



Who Knows

I

GOOD God, good God! I am going to write down at last what has happened to me. But can I? Dare I? The thing is so bizarre, so inexplicable, so incomprehensible, so silly!

If I were not perfectly sure of what I have seen, sure that there was no defect in my reasoning, no error in my statements, no gap in the inflexible sequence of my observations, I should believe myself to be the dupe of a simple hallucination, the sport of a singular vision. After all, who knows?

I am at present in a private asylum, but I came here voluntarily, out of prudence and fear. Only one single human being knows my history, and that is the doctor of the asylum. I am going to write it down. I really do not know why. To get rid of it, for I feel as though it were an intolerable nightmare.

Let me explain.

I have always been a recluse, a dreamer, a kind of isolated philosopher, easy-going, content with little, harboring ill feeling against no man, and

without even a grudge against heaven. I have always lived alone, because of a kind of embarrassment that affects me when I find myself in the presence of others. How can this be explained? I cannot account for it. I am not averse to society, to conversation, to dining with friends, but when they are near me for any length of time, even the most intimate friends, they bore me, fatigue me, enervate me, and I experience an overwhelming, torturing desire to see them get up and leave, or to get up and go away myself.

That desire is more than a craving; it is an irresistible necessity. And if the presence of the people with whom I find myself were to be continued, if I were compelled, not only to listen, but also to follow, for any length of time, their conversation, something serious would assuredly happen to me. What would happen? Ah! who knows? Perhaps a slight paralytic stroke? Yes, probably!

I like so well to be alone that I cannot even endure to have other beings sleeping under my roof. I cannot live in Paris, because I there suffer the most constant agony. I die morally and am also the victim in body and nerves of that immense crowd which swarms, which lives around me, even when it sleeps. Ah! the sleep of others is even more painful to me than their conversation. And I can never find repose when I know, when I feel, that on the other side of a wall other existences are interrupted by these regular eclipses of intelligence.

Why am I thus? Who knows? The cause of it is perhaps very simple. I tire very soon of everything outside of myself. There are many people in similar case.

There are on earth two distinct races: those that have need of others, whom others distract, amuse, soothe, and whom solitude harasses, exhausts, overwhelms, like the ascent of a terrible glacier, or traversing the desert; and those, on the contrary, whom others weary, tire, bore, silently torture, while isolation calms them, bathes them with the repose in their independent and fanciful imaginings. In fact, this is a normal, psychic phenomenon. Some are constituted to live a life with the others, to live a life within themselves. As for me, my attention to externals is quickly exhausted, and as soon as it reaches its limit I experience in my whole body and in my whole intelligence an intolerable discomfort.

As a result of this, I become attached, or rather, I became much attached, to inanimate objects, which have for me the importance of actual beings, and my house has become, had become, a world in which I lived an active and solitary life, surrounded by all manner of things, furniture, familiar knick-knacks, as sympathetic in my eyes as the faces of human beings. I had filled my home with them, little by little, I had adorned it with them, and I felt contented, satisfied, happy there as one might in the arms of a charming woman, whose wonted caresses had become a soothing and delightful necessity.

I had had this house constructed in the centre of a beautiful garden, which hid it from the public highway, and which was near a city where I could always find the distractions of society, for which, at moments, I had a longing. All my servants slept in a separate building which was situated at some considerable distance from the house, at the far end

of the kitchen garden, which was surrounded by a high wall. The darkness of the nights, in the silence of my isolated dwelling, concealed, buried beneath the leaves of great trees, was so reposeful and so delicious that I lingered every evening, for several hours, before retiring, in order to enjoy the solitude a little longer.

One day *Sigurd* had been played at one of the city theaters. It was the first time that I had listened to that beautiful, musical, and fairy-like drama, and I had derived from it the liveliest pleasure.

I returned home on foot, with a light step, my head full of sonorous phrases, and my mind haunted by delightful visions. It was black, black night, so dark that I could hardly distinguish the highway, and I stumbled into the ditch more than once. From the custom house to my house is about a mile, perhaps a little more, or a leisurely walk of about twenty minutes. It was one o'clock in the morning, or maybe half-past one; the sky had by this time cleared somewhat and the waning moon appeared, the gloomy last quarter of the moon. The first quarter of the crescent moon, which rises about five or six o'clock in the evening, is clear, gay, and with a silver sheen; but the quarter that rises after midnight is reddish, sad, and fateful; is the true witches' moon. Every night prowler must have observed this. The first quarter, though slender as a thread, throws a faint joyous light which rejoices the heart and outlines distinct shadows on the ground; the last quarter sheds scarcely a dying glimmer, and is so wan that it causes hardly any shadows.

I perceived in the distance the somber mass of

my garden, and I know not why, but I was seized with a feeling of uneasiness at the idea of going indoors. I slackened my pace. The air was very mild. The thick clump of trees had the appearance of a tomb in which my house lay buried.

I opened the outer gate, and entered the long avenue of sycamores which leads up toward the house, their branches meeting overhead and forming a kind of tunnel, and I passed through thick, impenetrable masses of shrubbery and skirted lawns with flower beds, oval patches of various indistinct hues.

On approaching the house, I was seized by a strange feeling. I stood still. Nothing could be heard. In the trees there was not even a breath of air. "What is the matter with me?" I said to myself. For ten years I had come home on the same way, without ever experiencing the least inquietude. I never had any fear at night. The sight of a man, a marauder or a thief would have thrown me into a fit of rage, and I would have rushed at him without any hesitation. Moreover, I was armed, I had my revolver. But I did not touch it, for I was anxious to resist that feeling of dread that was taking possession of me.

What was it? Was it a presentiment? That mysterious presentiment which takes hold of the senses of men before they see something which, to them, is inexplicable? Perhaps? Who knows?

In proportion as I advanced, I felt shivers going through me, and when I was close to the wall, near the outhouses of my vast residence, I felt that I must wait a few minutes before opening the door and going inside. I sat down then on a bench under the windows of my drawing-room. I rested there,

a little shaky, with my head leaning against the wall, my eyes wide open under the shade of the foliage. For the first few moments I did not observe anything unusual around me; I had a humming noise in my ears, but that is not unusual. Sometimes it seems to me that I hear trains passing, that I hear clocks striking, that I hear a multitude on the march.

Presently those humming sounds became more distinct more concentrated, more recognizable. I had made a mistake. It was not the ordinary buzzing of my arteries which transmitted to my ears these rumbling sounds, but it was a very distinct, though very confused noise which came, without any doubt whatever, from the interior of my house. I distinguished through the walls this continued noise, I should rather say agitation than noise, an indistinct moving about of a pile of things, as if people were tossing about, displacing, and carrying away, surreptitiously, all my furniture.

I doubted, however, for some considerable time the evidence of my hearing. But, having placed my ear against one of the outhouses, the better to discover what this strange disturbance was inside my house, I became convinced, certain, that something altogether abnormal and incomprehensible was transpiring there. I had no fear, but I was—how shall I express it?—paralyzed by astonishment. I did not draw my revolver, knowing very well that there was no need of my doing so. I listened attentively.

I listened a long time, but could come to no conclusion, my mind being quite clear, though half crazy with anxiety. I stood there listening to the noise, which gradually increased, and at intervals

grew so loud that it seemed to be an impatient, angry disturbance, a mysterious commotion.

Then, suddenly, ashamed of my timidity, I seized my bunch of keys, selected the one I wanted, guided it into the lock, turned it twice, and, pushing the door with all my might, sent it banging against the wall.

The collision sounded like the report of a gun, and in response to that explosive noise there resounded, from roof to basement of my residence, a formidable tumult. It was so sudden, so terrible, so deafening, that I recoiled a few steps, and, although I knew it to be wholly useless, I pulled my revolver out of its case.

I still waited, but only a few minutes. Now I could distinguish an extraordinary pattering upon the steps of my grand staircase, on the waxed floors, on the carpets, not of boots, nor of naked feet, but of iron, and wooden crutches, which clattered like cymbals. Then I suddenly discerned, on the threshold of my door, an armchair, my large reading easy chair, which walked off waddling. It went away through my garden. Other chairs followed it, those of my drawing-room, then my sofas, dragging themselves along like crocodiles on their short paws; then all my chairs, bounding like goats, and the little footstools, hopping like rabbits.

Oh! what a sensation! I slunk back into a clump of bushes where I remained crouching, watching, meanwhile, my furniture defile past, for everything walked away, the one behind the other, briskly or slowly, according to its weight or size. My piano, my grand piano, bounded past with the gallop of a horse and a murmur of music in its sides; the smaller articles crawled along the gravel

like ants, my brushes, hand mirrors, goblets, the moonlight being reflected in them like glow-worms which glistened in the moonlight. I saw my writing desk appear, a rare curiosity of the last century, which contained all the letters I had ever received, all the history of my heart, an old history from which I have suffered so much! Inside it there were also many photographs.

Suddenly—I no longer had any fear—I threw myself on it, seized it as one would seize a thief, as one would seize a wife about to run away; but it pursued its irresistible course, and despite my efforts, and despite my anger, I could not even retard its pace. As I was resisting in desperation that insuperable force, I was thrown to the ground in my struggle with it. It then rolled me over, trailed me along the gravel, and the rest of my furniture which followed it began to march over me, trampling on my legs and injuring them. When I loosed my hold, other articles passed over my body, just as a charge of cavalry does over the body of a dismounted soldier.

Seized at last with terror, I succeeded in dragging myself out of the main avenue, and in concealing myself again among the shrubbery, so as to watch the disappearance of the most cherished objects, the smallest, the least striking the least known, which had once belonged to me.

I then heard, in the distance, in my house that now sounded hollow like all empty houses, a loud noise of slamming of doors. They were slammed shut from top to bottom of my dwelling, even the door which I had just opened myself, fool that I was, for this exodus; and which was the last to close. I fled then, running toward the city, and only re-

gained my self-composure on reaching the boulevards, where I met some belated people. I rang the bell of a hotel where I was known. I had knocked the dust off my clothes with my hands, and I told the porter that I had lost my bunch of keys, which included also the key of the kitchen garden, where my servants slept in a house standing by itself, on the other side of the wall of the inclosure which protected my fruits and vegetables from the raids of marauders.

I covered myself up to the eyes in the bed which was assigned to me; but I could not sleep, and I waited for dawn listening to the throbbing of my heart. I had given orders that my servants were to be summoned to the hotel at daybreak, and my *valet de chambre* knocked at my door at seven o'clock in the morning.

His countenance bore a woeful look.

"A great misfortune has happened during the night, Monsieur," said he.

"What is it?"

"Somebody has stolen the whole of Monsieur's furniture, all, everything, even to the smallest articles."

This news pleased me. Why? Who knows? I was complete master of myself, bent on dissimulation, resolved to tell no one of anything I had seen; determined to conceal and bury in my heart of hearts a terrible secret. I responded:

"They must be the same people who have stolen my keys. The police must be informed immediately. I am going to get up, and will rejoin you in a few moments."

The investigation into the circumstances under which the robbery might have been committed

lasted for five months. Nothing was found, not even the smallest of my knickknacks, nor the least trace of the thieves. Good gracious! If I had only told them what I knew . . . If I had said . . . they would have locked me up—me, not the thieves, but the man who had seen such a thing as I described.

Oh, I knew how to keep silence! I never refurnished my house. That would have been useless. The same thing would have occurred again. I had no desire even to reenter the house, and I did not reenter it; I never visited it again. I went to Paris, to the hotel, and I consulted doctors in regard to the condition of my nerves, which had disquieted me a good deal ever since that fatal night.

They advised me to travel, and I followed their advice.

I began by making an excursion into Italy. The sunshine did me much good. During six months I wandered about from Genoa to Venice, from Venice to Florence, from Florence to Rome, from Rome to Naples. Then I traveled over Sicily, a country celebrated for its scenery and its monuments, relics left by the Greeks and the Normans. I passed over into Africa, I traversed at my ease that immense desert, yellow and tranquil, where camels, gazelles, and Arab vagabonds roam about, where, in the rare and transparent atmosphere, there hover no ghosts, either by day or night.

I returned to France by Marseilles, and in spite of all the Provençal gayety, the diminished clearness of the sky made me sad. I experienced, in returning to the continent, the peculiar sensation of an invalid who believes himself cured, and who is

warned by a dull pain that the seeds of the disease have not been eradicated.

I then returned to Paris. At the end of a month I was very dejected. It was the autumn, and I wished, before the approach of winter, to make an excursion through Normandy, a country with which I was unfamiliar.

I began my journey with Rouen, and for eight days wandered about, charmed, captivated, enthusiastic, in that city of the middle ages, in that astounding museum of remarkable Gothic monuments.

But, one afternoon, about four o'clock, as I was sauntering slowly through a seemingly unattractive street, through which there runs a stream as black as ink, called Eau de Robec, my attention, fixed for the moment on the quaint, antique appearance of some of the houses, was suddenly attracted by a row of second-hand furniture shops next door to one another.

Ah! they had carefully chosen their locality, these sordid traffickers in antiquities, in that quaint little street, overlooking that sinister stream of water, beneath those pointed gables of tile and slate on which still revolved the weathercocks of bygone days.

At the farther end of these dingy shops one saw piled up carved chests, Rouen, Sèvres, and Moustiers china, painted statues, others of oak, Christs, Virgins, saints, church ornaments, chasubles, capes, even sacred vases, and an old gilded wooden tabernacle whence God had departed. Oh! What singular caverns are in those lofty houses, crowded with objects of every description, whose existence seems to be ended, things which have survived their origi-

nal possessors, their century, their times, their fashion, in order to be bought as curiosities by new generations.

My affection for *bibelots* was awakened in that city of antiquaries. I went from shop to shop, crossing, in two strides, the rotten four-plank bridges thrown over the nauseous current of the Eau de Robec.

Heaven protect me! What a shock! One of my most beautiful wardrobes was suddenly descried by me, at the entrance to an archway, which was crowded with articles of every description and which seemed to be the entrance to the catacombs of a cemetery of ancient furniture. I approached my wardrobe, trembling in every limb, trembling to such an extent that I dared not touch it. I put forth my hand, I hesitated. It was indeed my wardrobe, nevertheless; a unique wardrobe of the time of Louis XIII, recognizable by any one who had only seen it once. Casting my eyes suddenly a little farther, toward the more somber depths of this corridor, I perceived three of my tapestry-covered chairs; and farther on still, my two Henry II tables, such rare treasures that people came all the way from Paris to see them.

Think! only think in what a state of mind I now was! I advanced, haltingly, quivering with emotion, but I advanced, for I am brave, I advanced as a knight of the dark ages would enter an enchanted cave.

I found, at every step, something that belonged to me; my brushes, my books, my pictures, my draperies, my firearms, everything, except the writing desk full of my letters, and that I could not discover.

I walked on, descending dark passages, in order to ascend again to the floors above. I was alone, I called out, nobody answered, I was alone; there was no one in that house—a house as vast and tortuous as a labyrinth.

Night came on, and I was compelled to sit down in the darkness on one of my own chairs, for I had no desire to go away. From time to time I shouted, “Hullo, hullo, somebody!”

I had sat there, certainly, for more than an hour when I heard steps, steps soft and slow, I knew not where. My impulse was to make my escape; bracing myself up, I called out again, whereupon I perceived a glimmer of light in the adjoining room.

“Who is there?” said a voice.

“A buyer,” I responded.

“It is pretty late to come into a shop in that manner.”

“I have been waiting for you for more than an hour,” I answered.

“You can come back to-morrow.”

“To-morrow I shall have left Rouen.”

I dared not advance, and he did not come to me. I saw still the glimmer of his light, which shone on a tapestry on which were two angels flying over the dead on a field of battle. It belonged to me also. I said:

“Well, are you coming?”

“I am at your service,” he answered.

I got up and went toward him.

Standing in the center of a large room was a little man, very short and very fat, phenomenally fat, a hideous object.

He had a singular beard of straggling yellow-

ish hair, and not a hair on his head. Not a single hair!

As he held his candle aloft at arm's length in order to see me, his cranium appeared to me to resemble a little moon, in that vast chamber encumbered with old furniture. His features were wrinkled and puffy, and his eyes could not be seen.

I bought three chairs which belonged to me, and paid at once a large sum for them, giving him merely the number of my room at the hotel. They were to be delivered the next day before nine o'clock.

I then started off. He conducted me, with much politeness, as far as the door.

I immediately repaired to the chief commissary of police, to whom I told the story of the robbery of my furniture and of the discovery I had just made. He required time to telegraph to the authorities who originally had charge of the case, for information, and begged me to wait in his office until he received a reply. An hour later, the answer came and bore out my statements.

"I am going to arrest and interrogate this man at once," he said to me, "for he may have conceived some sort of suspicion, and smuggled away what belongs to you. Will you go and dine and return in two hours? I shall then have the man here, and I will subject him to a fresh interrogation in your presence."

"Most gladly, Monsieur. I thank you with all my heart."

I went to dine at my hotel and ate better than I could have believed possible. I was quite happy now; "they've got him," I thought.

Two hours later I returned to the office of the police functionary, who was waiting for me.

"Well, Monsieur," said he, on perceiving me, "we have not been able to find your man. My agents cannot put their hands on him."

"Ah!" I felt myself sinking. "But . . . you have at least found his house?" I asked.

"Yes, certainly; and what is more, it is now being watched and guarded until his return. As for him, he has disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"Yes, disappeared. He ordinarily passes his evenings at the house of a female neighbor, who is also a furniture broker, a queer sort of sorceress, the Widow Bidoin. She has not seen him this evening and cannot give any information in regard to him. We must wait until to-morrow."

I went away. Ah! how sinister the streets of Rouen seemed to me, how troubled and haunted!

I slept so badly that I had a fit of nightmare every time I went off to sleep.

As I did not wish to appear too restless or eager, I waited till ten o'clock the next day before reporting to the police.

The merchant had not reappeared. His shop remained closed.

The commissary said to me:

"I have taken all the necessary steps. The court has been made acquainted with the affair. We will go together to that shop and have it opened, and you shall point out to me all that belongs to you."

We drove there in a cab. Police officers were stationed at the building with a locksmith, and the door of the shop was soon opened.

On entering, I could not discover my wardrobes, my chairs, my tables; I saw nothing, nothing of that which had furnished my house, no, nothing, although on the previous evening, I could not take a step without encountering something that belonged to me.

The chief commissary, much astonished, regarded me at first with suspicion.

"My God, Monsieur," said I to him, "the disappearance of these articles of furniture coincides strangely with that of the merchant."

He laughed.

"That is true. You did wrong in buying and paying for the articles which were your own property yesterday. It was that that gave him the cue."

"What seems to me incomprehensible," I replied, "is that all the places that were occupied by my furniture are now filled by other furniture."

"Oh!" responded the commissary, "he has had all night, and has no doubt been assisted by accomplices. This house must communicate with the adjoining houses. But have no fear, Monsieur; I will have the affair promptly and thoroughly investigated. The brigand shall not escape us for long, seeing that we are in charge of his den.

* * * * * * *

Ah! My heart, my heart, my poor heart, how it beat!

I remained a fortnight at Rouen. The man did not return. Heavens! good heavens! That man, what was it that could have frightened or surprised him?

But on the sixteenth day, early in the morning,

I received from my gardener, now the keeper of my empty and pillaged house, the following strange letter:

“MONSIEUR: I have the honor to inform Monsieur that there happened something the evening before last which nobody can understand, and the police no more than the rest of us. The whole of the furniture has been returned, not one piece is missing—everything is in its place, up to the very smallest article. The house is now the same in every respect as it was before the robbery took place. It is enough to make one lose one’s head. The thing took place during the night between Friday and Saturday. The roads are torn up as though everything had been dragged along from the gate to the house to the door. The same thing was observed the day after the disappearance of the furniture.

“We are anxiously expecting Monsieur, whose very humble and obedient servant I am, RAUDIN PHILIPPE.”

“Ah! no, no, ah! never, never, ah! no. I shall never return there.”

I took the letter to the commissary of police.

“It is a very clever restitution,” said he. “Let us say nothing about it. We shall nip the man one of these days.”

* * * * * *

But he has never been nipped. No. They have not nipped him, and I am afraid of him now, as though he were a ferocious animal that had been let loose behind me.

Not to be found! Not to be found, this monster with the moon skull. They will never find him. He will never return to his shop. What does he care! I am the only one who may meet him, and I do not wish to do so.

I do not wish it! I do not wish it! I do not wish it!

And if he returns, if he takes possession of his shop, who is to prove that my furniture was on his premises? There is only my testimony against him; and I feel that that is not above suspicion.

Ah! no! That kind of existence was no longer possible. I was not able to keep the secret of what I had witnessed. I could not continue to live like the rest of the world, with the fear upon me that those scenes might be reënacted.

I came to consult the doctor who directs this lunatic asylum, and I told him everything.

After he had interrogated me for a long time, he said to me:

“ Will you consent, Monsieur, to remain here for some time? ”

“ Most willingly, Monsieur.”

“ You have some means? ”

“ Yes, Monsieur.”

“ Will you have isolated apartments? ”

“ Yes, Monsieur.”

“ Would you care to receive any friends? ”

“ No, Monsieur, no, nobody. The man from Rouen might take it into his head to pursue me here to be revenged on me.”

* * * * *

And I have been alone, alone, all, all alone, for three months. I am growing tranquil by degrees. I have no longer any fears. If the antiquary should become insane . . . and if he should be brought into this asylum! Even prisons themselves are not places of safety.