

## *The Exigent Shadow*

It was in the condemned cell at La Roquette.

“Thank you, Messieurs. You have brought me paper, envelopes, a pen and an inkwell”—he arranged the objects on the little table as he spoke—“and I thank you very much. I also thank the governor of the prison, since he has authorized me to keep the light for part of the night. No, you’re too kind! I won’t play cards this evening; I have a letter to write. It won’t take me long. I think, yes, I think”—he uttered a little laugh, almost malicious—“that I don’t have many hours before me. So goodnight Messieurs, sleep well, while I write. I fear that you’ll be woken up early tomorrow morning. So, goodnight, goodnight.”

One of the guards left the cell; the heavy bolt grated as it plunged into the wall. The other guard lay down on the mattress of a camp bed extended in front of the door; he did not take long to start snoring placidly, with no concern regarding the condemned man.

The latter was a small man, already old and sickly, his fingers always stirred by a slight tremor, softly-spoken, seemingly very gentle in spite of the atrocity of the crime that he had committed. There had never been any need to put him in a straitjacket. Surely he would allow himself to be led to the guillotine as meekly as a sheep—a sheep who knew, but was obliging anyway. In the white and brown cell, where the candlelight did not flicker, the little man’s nose almost touching the page, only the regular scratching of the pen was audible in the intervals of the snoring.

In accordance with the habit of certain methodical individuals, he had first put the address on the envelope: *To the Almoner, La Roquette Prison*. He added to that the underlined instruction: *Not to be opened until after my death*.

Good; now for the letter. And he traced the characters, carefully, without haste or disturbance—the slight tremor in his hands was habitual—like a conscientious employee copying a report calmly. His handwriting was very neat.

Monsieur Almoner, I beg your pardon for having delayed for so long, in spite of your charitable entreaties, in revealing to you why I rendered myself culpable of that abominable murder. It was necessary that the cause of my crime not be known until its author was beyond the reach of any absolution, and mercy; for my salvation would be a disobedience. But today—this afternoon, and again this evening—I have recognized by certain signs that the definitive moment is near; even in the moments when, given the placement and height of the two narrow windows, its emergence seemed to defy all the laws that govern the figuration of bodies on walls, and just now, in the penumbra of the cell, while I was talking to my guards, placed not behind but in front of the candle, it has notified me, by such a clear and sharply outlined absence of what I still have, of the imminent necessity of not having it any longer, and has intimated the order of a perfect resemblance. At dawn, the prison governor will enter here with other persons and announce to me that I must resolve to die. I have, therefore, just time to write this explanatory letter.

Yes, it is quite extraordinary that a man like me, not wicked, not fanatical, quite simple, born of honest folk, who has been well brought-up, who exercised a tranquil profession—I was, as you know, a hat-maker in Remy-sur-Oise—should have rendered himself culpable, without hatred, as if for pleasure, of such a frightful and refined murder. I understand the amazement of the jurors, the Court and the physicians commissioned to examine my mental health (I refrained from telling them the truth; they would have thought that I was mad, and acquitted me, and I would not have been able to satisfy destiny); I also understand the astonishment that you have been kind enough to testify to me, Monsieur Almoner, for you do not know the thing, any more than the others.

Personally, I know it.

What is surprising, even for me, is that I did not perceive it immediately—I mean, as soon as I had reached the age of reason. Was it because, still a child, with frivolous eyes and mind, I did not pay any

heed to the strangeness of my case, or, perhaps, that I considered it common to all living beings? No, instinct alone should have been sufficient to warn me of the anomaly to which I was subject. Is it necessary to suppose, then, that the disposition of the places in which I was accustomed to work and play—the large schoolroom, the little kitchen garden behind my parents' house—did not permit me the observation of the anomaly? No, again. The light played through the casements of the school as freely as through other casements; as for the garden wall, it far surpassed the height of my shoulders.

After having reflected on the matter for a long time, gravely, I have come to think that during my childhood and early adolescence I was, in regard to conformity with the laws of natural phenomena, and particularly the one whose deregulation obliged me to commit murder, with a view to expiation, similar in every respect to other boys. The thing that was to decide my life was only produced later, with the expansion of active virility. And, in fact, is it not normal, and logical, even in the most inconceivable violation of eternal rules, that an irregularity implying for an individual, as in my case, some fatal exigency, some ineluctable duty, would only manifest itself from the hour when that person finds himself in a state to obey that exigency and fulfill that duty?

I will tell you in a few words. Monsieur Almoner, in what circumstances the necessity appeared to me for the first time that I have obeyed with horror, but with resignation, and perhaps also with pride—for does a man not have the right to be proud who has, even by means of a crime, undoubtedly saved humankind and nature from incomparable disorder and disaster?

As my father was dissatisfied with the education I received at the school of Saint-Remy-sur-Oise—the teacher, a very pale young man of strange appearance, occupied himself very little with teaching his pupils holy history or the four rules, but more often read aloud in class works dealing with matters of death and eternity, of which I understood very little but which frightened me nevertheless—and as, in addition, it is unnecessary to be very knowledgeable to be a good hat-maker, my father, who planned to leave his business to me, made the resolution when I was fourteen years old to keep me with him perpetually. I no longer saw the schoolmaster, who, if I remember rightly, was obliged to hand in his resignation because he was judged to be slightly mad.

I was a very docile apprentice, and quite content. I grew up, not very tall, but in good health in spite of my paltry appearance. I no longer gave any thought to all the obscure and troubling nonsense that the young teacher proffered with his wild eyes and unkempt hair. My parents were very good. They let me play in the garden or the street between the hours of labor. I ate well and slept well. I already savored, with pleasure, the tranquility of the life that would be mine henceforth.

Even when I was fifteen years old, I scarcely experienced the troubles of imminent virility. My mother rejoiced in seeing me so placid. However, I have to confess to you, Monsieur Almoner, that once my sixteenth year was accomplished, I did not take long to gaze a little more frequently than was appropriate at the female apprentice, very young, still almost a child, who came to the house every day and occupied herself, in the room behind the shop, in sewing round hats and the peaks of caps. That put many little black dots in her fingertips. But she had such pretty eyes, so lively and shiny, beneath bushy hair that was almost red, and, between patches of redness, her skin was very white.

She was the daughter of the druggist, our neighbor. She was a trifle thin, with long arms with which she did not know what to do, which dangled awkwardly as soon as she was no longer working. It charmed me that she was like that. When I looked at her, sitting on the other side of the table, she laughed, or else she cried; when she cried, she was prettier. You will forgive me, Monsieur Almoner, for telling you about these follies, in which there might have been some sin. My excuse is that I hoped to marry her, when I was established.

We met up, on spring mornings, in the willow grove beside the water. There we held hands, not too close to one another, and we did not say a word, or look at one another. But I heard her breath, and mine, very forceful and precipitate, as if we were out of breath. Then it was summer; I was seventeen; now, when we walked, I no longer kept so far from her. I dared not speak to her yet, but I drew her toward me, as if I wanted to whisper words in her ear. She turned her head toward the trees, or lowered them toward the sand of the path. Once, abruptly—there were flames in the air and we were walking in a hum of bees and golden flies, which were like fire flying everywhere—I clasped her against me and, without knowing

what I was doing, I put my lips on her mouth. We stopped, astonished, delighted and bewildered, and I kept kissing her, kissing her beautiful little warm mouth, which couldn't close again.

How did it happen that at that very moment when my child's heart blossomed into a man's heart, my gaze—without my kiss entirely quitting hers—moved away from her slightly and considered our two shadows, our two thin, long shadows, clearly designed on the pallor of the narrow path?

I saw, scarcely blackened, her body next to mine; I saw our arms mingled; I saw, a little higher than her shoulder, my inclined shoulder; I saw, a little higher still, her forehead, and the pretty shock of her hair...but white I inhaled her breath, I no longer saw...no, no, I did not see on the pallor of the path, my own face; I did not see my forehead, I did not see my hair. My true lips brushed her lips, but above the neck, my shadow had no mouth, nor forehead, nor hair.

My shadow had no head.

It would be difficult for me, Monsieur Almoner, to express the extent to which I was troubled by the discovery that my shadow had no head. I ran toward the place of the road where my shadow had been interrupted a little while before, supposing that there was some abrupt crevice there into which the head had disappeared, cut off by the edge. No, there was no hollow: a smooth and continuous terrain. And further on, in front of me, my decapitated shadow extended.

With an instinctive fear, I put my hand to my cheeks, to my temples; I touched, I could still touch, my skin, fleshy, hairy and alive, but I saw, on the road the blackness of my palms palpating the absent contours of nothing.

I contracted a malady in consequence, Monsieur Almoner, that kept me in bed for fifty days. Having entered into convalescence, I opened wide, wandering eyes, and I remained obstinately taciturn; people were obliged to wonder whether, because of the disease—it was a typhoid fever that I had had—I might have gone mad or become an imbecile. Neither one nor the other: I possessed all my reason; but I could not help thinking about my incomplete image. I thought about it with fear, with rage, and with vertigo. I had, at the same time, a quivering terror and an enraged desire to know whether, after my illness, the thing was in the same state as before. Perhaps my shadow now had a head? Oh, how I would have liked it to have one, and how I dreaded that it might not.

Curiosity finally triumphed over apprehension. One morning, when I was alone in my room, seated in a great armchair like a valetudinarian, I stood up slowly between the casement and the wall. I turned round slowly. Above the back of the chair, there were the shoulders, the neck, and nothing else. I fell back, unconscious.

For many days, many weeks, many months, I was very morose, my eyes staring—which made my mother anxious. Truly, one can have no idea, unless one has experienced it oneself, of the anxiety proximal to anguish, of the embarrassment prolonged into torture, than can be caused, especially in the early days, in a somewhat sensitive individual, by the conviction—corroborated continually by experience—that his shadow has no head. I do not know whether one can accommodate it any more gladly than not having one oneself. For in that case, in order to keep the mind at rest, it would only be necessary not to want to touch the face or the cranium, and carefully to avoid mirrors. Perhaps one would end up forgetting that one is acephalous. But what means is there of avoiding, unless one always lives in total darkness, the apparition of one's body on the wall, the floor or the sidewalk?

For myself, I suffered all the more because I dared not reveal the singularity of my case to anyone. Confessed to my parents, or to friends, my torment would doubtless have been less cruel; but an instinct—I have understood since how right it was, that instinct—advised me to remain silent, warning me that I ought to keep the secret of the derogation of natural law produced in my person, or at least the seeming incompleteness of my person.

What proved that I ought to do that is that, by virtue of an antinomy in which a superior and mysterious will was affirmed, I remained alone in perceiving it. Never has any other living being appeared surprised in seeing beside his shadow one that has no head. It is therefore the case that, by virtue of a necessary illusion, he sees one, and that the thing was an affair between me and...someone.

In any case, thanks to the habitude that one finally owes to time and the frequent return of the same facts, my anxiety became gradually less painful. The astonishment slackened first, and then the fear, of the neck that did not bear anything.

My father died in the year following the decease of my mother; after the distraction caused by my double grief, I was obliged to occupy myself with putting order into our commercial affairs, which were somewhat troubled. In order to conserve the clientele I was obliged make visits, and publish announcements in the Saint-Remy-sur-Oise *Indépendant*. Then I got married, to the little apprentice, the daughter of our neighbor the druggist, who had become a beautiful young woman. I had children, two boys and a girl. All of that diverted me from troubling thoughts. I only retained a hesitation in speech and a restriction in gesture, which were in conformity with the timid amiability of my character.

I reached the point of almost no longer paying any heed to the anomaly from which I had suffered so much, or rather, I considered it without disturbance. I even arrived at treating it with familiarity and good humor. Once—I'll always remember it, it was so funny—I was trying silk top hats on the proprietor of the Three Emperors Hotel; not knowing where to put down one of the hats, too small for my client, between the table and the cluttered chairs, I put it on my own, and then writhed with laughter—literally writhed! And why? Because I could see the shadow of the hat on the wall, so narrow that the head of a child could only have fitted into it with difficulty, touching with its vacillating brim the shadow of my shoulders! I can assure you, Monsieur Almoner, that it was very comical; you would not have been able to help clutching your sides, in spite of the gravity of your holy character.

And to the “infirmity” of my image, I also owed a joy. That was when, on Sundays in summer, when the shop was closed, I went for walks in the country with my daughter and my two sons. As they were already growing tall, and I am rather small, our shadows were almost the same height, because of the missing head—and that gave me pleasure.

In consequence, I might have been able to continue and complete peacefully a very happy life—unless I too had been the victim of the perhaps-universal disaster from which I have, thank God, saved humankind and the worlds—if last winter had not presented anomalous and very disturbing characteristics that gave all persons endowed with a sound intelligence much food for thought. As soon as the fifteenth of January, Monsieur—I'm certain, Monsieur Almoner, that you have retained the memory of it—a sun that one is not accustomed to see so ardent in July, a sun that might have been able to excite a brain less well-founded than mine—dried up the fields and the roads, drank the rivers, forced the trees to become green and roses to bloom. Long sandbanks, like the backs of yellow beasts, emerged from the thin sheet of the water, and one day, I saw the apple tree in the courtyard all white and decked with a thousand flowers. Never, certainly, in Saint-Remy-sur-Oise or in any country in the world, had such an astonishing inversion of the seasons been observed. I had to agree with my wife on the morning when, gazing through the window at the cloudless sky, from which not a drop of water had fallen for a month, she felt obliged to say: “Something in the world must surely be out of order.”

That observation did not astonish me, but it moved me strangely. And as, at that very moment, my headless shadow loomed up along the wall, I repeated, almost voicelessly, between my tremulous lips: “Yes, something is out of order. There's something out of order in the world.”

I would be lying, Monsieur Almoner, if I told you that, from that moment on the perception was established in me entirely and clearly of the connection there might be, that there really was—as I recognized later—between the prodigy of the estival winter to which we were subjected and that of my incomplete image. No, that connection didn't appear to me at first in its evidence, and even less the relationship of cause and effect between the two anomalies. But, as one sees threads of spider-silk extended from one side of the road to the other in a dusk that makes them increasingly luminous, connections, it seemed to me, as light, as tenuous and as vague, divined rather than observed, linked the two phenomena.

Yes, I sensed that I was no stranger to the strangeness that was being produced, and that the transgression in me of a natural law might correspond mysteriously to the transgression of another law in nature...

However, Monsieur Almoner, the preoccupation—albeit very vague, uncertain, scarcely presented—that the acephaly of my shadow was not without a relationship with the irregularity of the winter that was so ardently estival, did not take long to dissipate, as the season, vanquished by the eternal law, reverted to its normal temperature; and I think that nothing similar would ever have haunted my mind again if, quite a long time after the complete disappearance of the idea, in the early days of the month of April, the newspapers had not reported, with many details, the unexpected and frightful cataclysm that had overwhelmed the island of Java and almost completely destroyed it.<sup>1</sup>

It was, according to the rare survivors of the long disaster, more than a week of unparalleled horror. Amid a rightful and incessant din of thunder, in a darkness in which the sun no longer rose and only lightning provided illumination, mountains sank in the suddenly-split earth, and accumulations of rock and metal in fusion surged forth from lakes of plains: instant mountains soon swallowed up in reopened abysses, while an immense and thin torrential sheet, not of water but of lava, passed over the entire island like an immeasurable scythe, and, cutting through everything—hills, forests, houses—left behind sheaves of ruins.

A formidable inversion of all the rules that regulate matter! Enormous rocks were seen flying, carried by a wind that did not come from the sky; flocks of doves and swans were seen to collapse, made heavier by an unknown weight. The contrary was triumphant in the chaos of the end of a world: a restricted world—less than a continent—but a world nevertheless. And the inhabitants of our entire earth—without conceiving, however, that a sign had been given to them—were astonished by that upheaval, and shivered.

For myself, I understood that sign, that warning. I understood that the Destroyer—the one who was, in the beginning, the Creator—was testing by means of the narrow ruination an universal ruination; that the partial collapse of an island was a sketch of the total catastrophe of the universe.

But why had that sign been given at that precise moment? Why was it in the exact era when I was alive that the imminent derogation had been affirmed of all the rules that had directed and maintained the work of the six days for so long. Why was the end of the world so imminent in my lifetime?

Then the thought returned to me, more precise and more pressing, with an ineluctable urgency, to which the strange winter, warmer than a summer, had previously given birth in me; and, after long, often painful, meditation, I acquired the certainty that the world was going to end because my shadow no longer had a head.

At present, the evidence for that proposition appears to me to be so perfect, Monsieur Almoner, that I believe I would be insulting the perspicacity of your intelligence by insisting any longer on the reasons that determined me to admit it. A learned man like you ought to understand immediately what I, being simple of mind, took a long time to perceive.

Everything in nature is connected. Nothing there can be disordered without the whole being shaken. The ensemble of existing things can be considered as a gigantic house of cards; the almost infinite prolongation of its duration has enabled belief in its solidity: the illusion of the guests in the ephemeral dwelling. Withdraw a single card, however, and everything collapses and scatters. To speak more directly, a single fact deflected in its normal accomplishment, a single point of support removed from the unique and multiple equilibrium, a single law transgressed in the universal order, might imply—what am I saying? must necessarily imply—the dislocation of the entire enormous edifice. And my headless shadow was the fall of everything into nothing.

As soon as that conviction was established in my mind, I became the prey of a frightful and incessant melancholy, not because I was thinking about my own life soon being precipitated in the common disaster, and not because I was thinking about my wife and my children being destined to the most horrible death. Although I had amity for myself and for them, all the tenderness that the heart of a husband and father can contain, a more general concern, more broadly human, alarmed me.

---

<sup>1</sup> Although the specific anomalous phenomena cited in the story are fictitious, the author must have had the devastation caused by the August 1883 eruption of Krakatoa in mind.

No, personal interest was only the lesser cause of my dolor. I had pity for the entire earth, so beautiful, for so many beings fortunate to live there. What? It was true, it was certain that the dawn would no longer smile over the sea, so blue and so mild, and the plain, so green and so flowery? There would no longer be any sun there, since there would no longer be any sky? There would be no more stars there, since the night itself would no longer exist? Oh, my God, to think that, after the frightful hour, the birds would no longer sing in the vanished trees, that nowhere, nowhere, would roses any longer bloom. And so many men and women, who loved one another, would cease to love one another. The noblest projects of glorious ambition would no longer even conclude in the putrescence that follows funerals. On the eve of the universal disaster, fiancés, he twenty, she sixteen, were still exchanging promises...

An immense pity for all things and for all living beings seized my heart without release; as I always had eyelashes moist with tears, people around me said that a weakening of my lachrymal glands was the cause of those tears, those slow, growing tears, which trembled...

No, I was weeping because of the end of the world.

I also experienced I know not what remorse. Certainly, it was not my fault if the frightful cataclysm was so imminent; but after all, it was in me, innocent as I was, that the first sign and the cause of the disaster of everything was produced.

Was there a remedy? Was there a remedy for such a menacing evil?

Pity imposed on me the thought that there might perhaps be a remedy...

The world was about to perish because the law that regulated it had been broken in me, because my shadow had no head. I wondered whether there might not be a means of giving my shadow my head. That result attained, everything, necessarily, would be reestablished in its former order, and the universe would continue to live.

I cannot tell you, Monsieur Almoner—for my ideas on that subject are slightly confused—how long I employed in inventing some stratagem appropriate to repair the abnormality of my figuration on the wall. I only remember that, more than once, I masked myself with several very large masks, hoping that more blackness, more opacity might perhaps interrupt the light. Alas, the masks of my face had no more shadow than my face.

God, who had doubtless felt compassion for the earth and human beings, sent me an inspiration, for which I thank him on my knees.

In order for the peril to be averted, at least for the present, for everything to be returned to the state demanded by natural laws, it was not necessary—why had I thought of that?—that my head appear on the wall; it was sufficient for my shadow to be similar to me. Well, if I ceased to have a head; if, in one fashion or another, I ceased to have a head, my image would no longer be in discord with my form, the universal rule would no longer be violated, and the eternity of life, naturally, would follow its course.

I assure you, Monsieur Almoner, that when that idea came to me, I uttered a cry of joy. Humankind was saved! I did not hesitate or a moment to seize my razor, and, standing next to the window before the narrow mirror, without thinking about the despair of my wife and my children in mourning behind the funeral carriage, I got ready to cut my throat...

But no, the separation of the head from the trunk could not be complete, attempted by my inevitably hesitant hand, of which a horrible torture would attenuate the persistence. I could only be decapitated usefully—which is to say, totally—and I could only become entirely similar to my shadow, with the methodical, tranquil, as if mechanical, aid of someone who would act without passion and without dolor. Only the executioner could make me perfectly similar to my image on the wall or on the road; the executioner alone could give me the joy of saving universal life from annihilation. Oh, the admirable hope: my cadaver, if it were stood upright, similar to its shadow!

But only the worst murders are guillotined...

Oh, Monsieur Almoner, I loved them so much, my children, my daughter above all; I loved her so tenderly, so proudly. She was so pretty. When we went out together, the way people looked at her made me swell with pride. She was blonde, with little hairs over her forehead. I had hesitated for a long time to marry her, because I was so happy to have her with me. However, the following month we were to

celebrate her wedding. She loved her fiancé. They had sworn to me that they would often come to see me, and that they would not send the children they would soon have to a nurse in the country.

The children would remain in Saint-Remy-sur-Oise. It was agreed that I would go every morning to my son-in-law's home to see whether they were well, and to bring them rattles, and later toys. And my wife, slightly given to teasing but fundamentally good, was very content with that arrangement. We said to one another: "Well, old sport, we won't be all alone. The boys will come back from Paris and marry near here. There will be a family that isn't poor, happy and cheerful. In the evening the drawing room on the first floor will scarcely be large enough to hold all those people, who will laugh, amuse one another, tell stories, and we'll all be very content. All of us..."

Oh, Monsieur Almoner, I don't repent of my useful barbarity, but it's frightful nevertheless that it was necessary, in killing them, to do so much harm to my wife and daughter, in order to be sure that I wouldn't be sent to prison, to be sure that my neck would be severed, that my shadow would finally be right, and that the world wouldn't end, and that, for a long, long time, there will still be fiancés and roses...