

THE DANSE MACABRE

The *danse macabre* calls
Which for men and women to learn
Is quite natural for all
Everyone taking their turn.
The Danse Macabre

I. Saint-Jacques-de-la-Boucherie

On the sixth of April 1438, Palm Sunday—the last week of 1437 according to the old calendar, which fixed the commencement of the new year on Easter Day—the offices, processions, vespers and benediction had concluded at six o'clock in the evening at the church of Saint-Jacques-de-la-Boucherie, which was still hung with tapestries, perfumed with incense and illuminated by candles, although the priests and the faithful had gone to their homes for supper and silence reigned inside and out, before nightfall.

That church, of which nothing now remains but the blackened high tower with its symbolic animals, and whose site is occupied by the Cour du Commerce, was not in the fifteenth century as it was seen at the beginning of the Revolution, when the demolishers' hammers had not yet let air and light into the Rue des Arcis and the Rue des Écrivains. In the fifteenth century, the tower did not exist and the ancient chapel of Saint Jacques, known as *la Boucherie* because of the proximity of the great butchery that Philippe-Auguste's encircling wall had enclosed within the city, had grown by degrees to become a considerable parish, although dependent on the Abbaye Saint-Martin-des-Champs, and had given its curé the privileged title of *archi-prêtre* or *prêtre-cardinal*.

The original chapel, which was not dedicated, as some have believed, to St. Anne or Agnes in the tenth century, since that saint was unknown in Paris until the thirteenth, had long been imprisoned in the midst of houses and particular fiefs, of whose owners it gradually acquired the devotion. By virtue of these successive augmentations, it eventually extended all the way from the little Rue du Crucifix to the Rue des Arcis, surrounded by a ring of chapels and enriched by several merchants' associations. The devotion of the butchers of the Grand Châtelet, the Arrode family, Nicolas Boulard and especially the scrivener Nicolas Flamel, who was reputed to know how to make gold,¹ aggrandized and ornamented their parish in an epoch when the silver marc was worth seven livres, when plaster cost one sou per sack and a stone mason earned four sous six deniers per day. Throughout his life, Nicolas Flamel, who bequeathed a part of his wealth to the church council, directed building-work, sculptures and inscriptions, which he spread most generously at Saint-Jacques, edifying the portal in the Rue des Écrivains opposite his Maison de la Fleur-de-Lis, having the stained glass windows painted and preparing his sepulcher, with the narcissistic vanity of frequently repeating his own image, the portrait of his wife Pernelle and the writing-desk that he had taken for his coat-of-arms.

In 1438, Saint-Jacques, newly rebuilt from top to bottom, no longer had any part that was old, black and severe except for its arched square bell-tower facing the Rue Marivault and its somber porch in the Rue du Crucifix, which opened on to the cloister designed to serve the cemetery, permanently full of filth that three demolished houses had amassed in a larger area, even though the curé complained about the putrid odors that penetrated into the baptismal fonts. Scriveners' booths in wood and masonry were attached to the walls of the church like a hideous leprosy, and had invaded the public highway, over which their signs and awnings loomed, to an extent of three or four feet. A few buildings decorated with the title of town houses stifled the southern and eastern sides of the basilica, in which the intermediate habitations conserved windows, so that the profane was narrowly allied with the sacred; one could hear mass in one's bed or one's kitchen.

¹ Nicolas Flamel died in 1418, twenty years before Lacroix's story is set, but he did not acquire a reputation as an alchemist until two hundred years thereafter, so this reference and others in the text are a trifle anachronistic.

A veiled woman entered precipitately through the Porte de la Pierre-au-lait in the Rue du Crucifix, thus named for a cross that did not make its surroundings respectable. A man who was following her went in after her and neglected to offer her holy water. She seemed reassured by the presence of the holy sacrament exposed on the altar above the reliquaries; she slowed her pace and looked more tranquilly at the man she feared less than the house of God; but the holiness of the place, which offered an inviolable sanctuary even to criminals had no power against the audacity of the man, who traverse the nave without bowing and caught up with the fugitive under the arches of the northern aisle, which she had reached during her initial alarm rather than go to the sacristy; She tried to make the sign of the cross in front of the chapel of Saint-Leu and Saint-Gilles, but her hand was stopped in the middle of the line she was describing between her forehead and her breast. She uttered an inarticulate moan, which the echoes of the vault sent back into the organ-pipes, and fell, discouraged, on to a bench with its back to the epitaphs.

"In the name of Our Lord," she said, in a tremulous voice, "in the name of Our Lady, go away from this pious retreat and leave me in peace, Messire."

"Good God, Madame!" replied the young man, who was in no hurry to obey that plea, several times reiterated. "Are you afraid of me today? Has the Devil dressed my face?"

"Yes, the Devil hides beneath genteel semblances to tempt poor sinners! So, I beg you, stop persecuting me so obstinately. Go away; for love of my person and my honor, go!"

"No; for the greater love that I have for you, I shall stay here, whether you like it or not, and I shall tame your rebellious humor, for my heart is consumed by hope and despair."

"Oh well! Hurry up and recite your impieties to me, wretch, and the sin shall be entirely imputed to you at the judgment of souls—but for the sake of my eternal salvation, make sure that no one sees you!"

The woman, vanquished by obstinacy and violence, which she pardoned in the depths of her soul, by reason of their cause, resigned herself with a sigh that was not solely an expression of anxiety, and brought her veil down over her tearful face. She put out a hand to maintain an appropriate distance between herself and the bold young man. Her white and timid hand encountered a sepulchral marble, and shivered at that cold contact. The unknown came to sit down beside her and silently enfolded her in his arms in spite of the mute resistance that she opposed to the strange familiarity.

She was a lady of high status, as was appreciable by the richness of the silks and furs making up her costume. She seemed young and beautiful, although she was veiled, and the admirable perfection of her figure was an undeceptive testimony to the perfection of her features, which she disguised more out of prudence than coquetry, but the grace of her bearing, her dainty feet and charming hands would have made her recognizable to anyone who had seen her before. She wore a green satin gown bordered with grey, with flared sleeves and a heart-shaped neckline; her gilded belt and necklace, especially, advertised her rank and wealth. She wore a rounded hair-net with auricles, not unlike the head-dresses of the time of Saint Louis, and her black velvet shippers were protected from the mire of the streets by a double overshoe equipped with wooden heels and toes, akin to clogs. A rosary of nacre and lemonwood, or cedar, hung from her belt, and under her arm she held a large missal bound in silk with silver clasps, although fashion dictated that the book in question ought to be confided to some ancient follower, a companion obligatory for walking and worship.

The young man was no less recommended by appearances; his handsome face and elegant costume seemed a sufficient guarantee of his distinguished birth and fine position in the nobility. He was of medium height, and remarkable for the harmonious proportion of his supple and vigorous limbs, which was not disguised by his tightly-knitted hose of amaranth wool and the silky cloth of his close-fitting jacket, tightened around his waist with a perfumed Cordovan leather belt. The blue jacket, darker in the chest and slit at the bottom of each side, floated above the knee and did not impede any movement, as a long and ample cloak, like those religiously maintained by old men and the notable of the bourgeoisie, would have done. His boots of blackened leather, laced over the foot, terminated in a flap. His fox-fur cap rose up in a cone with no other ornament than a gold medallion attached to the external rim and a cross of the same metal, which had been missing from the lady's rosary for an entire week.

He had a singular beauty that gave evidence of a foreign origin. The Jewish character imprinted on his physiognomy did not come from a depressed forehead, an oblique gaze or red-tinted hair; his hair was a striking blond color, undulating over his shoulders in natural curls; his large blue eyes

blossomed beneath the shade of lashes; the incarnadine of his lips, always parted by an ironic smile, contrasted with the white of his teeth; even so, the indelible sign of the children of Moses was marked somehow in his eyes and smile. No one would have dared to make the observation, the Jews having been expelled from France by Charles VI in 1394, unable to return on penalty of the noose or the pyre. Nevertheless, the lady had noted with an involuntary pleasure the resemblance the unknown bore to Jesus.

“For God’s sake, Messire,” she said, affecting an angry one, “Are you a Jew or a Saracen, to behave so scandalously in the house of the celestial Savior you see crucified there?”

“Do you think, most excellent lady, that it is necessary to be a good Christian to become a good lover? I see no divinity to serve here but yours.”

“Fie! Don’t proffer such outrageous blasphemies, for fear of damnation. Go about your business, I implore you; my confessor will impose too harsh a penance on me.”

“In that case, I promise to take half of it. Let me see those lovely eyes that shine more brightly than stars and carbuncles; comfort me with love, my beauty.”

“Abstain from that language, Messire; you know that I’m married, and the wife of Monsieur Louis de la Vodrière; I owe him the fidelity that he owes me, and will therefore love him conjugally, as my legitimate and only friend.”

“Truly, Madame, you talked in a better style last Sunday, at vespers, and I remember that you promised me a kiss—the first, but not the last.”

“Alas! Kindly forget my imprudence, of which I’m ashamed; that sin as committed in the church of Sainte-Opportune; that’s why I haven’t been there since the mass in question.”

“Curse the confessor who has inspired such stupid fantasies and displeasing remorse!”

“Oh, don’t curse that venerable priest, who governs me in all things and guides me along the path of virtue; I don’t reproach him for anything, except my deplorable marriage.”

“In sum, you’re no longer saying no to my lamentations; your marriage really is fatal and pernicious; your spouse is austere and ill-disposed—what a piteous life you lead!”

“Not at all, Messire; my little child would be a remedy for the worst ills; you do not understand the delights of a mother, you who have learned the doctrine of the court, who invest your glories in horses, dogs, arms and largesse. Oh, my sweet lord, is he not another father to my dear son!”

“I would have given up the king’s court, the dalliance of the hunt, the honors of war, even the title of gentleman, as the price of your affection, my darling, and I desire no other paradise!”

“You have the election of that place; it will not be taken away from you, Benjamin; persevere in your love without requiring allegiance.”

“Jehanne, tell me to make me content: may I not see you alone before next Sunday during mass? Will you let me come to your house, by day or by night?”

“Be more indulgent, my friend; do not come to Messire de la Vodrière’s house, for the sake of your life and mine; on Sundays, do not prevent me from taking communion.”

“What! Dear lady, do you think you can get rid of me? Can I not see you without danger of death? It does not matter to us whether it is Sunday or the Sabbath, or Easter, provided that we can talk about our love, larded with tender gazes and honest kisses. For that purpose I would risk the most dangerous peril. Tell me, where, when and how I can take you in my arms, call you mine, set you afire with my flame? Tell me that, tyrannical sovereign: soon, tomorrow, tonight, just now?”

“I have a great desire, but little power. No, not soon, a long time—never! Adieu, Benjamin, go away now; I can hear my confessor coming. Go, I beg you!”

The sound of a massive door closing had resounded in the nave, and the tumulary slabs that paved the church sounded under a slow footfall. Jehanne de la Vodrière, as if woken up with a start by that noise, which she recognized, detached herself from an embrace that had become tighter by the minute without her being aware of it, and got to her feet anxiously.

She went to kneel down, her head bowed and her bosom agitated, in the confessional of the chapel opposite, while the young man, disconcerted by that unexpected flight, hesitated to follow her; but the refuge she had chosen and the presence of a witness prevented him from giving way to an excitement that would have compromised them both. Clenching his fists, biting his lips and shaking his beard, he slipped from pillar to pillar and out of the church.

The chapel of Notre-Dame, where Jehanne had taken refuge, has been consecrated since under the invocation of Saint-Michel. Simon Dampmartin, the king’s *valet de chambre*, changer and

bourgeois of Paris, had founded it in 1394, to the right of the choir, opposite the main altar, under a vault known as the crooked piece, so dark that it required illumination to read there even in broad daylight.

The chapel, painted with frescoes in the brightest colors and ornamented with bronze statues of the founder and his wife, lying on their tomb, was perpetually lit by a *roe*, a kind of circular chandelier on a pivot, bristling with candles and maintained by the donations of parishioners, notably the widow Philiberte de Rosières, the mother of Guillaume Sanguin, the merchants' provost. Today, a finely-woven carpet had been added to the ordinary decoration of the chapel, representing scenes from the *Roman de la Rose* and the person known as the God of Amour and Old Age. The butchers' daughters had dressed the image of the Virgin, and coiffed her in a crown of roses; the tombs were strewn with bunches of box-wood branches and green grass.

Scarcely had Jehanne de la Vodrière knelt down in the confessional, a prodigious work of wooden sculpture in the Gothic mode, than an old priest entered his compartment, after having murmured a prayer on the altar steps. Age, in wrinkling his forehead and creasing his eyelids, had not curbed his tall stature; his bald head, surrounded by an aureole of white hair, and his silvery beard gave an air of solemn majesty to his immobile face, whose ivory complexion, piercing eyes and bushy eyebrows imposed respect and confidence. His costume was that of the Dominicans, known in France as Jacobins because their primary convent was situated in the Rue de Saint-Jacques. Père Thibault, who had been brought up in that order since childhood, wore a white woolen robe and a black serge cowl falling to a point over the stomach and as a mantle to the heels, the hood hanging down; his hands were bare and his feet shod. He leaned toward the grille separating him from his penitent, still veiled, and a suave breath caressed the icy face of the old man, who was not only attentive to the confession delivered to his religious ministry.

Jehanne trembled in enumerating the slight faults that aggravated her, as she passed them before the eyes of a judge, a rigid depository of divine authority; only her youth and sex were guilty of errors, which she declared sadly in a voice punctuated by sobs.

The confessor listened in silence, without interrupting the admissions that followed one another at hazard: naïve admissions that would not have made a virgin blush, and whose conclusion was a profound sigh that she would rather have repressed.

Afterwards, she waited with pretended gratitude for the priest to prescribe a penance, and as he was slow to speak to her, she selected from her alms-purse a gold coin bearing a crown, worth fifty sols, and presented it humbly to the Dominican, who made the sign of the cross instead of accepting the offering.

"My daughter," he said, shaking his head, "A confession is only taxed at six sols, and that indecent simony pays the rent due to Monsieur l'Archi-prêtre de Saint-Jacques. For myself, I don't traffic in that fashion with holy things, inasmuch as Jesus expelled the merchants from the Temple."

"Assuredly, my venerable Father, I know your exemplary charity, and I ask you to distribute this money to the needy poor, in order that they might pray for the redemption of my sins."

"Their prayers will not have the power for which you hope, my daughter, of being able to efface a sacrilege, a certain sin concealed from the confession."

"Thank you, Father. My confession is not perfect, since you have not absolved me. Do you want to interrogate me?"

"How is it that you did not say a word about the young seigneur who is pursuing you amorously? Have you sent him away, as is appropriate? Has he repented of his own malignity?"

"Oh, most excellent Father, my tongue dries up in anguish and begs pardon in response."

"Now, I summon you to omit nothing, Jehanne, lest the evil be impossible to heal; I have seen and heard your husband, who complains, who is indignant at your follies, of which I demand an account in the name of God."

"Don't believe him, Monseigneur; the jealousy that is pricking him is forging imaginary terrors and false melancholy, by which I am greatly inconvenienced."

"Speak frankly, my daughter; have you not seen that insulter of conjugal innocence, that love of human vanities and satanic pomps, again?"

"He is not as you paint him, Father, and I call my guardian angel as a witness that I have done my best to avoid encountering him..."

“You see him in secret, then? What has he said to you? Has he told you his name and his title, his wealth and his offices? What have you replied to his villainous propositions?”

“Indeed, I won’t deny it, he has approached me in this very place, and I have proudly insisted that he leave right away—which he did without a murmur, the worthy gentleman.”

“Do you swear by the holy sacrament that this conversation will not have more grievous consequences, my daughter?”

“I shall do my best to make sure of that, I swear—but the spirit is willing and the flesh weak. How I regret not having married such a gallant seigneur!”

“Incline your ear to my advice, Jehanne my daughter; I am the one who baptized you, confessed you and married you, all very honorably, so you cannot doubt the true amity that advises you as to your interests. Do not delay any longer in expelling and avoiding this young man, whoever he is. If not, you will go from bad to worse, for adultery opens the door to all of the seven deadly sins.”

“I would gladly avoid him, if it were possible, but I always find him in my way, and if I stay in my room he walks past the window along the Rue des Bourdonnais. When I go to masses or sermons he sits close by, speaking to me with his gaze no less than his mouth; finally, I have quit Sainte-Opportune, only to find him at Saint-Jacques.”

“God be praised that Messire de la Vodrière has not discovered this impetuous rival. I wash my hands of the blood that would be shed to settle that quarrel.”

“May it please Heaven that there will be no blood or murder! Take back that prophecy, Messire!”

Jehanne dissolved into tears at the idea of a lugubrious presage attached to her destiny. She seemed to hear a sentence of fatality, and the punishment inflicted on her guilty passion took the most menacing forms in her mind. She begged for mercy, her arms raised and her body trembling; she abjured the love that possessed her entirely; she plunged into a ecstasy of devotion, so common in those times when people only lived half on earth.

Père Thibault blessed her, and did not impose any other penance on her than expressly forbidding her to see the unknown author of her sin again.

“Jehanne,” he said to her, generously, “I shall delay granting you absolution again; act in such a way that, after this holy week, you can take communion virtuously.”

She left the confessional so dejected that she had to support herself on the mausoleum of Simon Dampmartin, without having the strength to move forward. Nightfall redoubled the obscurity of the church, where the consumed candles were going out, with sudden surges of their vacillating light. A mephitic air rose from the ground, stuffed with cadavers; a glacial fluid descended from the damp vaults; and in that vague dusk, illuminated by the smoky lamps that were burning for the dead, the pillars, statues tombs and hangings stood out in black, the slightest sound taking on a formidable resonance among them. One might have thought them an assembly of phantoms if an odor of cabbage soup and roast goose had not brought the mind back to the realities of animal life; the curé and the canons were at table.

Jehanne, who feared being stopped on the way and incurring the jealous fury of her husband, begged Père Thibault to accompany her to her home, to excuse her return at that late hour. The Jacobin, who had seen her as an infant in her cradle, remembered having been her mother’s confessor; he was no longer of an age to furnish a text on calumny, and did not hesitate to escort the young woman, whom he regarded almost as his daughter.

She hastened her steps, and he ran out of breath following her through the narrow, tortuous, dark and stinking Rues de la Heaumerie, de la Tableterie, des Lavandiers and des Males-Paroles, whose names have not changed any more than their aspect.

The streets were deserted, the houses silent and the windows dark, their inhabitants asleep before the curfew. Jehanne, however, turned round anxiously at the sound of footsteps that matched her own, and the rattle of a leper clicking behind her.