The Desire to be a Man

By Comte P. H. Villiers de L’isle Adam

> Nature might stand up and say to all the world: ‘This was a man.’
> Shakespeare: *Julius Caesar*

The Stock Exchange clock struck midnight, under a starry sky. At that time the citizens were still subject to military law, and, in accordance with the curfew regulations, the waiters of those establishments which were still lit up were hurriedly closing their doors.

Inside the boulevard cafés the gas butterflies of the chandeliers fluttered quickly away, one by one, into the darkness. Outside could be heard the noise of the chairs being arranged in quartets on the marble-topped tables; it was the psychological moment when every cafe proprietor thinks fit to show the last customers, with an arm ending in a napkin, the Caudine Forks of the back door.

That Sunday the sad October wind was whistling through the streets. A few yellow leaves, dusty and rustling, were blown along by the squalls, touching the stones and skimming the asphalt, and then, like bats, disappeared into the shadows, arousing the idea of commonplace days lived through once for all. The theatres of the Boulevard du Crime where, during the evening, all the Medicis, Salviatis, and Montefeltres had been stabbing one another with the utmost fervour, stood silent, their mute portals guarded by their caryatids. Carriages and pedestrians became fewer from one moment to the next; here and there, the sceptical lanterns of rag-pickers gleamed already, phosphorescent glows given off by the rubbish-heaps over which they were wandering.

Under a street lamp level with the Rue Hauteville, at the corner of a fairly luxurious-looking cafe, a tall passer-by had come to a stop, as if automatically hesitating to cross the roadway separating him from the Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle. He had a saturnine face, a smooth chin, a somnambulist’s walk, long greying hair under a Louis Treize hat, black gloves holding an ivory-headed stick, and an old greatcoat in royal blue, trimmed with dubious astrakhan.

Was this tardy stroller on his way home? Had the mere chance of a walk late at night brought him to that street-corner? It would have been difficult to decide from his appearance. However, the fact remains that, suddenly noticing on his right one of those mirrors—as tall and narrow as himself—which sometimes stand like public looking-glasses outside leading cafés, he halted abruptly, planted himself opposite his reflection, and deliberately looked himself up and down, from his boots to his hat. Then, all of a sudden, raising his hat with an old-world gesture, he greeted himself with a certain courtesy.

His head, thus unexpectedly bared, then revealed him as none other than the famous tragedian Esprit Chaudval, born Lepeinteur and known as Monanteuil, the scion of a worthy family of Saint-Malo pilots, and whom the mysteries of Providence had induced to become a leading man in the provinces, a star abroad, and the often fortunate rival of Frédérick Lemaitre.

While he was considering himself with this sort of stupor, the waiters in the nearby café were helping their last customers into their overcoats and fetching their hats, others were noisily emptying the contents of the nickel money boxes and piling the day’s takings on a tray. This haste and bustle was due to the ominous presence of two policemen who had suddenly appeared at the door and were standing there with folded arms, harrying the laggardly landlord with their cold gaze.

Soon the shutters were bolted into their iron frames, apart from the one over the mirror, which by a strange oversight was forgotten in the general hurry.

Then silence descended on the boulevard. Only Chaudval, heedless of everybody's departure, had remained in his ecstatic posture on the corner of the Rue Hauteville, on the pavement in front of the forgotten mirror.

This pale, moonlit looking-glass seemed to give the actor the feeling he would have had bathing in a pond. Chaudval shivered.

Alas, the fact is that in that cruel, dark crystal, the actor had just seen himself growing old.

He noticed that his hair, which only yesterday had still been grizzly, was turning silver; he was finished! It was goodbye to curtains and crowns, goodbye to the roses of Thalia and the laurels of Melpomene. It was time to take leave for ever, with handshakes and tears, of the Ellevious and the Laruettes, of the grand liveries and the soft curves of the Dugazons and the *ingénues*!

It was time to get down in a hurry from the chariot of Thespis and watch it drive away with his colleagues; to see the baubles and streamers which, that morning, had fluttered from the wind of Hope, disappear in the twilight round a distant bend in the road.

Chaudval, suddenly conscious of his fifty years (he was a good fellow), heaved a sigh. A mist passed in from of his eyes; a sort of wintry fever took hold of him and a hallucination dilated his pupils.

The haggard fixity with which he was gazing into the providential mirror ended up by giving his eyes that ability to enlarge objects and endow them with importance which physiologists have observed in individuals under the stress of intense emotion.

The long mirror was accordingly deformed under the gaze of his eyes, which were filled with dim, murky ideas. Childhood memories of beaches and silvery waves danced about in his brain. And the mirror, doubtless because of the stars deepening its surface, reminded him at first of the sleeping waters of a gulf. Then, billowing out even more, thanks to the old man's sighs, the mirror took on the appearance of the sea and the night, those two old friends of lonely hearts.

He revelled for some time in his vision, but then the street lamp which was reddening the cold drizzle behind him, above his head, struck him, reflected as it was in the depths of the dreadful mirror, as like the glow of a blood-red lighthouse, luring the doomed vessel of his future to shipwreck.

He shook off his hallucination and drew himself up to his full height, with a nervous burst of bitter, cynical laughter which startled the two policeman under the trees. Luckily for the actor, the latter, taking him for some drunkard or jilted lover, continued their official stroll without paying any attention to the wretched Chaudval.

'Very well, let us give up!' he said simply in an undertone, like the condemned man who, suddenly roused from sleep, says to the executioner: 'I am at your service.'

The old actor then launched into a dazed monologue. 'I acted prudently the other evening,' he went on, 'when I asked my good comrade Mademoiselle Pinson (who shares the Minister's confidence and even his bed) to obtain for me, between two ardent confessions, that post as lighthouse-keeper which my ancestors occupied on the Atlantic coast. Ah! Now I understand the weird effect the reflection of this street lamp in this mirror had I on me! It was that idea at the back of my mind. Pinson will send me my letter of appointment, that's certain. And then I shall retire into my lighthouse like a rat into a cheese. I shall guide the ships in the distance, across the sea. A lighthouse always gives the impression of a stage-set. I am alone in the world: without a doubt it is the perfect refuge for my old age.'

All of a sudden Chaudval interrupted his reverie.

'Good Lord!' he said, feeling inside his greatcoat. 'But . . . that letter the postman delivered just as I was coming out must be the reply . . . I was going into this cafe to read it, and I forgot all about it! I'm losing my grip, and no mistake! . . . Good, here it is!'

Chaudval had just taken out of his pocket a large envelope from which, as soon as he broke the seal, a ministerial letter fell to the ground. He feverishly picked it up and read it at a single glance, in the red glow of the street lamp.

'My lighthouse! My letter of appointment!' he exclaimed. 'Saved, thank God!' he added, as if out of force of habit and in a falsetto voice so sudden and so different from his own that he looked around, thinking that somebody else had spoken.

'Come, now,' he said, 'calm down . . . and *be a man!'*

But at these words Esprit Chaudval, born Lepeinteur and known as Monanteuil, stopped as if changed into a statue of salt; this remark seemed to have petrified him.

'Eh?' he went on after a pause. 'What did I tell myself just then? To be a Man? . . . After all, why not?'

He folded his arms reflectively.

'For nearly half a century now I have been acting and playing other men's passions without ever feeling them—for at bottom I have never felt anything. So I am like those other men just for fun! So I am nothing but a shadow! Passions, feelings, *real* actions—that is what makes a genuine Man. Consequently, since my age forces me to rejoin Mankind, I must find myself some passions or *real* feelings—seeing that that is the *sine qua non* without which nobody can call himself a Man.

'There's a piece of good reasoning for you; it's positively bursting with common sense. So now to choose the passion most in keeping with my resuscitated nature.'

He meditated, then went on sadly:

'Love? . . . too late . . . Glory? . . . I have tasted it . . . Ambition? . . . let us leave that nonsense to the politicians!'

All of a sudden he gave a cry.

'I have it!' he said. 'Remorse! *There's* a passion that suits my dramatic temperament.'

He looked at himself in the mirror, assuming an expression which was drawn and convulsed as if by some supernatural horror.

'That's it!' he concluded. 'Nero! Macbeth! Orestes! Hamlet! Erostratus! The ghosts! Oh, yes, I want to see some real ghosts too! Like all those lucky fellows who could not take a single step without meeting a ghost.'

He struck his forehead.

'But how? ... I'm as innocent as a lamb unwilling to be born.'

And after another pause he went on:

'But that doesn't matter! Where there's a will there's a way! I'm entitled to become what I ought to be, whatever the cost. I'm entitled to be a man. Do I have to commit crimes in order to feel remorse? All right, so be it: what does it matter, provided it is in a good cause? Yes indeed, so be it!'

At this point he began to improvise a dialogue.

'I shall perpetrate some dreadful crimes . . . When? . . . Straight away. I cannot wait until tomorrow . . . What crimes? . . . A single one! But a grandiose crime, of extraordinary cruelty, calculated to rouse all the Furies from the Underworld! . . . And what crime is that? . . . Why, the most impressive of all! I have it! A fire! I just have time to start a fire, pack my bags, come back, duly hidden behind the window of a cab, to enjoy my victory in the midst of the horrified crowd, collect the curses of the dying—and catch the train for the north-west with enough remorse put by to last me the rest of my days. Then I shall go and hide in my brightly-lit eyrie on the shores of the Ocean—where the police will never find me, for the simple reason that my crime is *disinterested*. And there I shall die alone.’

Here Chaudval drew himself up and improvised this positively classical line:

‘Saved from suspicion by the grandeur of the crime.’

The great artist looked around to make sure he was alone, picked up a stone, and concluded:

‘Well, that’s settled. And from now on you won’t reflect anybody else.’

And he threw the stone at the mirror which shattered into a thousand shining pieces.

Having performed this duty, Chaudval made off in a hurry—as if satisfied with this first energetic feat—and rushed towards the boulevards, where, a few minutes later, he hailed a cab, jumped into it, and disappeared.

Two hours later, the flames of a huge fire, coming from some big warehouses stocked with petroleum, oil, and matches, were reflected in every window-pane in the Faubourg du Temple. Soon squads of firemen, rolling and pushing their pumps, came running up from all sides, the mournful wail of their horns rousing the inhabitants of that populous district from their sleep. Countless hurried steps rang out on the pavement: the Place du Château-d’Eau and the adjoining streets were crowded with people. Already human chains were being hurriedly organized. Within less than a quarter of an hour a cordon of troops had been formed round the fire. In the blood-red light of the torches, policemen were holding the people back.

The carriages, trapped in the crowds, had come to a standstill. Everybody was shouting. Distant screams could be made out amidst the dreadful crackling of the flames. The victims of the fire, caught in the inferno, were howling, and the roofs of the houses falling in on them. About a hundred families, those of the workers employed in the burning buildings, were left penniless and homeless.

In the distance, a solitary cab, loaded with two bulky trunks, was standing behind the crowd at the Château-d’Eau. And in that cab sat Esprit Chaudval, born Lepeinteur and known as Monanteuil, drawing aside the blind from time to time and contemplating his handiwork.

‘Oh!’ he whispered to himself. ‘How loathsome I feel in the eyes of God and men! Yes, that’s the work of a criminal, sure enough!’

The kindly old actor’s face lit up.

‘0 wretched man!’ he muttered. ‘What sleepless nights I’m going to enjoy among the ghosts of my victims! I can feel burgeoning within me the soul of Nero, burning Rome out of artistic fervour, of Erostratus, burning the temple of Ephesus out of a desire for glory, of Rostopchin, burning Moscow out of patriotism, of Alexander, burning Persepolis out of love for his immortal Thaïs! . . . I for my part burn out of duty, having no other means of existence. I burn because I owe it to myself. I burn to fulfil an obligation. What a man I’m going to be! How I’m going to live! Yes, at last I’m going to find out what it’s like to be tortured by remorse. What wonderful nights of delicious horror I’m going to spend! Ah, I breathe again! I’m born again! I exist! When I think that I was an actor! Now, as I’m nothing in the coarse eyes of mankind but a gallows-bird, let us fly like the wind! Let us hide in our lighthouse, to enjoy our remorse there in peace.’

In the evening, two days later, Chaudval, reaching his destination safely, took possession of his lonely old lighthouse on the north coast: a ruined building with an antiquated beacon which ministerial compassion had rekindled for his sake.

The light was of scarcely any use: it was just an excrescence, a sinecure. A dwelling with a lamp on top, which nobody needed except Chaudval.

So the worthy tragedian, having moved his bed into the lighthouse, together with stocks of food and a tall mirror in which to study his facial expressions, promptly shut himself up there, secure from all human suspicion.

Around him moaned the sea, in which the ancient abyss of the heavens bathed the light of its stars. He watched the waves attacking his tower under the shifts of the winds, much as the Stylite must have gazed at the sands being hurled against his column by the shimiel.

In the distance he followed with unthinking eyes the smoke of steamships or the sails of fishing boats.

As he went up and down the stone staircase, the dreamer kept forgetting his fire.

On the evening of the third day, sitting in his room, sixty feet above the waves, he was re-reading a Paris newspaper which told the story of the catastrophe which had taken place two days before.

An unknown malefactor had thrown some matches into the petroleum cellars. A colossal fire, which had kept the firemen and the people out in the Faubourg du Temple.

Nearly a hundred victims had died; unfortunate families had been plunged into the direst poverty.

The whole place was in mourning and still smoking.

The name of the person who had committed this heinous crime was unknown, and so above all was the criminal’s motive.

When he read this, Chaudval jumped for joy and, feverishly rubbing his hands, exclaimed:

‘What a triumph! What a wonderful scoundrel I am! How I’m going to be haunted! How many ghosts I’m going to see! I knew that I should become a Man! Oh, I admit that the means I used was drastic, but it had to be, it had to be!’

Reading the Paris newspaper again, Chaudval noticed that a special performance was being given in aid of those who had suffered from the fire, and murmured:

‘Well, well! I ought to have put my talent at the service of my victims. It would have been my farewell performance. I would have declaimed Orestes, I would have been marvellously true to life . . .’

Thereupon Chaudval began living in his lighthouse.

And the evenings and the nights fell, and followed one after another.

Something happened which astounded the actor. Something horrifying!

Contrary to his hopes and expectations, his conscience failed to torment him. Not a single ghost appeared. He felt nothing, *absolutely nothing*!

He could not believe the Silence. He could not get over it.

Sometimes, looking at himself in the mirror, he noticed that his debonair expression had not changed. Then he would hurl himself in a fury on his signals, altering them in the radiant hope of sinking some far-off ship, so as to rouse, quicken, stimulate his rebellious remorse, and awaken the longed-for ghosts.

It was all to no purpose.

His attempted crimes came to nothing. His efforts were in vain. He felt nothing. His efforts were in vain. He felt nothing. He did not see a single threatening phantom. He found it impossible to sleep any more, he was so stifled by shame and despair. The result was that when, one night, he suffered a stroke in his luminous eyrie, he had a death-agony in which—amid the noise of the ocean, with the sea-winds buffeting his tower lost in infinity—he cried out:

‘Ghosts! . . . For the love of God! . . . Let me see one ghost at least! . . . *I’ve earned it!*’

But the God he was invoking did not grant him this favour—and the old actor died, still expressing, in his vain rhetoric, his ardent longing to see some ghosts . . . *without realizing that he himself was what he was looking for*.