby willows or at the corner of a path. Always following the light and uncertain trace, I arrived at the old monastery of Sainte-Marie; but, wandering from one heap of rubble to another, I no longer found anything.²

That dilapidated convent offers one of the saddest sights that can strike the human eye. Nothing remains of the church but large isolated pilasters which bear the debris of a destroyed vault in places. When the moon lets its light fall through those columns and owls ululate on the cornices, as one reaches the summits of the uncultivated terraces and advanced among the high walls, stumbling among the ditches, and descending the broken stairways overgrown by poisonous plants, such as henbane and celandine, one ends up at buildings that are utterly degraded, of which nothing subsists but menacing sections of wall and eaves suspended in an almost-miraculous manner. When one is conducted by hazard to that funereal avenue, which leads via a rocky slope beneath damp arches to the ancient catacombs, and

¹ Available from Black Coat Press: *Trilby / The Crumb Fairy* (a collection which also includes "Bean-Treasure and Peaseblossom," "The Dream of Gold," "Goodman Genie," "Love and the Grimoire," "The Man and the Ant," "Smarra, or The Demons of the Night"), ISBN 978-1-61227-455-3; *The Vampire*, an 1820 stage play adaptation of John-William Polidori's novella included in *Lord Ruthven the Vampyre*, ISBN 978-1-932983-10-4; and "Perfectibility" (1833) included in *The Germans on Venus*, ISBN 978-1-934543-56-6.

² The ruins of the convent of Sainte-Marie, near Chaillot on the road to Passy, have long been swallowed up by the expansion of Paris, but in the 1820s the area was still rural.

by the light of some dying lamp one can read on the scattered stones the names of the chaste women whose bones were deposited there...there is no human strength that can resist similar emotions. They absorbed all my faculties to such an extent that I forgot, in a way, the strange motive of my research; it was not until the next day that I felt the desire reborn more vividly to penetrate the mystery of the being whose encounter had troubled me, and which had made the great sepulcher a habitation as mysterious as itself.

At one o'clock, holding my breath and walking silently, I arrived at the tomb, and I recognized the specter.

He was sitting, with his eyes fixed on a certain point in the sky. It was a young man, thin and very pale, clad in poor rags, whose unkempt hair fell back in thick waves. On seeing his gaping mouth, his extended neck, his stiff arms and his entire occupied attitude, one might have thought that he was delivering himself to a grave contemplation; but a sob escaped him, and I presumed that he had not seen what he appeared to be seeking.

He perceived me then, and leapt up in order to flee. Then, stopping immediately and looking at me mildly, he said: "What do you want with me?"

"To know you, and perhaps to console you."

"You're a man," he said, "and your heart is made like theirs. I don't like that species; there were some in my early days who were sympathetic to the suffering of others; they were noble hearts loved by God; things are very different now."

He shook his head and wiped his eyelids.

"There are still some now," I said. "Don't close your heart to your brothers."

"I no longer have brothers; do the unfortunate have any? Look how wan and withered I am; Look how soiled I am. I'm hungry during the day; during the night I lay my bones in the mud and the water of marshes. God has given me bad days. There are moments when my eyes are troubled, when my teeth join effortfully. My breast rises, my nerves vibrate like the strings of a harp; I sense tears that are trying to escape, a chill that runs through my limbs, and an inexplicable malaise that grips me by the throat. It's said that I'm a maniac and an epileptic, and people pass by, letting a smile of disdain fall upon me. That is what I am."

He sat down on the tomb, and I sat down beside him.

"I can recount to you...", he said, suddenly. "She won't come tonight, anyway. Do you see that black cupola rising up there in the blue depths of the sky? And that star, shining above, floating in such a pure light. Do you see it? She's there, in truth, since she told me so; but she no longer descends.

"I was almost as rich as Octavie, but the heir of a great house presented himself, and her parents refused me. Two days before the wedding, I was walking under the trees of the Luxembourg and I was embracing my dolor. What dreams did I not have! I shall take a sharp dagger into the banqueting hall, I said, and I shall give eternity to my beloved and myself; or I shall throw fear into the temple and I shall abduct Octavie from the midst of her consternated friends; or I shall mingle the horrors of a conflagration with the preparations for her hymen; and in the trouble of that scene of terror, I shall steal her, dead or alive, from the crime of a new amour.

"She passed by. The satin of her dress rustled. I shivered all over; a red cloud obscured my sight; all my blood flowed to my heart. She had recognized me, my Octavie. 'I'll come back soon,' she said to those surrounding her. 'The calm of midnight must be more delightful here. I'll come back soon; perhaps I'll come tomorrow.'

"They resound like such sweet music, the words of the woman one loves. They resound for a long time. All the faculties are gripped by them; the soul identifies with them; it seems that in carrying away her last thought, one is bearing her away entirely.

"I went away repeating: *I'll come back soon, perhaps I'll come tomorrow*. Perhaps tomorrow, she had said. But she didn't come.

"One o'clock chimed. Then a lugubrious bell, struck at long intervals, filled the air with a symphony of death.

“I would not have been able to define the emotion by which my senses were surprised, but it was as if it emanated from the sky. Whatever it was, an action of will of which I had not taken account drew me to Octavie’s house; and, cleaving through the crowd of domestics, I stopped at the disarray of the apartment that she occupied.

The windows were open. Behind the curtains, shadows and torches could be seen passing by turns, and I know not what stifled cries were rising from the depths of the room.

“‘She’s dead!’ I cried.

“‘No,’ replied her father, clutching me convulsively in his arms. ‘She’s asleep.’

“She was lying on her bed of red damask; there was a candle on her nightstand, a book at her feet; a priest was motionless beside the bed; her mother had fainted on the floor. Eulalie was weeping copiously, and a man dressed in black said with a ferocious sang-froid: ‘There’s no more hope; I knew full well that she wouldn’t get out of it.’”

“I have forgotten the entire year that followed that evening, for I was ill, people said, and my malady excited repugnance and horror. Since Octavie’s death, there was no longer anyone who loved me.

“A year later, to the day, I was going up the Rue de Tournon by the light of the illuminations of a public festival; I had passed slowly through twenty groups who afflicted me with the outbursts of their vulgar joy when one o’clock chimed. If the stroke of the clapper had hit me, it would have wounded me less rudely than it did in making that bell groan. Why was that hour—the hour whose last murmur had covered the sounds of your agony—not removed from the cycle of time?

“Then an adolescent with an angelic face saluted me with a moist and luminous gaze, and disappeared into the crowd, indicating the Luxembourg to me.

“I hesitated; I could still see him; a tear slid down his face, glistened and fell.

“I went into the gardens, very emotional—me, who had never known fear—and the dust that rose up in my passage, and the rays of moonlight that sprang forth between the leaves, and the distant tumult of the crowd returning home, all filled me with disquiet and alarm.

“She finally appeared to me, dressed and veiled in white, as on the beautiful evening when we had traversed all the quais of the Seine on foot, and I saw distinctly that she was floating in a vapor as gentle as the dawn. I lost consciousness, and Octavie did not draw away from me. She leaned over my motionless body, and her hot breath warmed my breast. Her kisses fluttered from my mouth to my eyelids and from my eyelids to my hair. Her arms enveloped me softly and rocked me in a region full of light and perfumes. There was a burden of voluptuousness upon all my organs. But when my reassured mind began to enjoy more fully that scene of intoxication; when my anxious eyes sought Octavie around me, I could no longer distinguish anything but the trace of her flight, a pale and trembling furrow that extended all the way to that star, and which gradually faded away.

“I don’t know why she no longer comes, but if she doesn’t come, I shall go...I believe I shall go,” he repeated, in a low voice.

Such was the story that the epileptic told me, and after that, I enquired at length, but fruitlessly, regarding his fate. I had despaired of seeing him again, when hazard informed me that someone similar had been seen in the infirmary at Bicêtre. I went there, and had myself taken to his bed. He was little more than a cadaver, almost totally fleshless, and frightfully livid. His eyes still had a little fire and moved quite rapidly in their sunken orbits, but his gaze made one feel ill.

After having reflected for a few minutes with the air of a man trying to fix confused reminiscences, a bitter smile creased his lips slightly and he leaned gently in my direction

“I knew full well,” he said, “that I would go. I shall probably go tomorrow. Octavie came to invite me there, and I’ve already received a pledge from her of imminent alliance—for it’s good,” he added, “Octavie’s hand, which extends thus toward me at any hour; it isn’t a hand desiccated by death. It isn’t a black and hideous hand like those of skeletons that have grown old in the tomb; its form is sweeter than the hands of angels. It’s true that I can’t touch her yet, but when the moment is ready to be accomplished, that hand will seize me and draw me beyond the sky.”

As he finished speaking, he started staring at his pillow with a fearful joy, and cried out in a muted and alarmed voice: “There she is, there she still is, and there’s her oval onyx with a little circle of gold.

“I shall go tomorrow,” he said, smiling.

Capricious aberrations of a vivid or credulous imagination! He did not seem to see the straw on which his head was resting, and the coarse sheet that covered him was depressed by the weight of Octavie’s hand, conserving its imprint.

How do I know, an unfortunate they call mad, whether that pretended infirmity was not the symptom of a more energetic sensibility, a more complete organization, and whether nature, in stimulating all your faculties, does not render them more apt to perceive the unknown?

That idea still occupied me when I arrived the next day. I approached the epileptic’s bed and I did not see him, but a shroud thrown over him allowed me to divine his body. There was also a little candle burning there, and everything else was as it ordinarily was.

When the evening had advanced somewhat I went to the place where I had encountered him previously and I sat down on the tomb where we had sat together. It had been disturbed, perhaps with the intention of taking it away in order to form the boundary-marker of a field or the cornerstone of a building. I heard one o’clock chime and I calculated that that night would be the second anniversary of Octavie’s death.

The sky was not pure; at first, a dull and stormy cloud hid the star where her friend had so often looked for her, but it emerged slowly from the darkness, and seemed more resplendent.

“Poor madman!” I said aloud. “What is the price of your discoveries now, vain science of the earth? There is nothing obscure for you in so many marvels that make the astonishment of sages; and if some cloud has veiled your days, you are freed therefrom, like that star, in order to resume in a new life your primal grace and your original beauty.”