

THE SHORES OF NIGHT

FLETCHER CRAWSON'S ACCOUNT

CHAPTER I

Behind the tall windows, January shook its snowy hair. On the small square I looked down on, spindly trees, weighed down by icy cotton, trembled in their wrought iron tree guards shining with frost. In the fountain basins, a few solitary plates of ice served as a reminder of the good old days of triumphant water sprays. The streetlights, standing in a line, with their large, blinding heads perched ridiculously at the top of long slender stems, cast a cruder, somewhat more glacial gaze over this muddy whiteness here and there.

I looked away from this barely real landscape, separated from me by a thin sheet of glass and glanced around the calm warm universe of the library. The tall, polished shelves, with their millions of pages crammed in a motionless journey, joined the long oak tables to create a strange world of horizontal and vertical lines under the banker's lamps with their green shades where odd puppets maintained an unsettling stillness, broken only, from time to time, by the rustling of a page being turned.

A few meters away, a small, shriveled old woman with a graying bun on the top of her skull, was peering through spectacles from another century at the violently colored cover of an issue of the "Petit Journal" depicting the fire at the Bazar de la Charité.

Despite the distance, I was able to see the terrible realism the designer had not feared to use when portraying the cadavers that had been blackened and scorched by the fire, lying in the midst of collapsed beams.

What depths of repressed sadism lay in the heart of this peaceful looking grandmother for her to sneak into the library, at night, to consult the collection of these outdated publications in which each issue was more chilling than the last?

Farther off, to my right, a man sitting with his back to me was leaning against a table arranged parallel to mine. His black jacket, shiny with wear, outlined the narrowness of his shoulders and, with his two arms crossed in front of him and resting on the piece of oak furniture, he looked like one of those large birds of prey with its long, bald skull sitting on top of a massive body and folded wings. Other readers were seated here and there in the large room but they were too far away from me for me to be able to provide a precise description.

I returned to the ancient document I had decided to read. The overwhelming allegorical presumption of the text had managed to finally make me look away, to observe the universe of reality for a few minutes.

I looked back at the pages, yellowed over time, that had been difficult to locate in the closed stacks. I was only able to consult it as a result of the archivist's friendship. It was an extraordinarily complex drama in which each character embodied a specific human vice or virtue. I had reached a passage in which strangeness overwhelmed the fastidious and emphatic character just when a new individual, unknown up to that point, appeared to take charge of the situation. I started to read the following sentence:

"The castle seemed to be completely buried under the thick snow know only to Rhenish winters and, through the tall window in the parlor, the margrave observed the countryside where plague and famine reigned, hidden under the lintel of January. A knock at the door.

"Come in," said the master, thinking that one of the servants was coming for orders.

But, as the door opened, it revealed a tall stranger, looking pitiful in tattered black clothing.

"What's this?" shouted the margrave. "Who are you and how did you manage to get in here without my people coming to warn me?"

“My apologies,” said the man. “My name is Ulrich von Heiligenshtadt and I share your blood...”

As I finished reading that sentence, I looked up, jumping. The man in black that I had observed sitting motionless at the other table had stood up without making a sound and was now standing in front of me, leaning slightly forward.

“I beg your pardon, for interrupting your reading,” he said. “I’m taking notes about an important matter and I find I’ve suddenly run out of materials. Would you have a little ink in your pen or could you loan me a mechanical pencil?”

Once standing, the man seemed very tall and very thin. His black clothing shone with wear. He spoke with a pronounced German accent.

At the time, I did not know quite what to do. I was torn between the obligation to be of service to him and the infinitely strange sensation caused by the simultaneity, the superposition of a living person with the character who had spoken the sentence I had just been reading. I was obliged to note, moreover, that the two characters, the real one and the fictional one, were similar in some strange manner, and that there was some sort of equivalence, in the framework and the period, that could not escape my notice.

I stared at him dumbfounded and I must have looked like a simpleton or a man caught up in some stupid act to him. I recovered and finally muttered some indistinct excuse.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I have nothing of the kind on me. I suggest you ask the librarian who will certainly be pleased to give you the items you need.”

I thought the man would head immediately to the archivist’s office but he did nothing of the sort. He placed both of his hands on my table, bent slightly and remained there, motionless, for a moment. His face was just above the green lampshade and I felt slightly uncomfortable when I saw his face, in the dim light, cut into geometric shapes by the unusual and deathly light. That, combined with the surprising coincidence that connected him to the character in the book made me hunker down against the back of my chair, seeking comfort. In vain.

He glanced at the open book lying in front of me and something akin to irony shone in his deeply sunken eyes.

“Curious...” he said. “A curious document. Where did you manage to find it?”

He straightened up and continued, “I cannot continue my boring conversation with you without introducing myself to you.”

He remained silent for a moment, while I leisurely savored the fear of what was to come.

“My name is Ulrich von Heiligenshtadt,” he said.

Then the man left, striding silently. I watched him walk away, dumbfounded. When he disappeared into the archivist’s office, I recovered from my torpor and feverishly read the extraordinary paragraph again. But, although I ran my eyes over the two pages first quickly then more slowly, re-reading certain fragments I had already gone over, and even moving onto what I had not read as yet, I found no mention anywhere of the mysterious Ulrich, although the other characters were still present.

I abandoned my reading with the feeling that something incomprehensible and unusual had erupted into the natural order of things and that the peaceful library was the theater for an unprecedented event. With my mind filled with all sorts of vague suppositions, I looked at the door to the archivist’s office for a long time, the door which the stranger had walked through just a few moments earlier.

The landscape outside, petrified in the glacial night, had not changed at all. Neither had the silent and comfortable atmosphere in the library. Either there was something unsettling about the matter or I had to question my sanity. I could not bear the eruption of the impossible in such banal circumstances and, overwhelmed by a sudden need for action, I suddenly stood up.

I stood there, undecided, for a few seconds, looking from the office door, to the book, then back to the door. I finally made up my mind and headed hesitantly in the direction of the office. I knocked on the oak door.

“Come in,” said a voice inside.

I pushed the door. In the room littered with papers and books, the archivist welcomed me with a questioning smile. He was alone.

“I... I...” I stammered. “Didn’t you...” I stopped short.

“Do you want another book, Mr. Crawson? The man asked kindly.

“It’s that...” I stammered again, dumbfounded, looking at the walls without discovering a door other than the one I had come in through. “I thought someone had come to visit you.”

The archivist looked somewhat surprised.

“Visit me!” he said “Did you think you would find me here with a cup of tea in hand, discussing glorious military memories?”

He smiled with the satisfied air of someone who was enjoying his own joke. I did not smile back and the expression on my face must have surprised him since he walked over to me, frowning, observing me closely.

“Explain yourself,” he added. “I have no idea what you’re going on about.”

I dug automatically through my pants pocket and pulled out a handkerchief, which I wiped over my forehead where perspiration was starting to bead.

“Excuse me, Mr. Flanders,” I said, patting the damp palms of my hands with the handkerchief. “I could have sworn that a man, a reader, had come in here to ask you for some ink. I... I wonder if I might have fallen asleep for a few seconds and dreamed it all.”

He continued to stare at me and replied, in a determined tone, “No doubt, sir... no doubt at all.”

He waved his hand at me.

“You know... dreams are extremely fleeting things. You doze for a moment and a dream comes, in a flash, fitting in between you and reality, and your mind does not recognize it as a dream. These things happen, Mr. Crawson, these things happen...”

I stepped back, dumbfounded.

“That’s likely,” I murmured. “Yet I remember the man perfectly, his tortured features, his black clothing, even his name.”

“His name!” exclaimed the archivist. “Now that’s unusual! People don’t usually remember names that they hear, that they believe they hear in dreams!”

“Oh!” I exclaimed. “Such an unusual name, it comes as no surprise that I remember it.”

“Yes,” said Flanders. “And that name would be?”

“German. It sounded German or Austrian: Ulrich von Heiligenshtadt.”

Flanders suddenly took two steps back.

“You said Heiligenshtadt?” he said, his voice cracking.

“Yes,” I replied. And that’s what seemed so strange to me. I had just read that same name in the book you loaned me.”

“Of course,” said Flanders. “That’s the name of the principal character in *Tragic Philosophies* by Clara Conway, that curious work written by a medium in the first half of the 18th century. Obviously, you know that work since you asked me for it.”

I stiffened. Sweat was starting to bead on my forehead.

“Well...” I said. “Come and take a look at that book. I challenge you to find anyone named Ulrich. I thought I had read that name myself but after the man spoke to me or, if you prefer, after my dream, I could find no reference in *Tragic Philosophies* to Heiligenshtadt.”

Flanders shrugged.

“Let’s go,” he said. “You left the book on your table? Go ahead of me. We’ll clear this up.”

When we got to the table where I had spent several hours, I was almost relieved to see the book open under the lamp. What would I have done if it had disappeared? How would I have explained to Flanders the extravagant ideas running around in my head? But *Tragic Philosophies* was still there, motionless and reassuring.

Flanders picked the book up greedily, read a few lines, turned a few pages, read a paragraph, went back a few pages, re-read half a page feverishly, flipped through to the end, read again. He pushed it aside, stood up, looking at me. The green light of the lamp emphasized the paleness of his face.

“Crawson,” he said, in a hesitant tone. “I’m missing something here. I admit that I can’t find the name of the main character either. Yet I recall it very strongly. I don’t know if we’re both hallucinating or if our memories are playing tricks on us. But what’s happening is beyond my understanding.”

I believe that he made a very small sign of the cross over the book with his finger, but I could not confirm this since his gesture was so furtive.

“What the devil!” I exclaimed. “We have to have seen that name somewhere since we both know it.”

The old woman looked up and glanced at us furiously through her spectacles.

“Shh,” she said imperiously.

The magazine open in front of her showed a colorful drawing of a guillotine with a bloody head. We both looked at her, indignation mingling with guilt, as she grumbled in a low voice, "Speaking in a library should be forbidden! Particularly in a foreign language!"

We had spoken in English and that seemed to displease her. I must say that she had to feel at a disadvantage since she must have been quite certain we understood her.

Flanders spoke in French, saying "You're right Madam. As the librarian, I should set an example. Come Crawson. We'll speak in my office."

He was already heading in the direction of the door, which had remained open, when I stopped at a window that looked out over the black night. My exclamation made him double back and I pointed, my finger trembling, at something in the middle of the square. He looked in the direction I was indicating.

"Well, well," he said "Now that's extraordinary!"

"What's extraordinary?" I shouted. "Do you see that tall man, dressed in black, sitting on the edge of the fountain? Well, that's the man who spoke to me. He's the one I saw go into your office... That's Heiligenshtadt and he seems to have escaped from the book!"

Flanders had placed his face against the window and was staring avidly at the man who was about 30 meters away, lit clearly enough by a streetlight that we were able to see his silhouette and his large, bald forehead.

As we stood there, petrified, watching, we saw the man raise his head in such a way that, even if we could not see his eyes, we could legitimately presume he was looking at us.

He stood up slowly, walked a few steps in the light, gradually stepped in the shadow of the trees where his outline stood out against the snow and in an uncertain manner, although we both had the same impression at the same time, something frightful happened. It seemed to me that he continued to walk without moving his legs, as his loose-fitting coat flowed like a pair of wings and he rose in heavy flight above the ground. But my terrified sigh of amazement merely echoed Flanders' who looked at me, eyes wide.

"Did you see that?" he said. "He vanished completely, as if sinking into the snow..."

I turned to the archivist, feeling as if the skin of my face were shrinking, as it turned cold and brittle.

"No," I said. "I saw him fly away... like a bat... an immense bat."

Behind us, a pile of paper fell noisily to the floor. The old woman, who was obsessed with catastrophes and executions bent down to pick up a stack of newspapers that had just fallen.

She turned to us and yelled, "It's all your fault... I won't be coming back here. And tomorrow I'll inform the mayor about how the archivist does his job... chatting out loud... in a foreign language."

She threw her library card down furiously and quickly pulled on her ragged, black fur coat. Then she stomped out of the room.

We both stood there, looking back and forth from the door that had closed behind her to the snow-covered square below us.

"Well, well," said Flanders, in a tone filled with fake joviality. "Here I am again, without a job, reduced to going back to my old translations."

We were alone in the vast room that looked even more imposing in the confidential light of the green lamps.

"You know full well that old witch will do nothing and you also know full well that is not what concerns us. What exactly did you see?"

He turned serious again. I felt some suffocating threat thicken around us, emanating from the thousands of books and the deserted room., transforming in the heat that was curiously present, ready to burst into fire.

Flanders placed his hand on my shoulder.

"In a trap..." he said. "Like falling into a trap... completely erased... there... in full light."

I looked at him, shivering despite the intense heat.

"Not at all," I said. "I saw him fly off heavily."

I remained silent. It didn't matter that we had different interpretations. In any case, in our minds, we had both seen a crack through which logic and reason had fled, leaving behind ruin and delusion. Yet, the situation was quite unsettling and I could see by Flanders' attitude that he was most uncomfortable. I refused to grow agitated any further by his dark threats of madness and wished the archivist good evening, adding that I would see him the next morning.

“Have a good night and try not to dream too much...”
But his hand when he shook mine was cold and trembled.