

THE MURDERED CITY

I

As he was about to light his match, Blasius stopped.

He put it back in the box gently, placed the box on a dirty elm-wood table beside him, and sat down.

With a slow gaze he considered the small room with the low ceiling and the ragged wallpaper where he had dragged out his mediocre life for years.

Near the fireplace, on a cast iron stove three-quarters full of charcoal, two retorts displayed shiny bulbs. A thin glass tube linked their slender necks together. The one on the right was empty. The one on the left contained a red liquid, in which the setting sun caused occasional golden flecks to glimmer. On a small table near the stove, pewter crucibles, chipped trays and multiform test-tubes were heaped up in disorder.

On the shelves in a glass-fronted cupboard, flasks labeled with numbers and chemical formulae; jars with exaggerated curves, and green, yellow and blue bottles contained solutions, powders and mysterious mixtures.

On the walls, portraits of illustrious scientists were completing their gradual fading. They were facing portraits of musicians and poets, and even a few actors of quality, ostentatious between the black sticks of frames: glabrous profiles and arrogant muzzles.

No bed—but on four iron feet fitted with castors, a vast black bear skin stretched like a drumskin and laden with oval cushions.

A wicker armchair into which Blasius had just let himself fall and four disparate chairs completed the furniture of that monastic room.

Leaning his right arm on the chair, Blasius was pensive...

His gaze, with no precise objective, settled on the trees that were perceptible in the large park surrounding the solitary maisonette. It wandered furtively from crown to crown, lingered over box-trees, the acrid odors of which rose toward his nostrils through the open windows, and returned after that luminous voyage to the coupled retorts, the cast-iron stove and all the apparatus of his arduous research, ingrate and terrible labor in which he was at continual risk of leaving his life, after having left his youth therein.

He was very tall and very thin. His hooked nose, like an eagle's beak, and his prominent chin, gave him a hard and antipathetic appearance. The reflections of his steel-gray eyes penetrated the surroundings, seeming to dissect them like living scalpels, and his pale hands, as delicate as feminine hands, burned in places by mixtures concocted during quotidian experiments, appeared too weak to sustain his forehead, of a seeker and a visionary.

He did not wear the kind of smock usually worn by scientists, but his long fleshless body floated in a chocolate brown monastic habit attached at the waist by a knotted rope. The extremity of that rope hung down the left-hand upright of the armchair, and from time to time Blasius seized it with his unoccupied hand and swung it rhythmically around his legs.

He had arrived one morning, from no one knew where, in front of the abandoned maisonette. He had examined it carefully from every side and had left again, furnished with the information provided by the notice pinned to the entry door.

Then, after an interval of five days, the gate of the house had groaned under the pressure of a vigorous arm, tearing up the wild grass and gravel of the pathway; and through the gaping opening a vehicle covered by a tarpaulin had come, halting in front of the mossy stones of the perron.

Moving in, accomplished by Blasius without any external aid, had not taken long. No neighbor, in any case, was disturbed by the resurrection of those lethargic walls, for the dwelling least distant from the retreat was more than an hour's walk away.

The vehicle departed the same evening. The gate closed again, and silence extended its soft wings once again over the closed garden and the leafy hermitage.

Having organized his material life, choosing the suppliers who were to provide him with food and drink, Blasius installed his laboratory, and, deaf to the appeals of any ambient joy and splendor, he set to work.

Day and night, for years, he buried himself amid his retorts and crucibles. When his effort was crowned by a result, when another discovery was added to the previous discoveries, Blasius untied his belt of rope, took off his monk's habit, donned inelegant garments and took a train to the distant city. He stayed there for a week—rarely two—and then, still alone, still mute, he returned to his retreat and recommenced his labor.

He went back to it, driven by an invincible force, but with death in his soul. For, every time he departed for the somber city, taking with him the formula of a new discovery, he came back having been thrown out, demolished and soiled by the arbiters of renown and science, with such commentaries that he doubted himself for months.

During his tragic returns he dreamed of crazy vengeance. He extended his ascetic fists toward the abominable horde, and he wrapped in his hatred the most criminal, the purest and the most pitiful ideas.

Then the days went by, gray or blue. The peace of the next day attenuated the fury of the one before, and gradually, in slow animate undulations, serenity entered into him again. He found himself calm enough once again to reflect, to measure the vanity of his anger. And he continued his bitter route, without friends, without affection, alone in an insensible world, like an autumn leaf blown by the north wind in the middle of a forest.

Avenge oneself? On whom and on what? Does one avenge oneself on the world when one is, as he had been for forty years, a poor creature of impotence and obscurity? Does one avenge oneself on life when one has always vegetated on the margin of one's fellows, and when one does not even possess an exact notion of existence? Oh, yes! He would have avenged himself if he had been able to remain malevolent to the end. But to savor vengeance like those he desired, it is necessary to be rich and powerful, and he was, alas, neither powerful nor rich. Then again, it was better to resign oneself, to accept from life that which it wants to give, without extenuating oneself demanding the impossible.

And thus, he had come to bury himself in the depths of this valley, away from habitual routes, in an area similar to neighboring areas, but more deserted.

He had chosen this house, which the weight of ivy, wisteria and odorous foliage seemed to be crushing; this house, which gave him the impression of kneeling before the immense solitude. And little by little, after heart-rending dolors, the quietude of the surroundings submerged him. The charm of that adorable summer circled his scarred heart like a great veil of perfumes and harmonies; and in the pure air, in the healthy and limpid atmosphere, the creative force of his brain was multiplied tenfold.

Once again, after all, he became the visionary infatuated with the ungraspable. Tomorrow he would accomplish such prodigies that perhaps his enemies would finally recognize him as the foremost among sages. And before that contrition, before that reparation, he would forget everything; and nothing more would prevent him henceforth from arriving at the realization of the great work to which he consecrated all his genius, incessantly and without weakening. For, since the failure of his *Treatise on active and passive cerebral phenomena*, Blasius, who had sounded the arcana of chemistry, physics and occultism, had abandoned the elevated psychic, esoteric and spiritualist science in order to absorb himself uniquely in experiments in transmutation.

With an obstinate patience, in his rudimentary laboratory, he had studied the properties of radium. Progressively, in the course of dangerous trials, but from which he had always emerged without serious accidents, he had disintegrated that simple substance into a series of new elements.

And today, in the splendor of this regal dusk, he had prepared an experiment whose success would permit him, later, to regulate all the phases of the spontaneous transmutation.

He would triumph, he was certain of it. But a sudden anguish gripped him at the moment of action; and he, the audacious, the resolute, dared not even strike the match that would ignite his burner.

And then, what was the point? If he succeeded, did he imagine, perchance, that the masters would recognize his success? As from each of his journeys, he would come back from that one trailing his feet through the mud, defamed, more beaten down than ever by human stupidity and injustice.

Outside, night was falling gradually. The wind seemed to be expiring amid the foliage of the plane trees and the flowers on the bushes. The cries of birds could no longer be heard, and in the distance, on the slope of some fissured hill, two owls were launching nostalgic ululations into the star-spangled air. In the great nocturnal silence, compounded from a thousand imperceptible sonorities, the heart of the solitary individual constricted. He could not resolve to quit his armchair, approach the stove, heat the retorts and tempt God.

And yet he had to. He had to! He had to dare, under pain of failing in his own eyes.

And suddenly, he got up, determined.

He struck his match, first lit the incandescent lamp that he used for illumination, and then, with the same piece of ardent wood he set fire to the paper on which the charcoal was heaped.

The sheets twisted; with a dull growl the flame was engulfed in the sheet-metal flue, and the charcoal began to crackle with little dry sounds. Gradually, the entire hearth reddened, and, with a monotonous song, globules agitated in the bulb of frosted glass

Leaning over the stove, Blasius followed the progress of the heat with a passionate attention. A thermometer fixed to the interior wall of a retort indicated the exact temperature to him, and vapors were already flowing, in little spurts, through a hole pierced at the summit of the tube linking the two instruments.

Now the mixture was approaching boiling point. The vapor became denser and spread, whistling, into the laboratory. Large bubbles departed from the bottom of the retorts, traversing the liquid mass from bottom to top, and came to burst on the surface with the gurgles of a sick man choking on his own fluids.

The chemical compound gradually turned from red to blue, with glints of orange. Then the boiling was affirmed.

Blasius leaned toward the thermometer more attentively. At the same time he took out his watch, and placed it close to him on the stove, ready to remove the retorts when he judged the moment opportune.

He counted the seconds in a low voice, in order to operate with more certainty.

As he pronounced the number six, an explosion pulverized the receptacles, caused the chemical composition to spurt up to the ceiling in circles, jets and droplets, while the violence of the blast threw the experimenter backwards, and an unbearable acidity invaded the small room. Ruddy, heavy smoke, spread like a carpet over the floor by awkward hands, rolled around faded drapes, flattened beneath portraits, was incrustated in the interstices of frames, and gradually extinguished the fire. Mephitic odors spread through the laboratory, seizing Blasius by the throat, interposing themselves between the pure air and his nostrils. He struggled, trying to reach the exit, or to reopen the window, which he had carefully closed at the beginning of the experiment. It was in vain; asphyxia defeated him. The more he opened his mouth in order to gulp the salutary air, the more the nauseating gas plunged into his lungs.

Then he tried to call for help; but nothing emerged from his throat but muffled roans. And, more implacable from one second to the next, the mysterious poison paralyzed him. Like an inert mass, he collapsed next to the armchair; he stayed there for a long time, unconscious.

Meanwhile, the yellow vapors accomplished their slow ascensional labor. Having surpassed the top of the cupboard in which Blasius stacked his bottles and glassware, they stopped at the ceiling and maintained themselves there like miniature clouds beneath a sky of sorcery. They formed a compact layer, and from one minute to the next the particles of gas still lingering in the room came to add to that lake of moving smoke. By rising up in that fashion they cleared the atmosphere. And when there was no longer any noxious swirl in the laboratory, the salutary air returned to Blasius's nostrils.

First he agitated feebly and moaned. Then he tried to move, sensing his strength reborn. Painfully, he pushed himself up, supporting himself on his hands. His eyes, adapting to the obscurity, gradually distinguished objects and furniture. He dragged himself to the table, found a lighter in his pocket, and was

able to light the stub of a candle picked up from underneath a chair. Once the candle was lit, a feeble gleam illuminated the room.

Then, hanging on to the edge of the rectangular table, Blasius got to his feet. Dazed, his eyes vague, he let himself fall on to a stool, with his head between his hands, and he strove to pull himself together. He cracked his knuckles, kneaded the muscles of his neck and stretched his thin legs. In the course of those gymnastics, he perceived the clouds heaped up against the ceiling.

Now he remembered! But before anything else, it was necessary to purify the atmosphere, to escape the poison whose origin he did not know, and which had nearly stifled him.

He went down on all fours again, and, crawling like a seal, he reached the door and opened it.

A wave of embalmed air invaded the laboratory; all the nocturnal effluvia rushed in, with a powerful surge, against the vapor accumulated under the ceiling.

Standing up, Blasius unfastened the window-catches, and it was no longer a mere gust of fresh air but an irresistible current that swept away all the smoke, expelling it into the splendor of the night like something hateful, and soon took possession again of the maisonette, to the song of toads and crickets intoxicated by the dew.

And when the last swirl of toxic substance had disappeared into the profound blue of the ether, Blasius sat down on an old bench facing the door. He seized an earthenware jug that he had filled from the well, drank a long draught of clear water, set the jug down at his feet, and sat there, motionless but resuscitated.

The breath of the rose bushes, the soul of wallflowers and magnolias, and the exhalations of honeysuckle and laburnum were mingled around his silvery hair. He did not feel sufficiently lucid, as yet, to analyze his adventure, to search for the causes of the explosion and the failure of his experiment, but he was alive! For the moment, he demanded nothing more.

In the distance, a monotonous cuckoo responded to the ululation of the owls.

Reassured, Blasius went back inside. With fearful precautions, he picked up the fragments of glass that littered the floor. Then, having cleared the parquet, he leaned over the stove, lamp in hand. No trace of liquid; here and there, a few scoria, reminiscent enough of clinker, and, on the edge of the extinct hearth, a morsel of lava twice the size of a walnut.

Blasius picked it up in his fingers, examined it attentively from every angle, and murmured: "That's prodigious! I expected lead, and this resembles pumice stone. Anyway, I'll see tomorrow what it is and I'll study the means of recommencing the experiment."

He opened a large drawer occupying the full length of the table, threw the stone into the midst of an accumulation of miscellaneous objects, and closed the drawer again with an abrupt movement. Then he lay down on his black bearskin couch, fully dressed, arranged a pile of cushions under his head, turned over on to his right side, and fell into a profound sleep.