

## THE AMERICAN SCULPTOR

Paris is a singular city. False miracles make an enormous racket there, while true miracles remain absolutely unknown.

Thus, the Davenports' cupboard, Talrich's talking head and the torpedo-child occupied public attention for months, but no one at all thinks of recounting the marvels accomplished by Mr. Bread.<sup>1</sup>

In truth, the latter avoids renown with as much care as others seek it, which is rare in a compatriot of Barnum.

Personally, I owe my acquaintance with Mr. Bread and his corrections of nature to the greatest of hazards.

The other day, I was going up the Rue Blanche at about one o'clock. The ascent of the Rue Blanche is a very difficult thing, but it becomes a little less so when one has ahead of one a well-dressed young woman walking with grace. That sometimes happens.

This time I had before me a young woman with a very advantageous figure and beautiful blonde hair, the latter flowing over the former and seemingly authentic, and desirable legs. From what I could see, only the shoulders left something to be desired. As elevated in their attachment to the arm as in their attachment to the neck, they did not have an appropriate curve, and I said to myself: *It's a pity that it isn't in the power of any human to give them the slope that the sovereign artist has adopted in designing human shoulders. Oh, if they were only in stone, I believe that, with the aid of a chisel, even though I'm not a sculptor, I'd be able to lift them as much as they need to be lifted; but even the author of the Venus of the Capitol could do nothing. He couldn't displace those bones or those muscles.*

I was carrying out that petty reasoning internally when I was overtaken by a strange tall gentleman who approached the lady in the gravest and most polite fashion, and asked her whether she would like to rearrange her shoulders.

The lady looked at him with a fearful expression and begged him to go on his way.

He persisted: "You're mistaken, Madam; you are a beautiful person; it is only your shoulders that spoil you. A brief session would suffice to lower them for you."

In the meantime, the lady shrugged them and went into number 78.

"Do you understand that?" he asked, turning to me. "I offer that lady something that she ought to accept with enthusiasm...of course, she imagines that I'm making fun of her."

"I fear so," I said.

"That's the only excuse for treating me like that.," he went on, "but a man who has straightened up women who were entirely hunchbacked, his own wife among others, can incline with all the more reason two or three lines of the shoulders of a woman who has a very good figure otherwise."

"You're an orthopedist?" I said, examining the bizarre individual, whose poorly-fitted wig allowed the skin of his scalp to show in places and whose long side-whiskers resembled the bristles of a wild boar, while his broken nose and little colorless eyes, mobile and distorted, gave him the appearance of a caricature.

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<sup>1</sup> The Davenport brothers, Erastus and William, were fake spiritualist mediums active from the 1850s to the 1870s whose most famous trick involved their being tied up inside a large box containing musical instruments, which would begin to play when the box was sealed. Jules Talrich (1826-1904) was an anatomical sculptor famous for making lifelike heads. He opened a wax museum in Paris in 1867. The "torpedo-child"—torpedo presumably referring to the fish also known as an electric ray—may be one of the "electric boys" exhibited in the latter part of the 19th century capable of inducing electric shocks when charged with static electricity, but the easily-discoverable references postdate the story.

“Orthopedist! Not at all—not, at least, as it is usually understood. I’m a sculptor, but for a long time I haven’t worked in clay, stone or marble. I model human bodies themselves, or rather, remodel them, when Nature has modeled them poorly.”

“Oh! Really?” *He’s a poor lunatic*, I thought. *He doesn’t seem malevolent. It’s necessary not to offend him.* “And what instrument do you use?” I added.

“No instrument! I only have to move my hands over someone’s body, with a premeditated design; it immediately takes on the forms that it pleases me to imprint on it. It’s a very personal gift, for until now, I haven’t been able to take any pupils.”

“So,” I replied, striving to remain as serious as possible, “when it pleases you to change a man into a woman, and *vice versa*, that’s the easiest thing in the world for you?”

“Oh, that, no,” he said. “My power doesn’t go that far. It’s limited to refashioning the skeletal system and the carnal fabric over the bones, the sex, age and animal quantity remain the same. I can’t make an individual pass from one sex to the other, rejuvenate him or take away any of the constituent molecules, but if someone gives me a Don Quixote and a Sancho Panza, I’ll undertake to extract two well-proportioned men by the development of one in breadth and the other in height. Do you grasp my meaning?”

“Perfectly, Monsieur,” I said, astounded to see a madman reasoning with such precision.

“You, for example,” Mr. Bread continued, “have a face that’s a trifle long..”

“Alas, Monsieur, I agree.”

“Well, I’d only require a few seconds to shorten it...here, like this...”

And at the same time, before I could react, he put one of his hands to my chin and the other to my forehead, and pressed rapidly—without, moreover, causing me the slightest pain.

In the movement, my hat had fallen off; he hastened to pick it up and hand it to me, with exquisite politeness.

I was furious, however, that the lunatic had manhandled my face like that, and I thought that the expression of his folly had surpassed the limit.

“I beg you to stop,” I exclaimed.

“I certainly don’t want to leave you in that state,” he replied, very calmly. “It’s necessary for me to finish what I started. You only have the sketch as yet of the new face I intend for you, and when I say sketch, I’m very honest, for in struggling, you caused my hands to slip in such a fashion that, involuntarily, I’ve compressed your face too much between the forehead and the chin.”

“No matter,” I said, with a pitying smile; I’m content with the sketch, imperfect as it may be. Adieu, Monsieur.”

He held me back by the sleeve.

“It’s impossible,” he protested, “for me to leave you with a face like that. You’re horrible.”

“That’s fine by me...”

“I see; you’re reluctant to look at it. Would you like me to accompany you home?”

*Who is this animal? I thought. Is he mad? Is he a crook? Is he something else?*

“I want you to leave me alone this instant,” I said, energetically.

“So much the worse for you,” he said, “but here’s my name and address. I’m convinced that you won’t take long to come to see me.”

I took his card mechanically, and went home as fast as possible.

My concierge, who was near the stairway, in the process of waxing my boots, stopped me in the corridor by saying: “Who do you want, Monsieur?”

“Ah! So, Père Sauvage, you’re mocking people? You don’t know me now?”

“I know your voice, your hazelnut-colored overcoat, your silver ring with a black stone, your thick yellow cane and the boots you have on your feet, which I waxed yesterday, but never in my life have I seen you with such a head.”

“It’s certain, Père Sauvage, that my features must be a trifle upset. I encountered a madman just now who took all the trouble in the world to knead me.”

“What? Features a trifle upset? That’s to say that they’re no longer your own—that you have someone else’s face.”

“Get away, you old joker!” I said to my concierge. And I went upstairs at a run.

I went into my apartment, whistling a tune from *Thérèse* cheerfully. As was my habit, I put my hat down on the writing-desk, my cane in the corner of the fireplace and my overcoat on the bed. Then I darted a glance at the mirror.

Immediately, I uttered a cry of horror. Unless I was also seeing things, like my concierge, unless I had gone mad, like the corrector of Nature, it appeared to me that I definitely no longer had my habitual face.

Whereas before, it had measured about ten inches high by about five wide, it must presently have measured the opposite: five high by ten wide: one of those ridiculous and odious faces that certain distorting mirrors show you.

Although I had also proved a hundred times over that that one was accurate, I looked sideways at the one on my dressing-table, and then yet another.

Always the same head!

Then I tried to squeeze it with both hands on the sides, in order to make it resume its original shape.

Vain efforts!

I had an equal desire to laugh and to weep: to laugh because my present head was reminiscent of that of a notary of my acquaintance; to weep because I thought that it was even worse than his.

With that, there were three curt raps on my door.

Great God! I knew those three little raps. And when I heard them, my heart ordinary skipped a beat. But where was I going to hide my head, for I no longer dared show it to the lady of my dreams, as people used to say—or the lady of my expenses, as one says nowadays?

Well, yes!

I would show it to her, in order to judge as a last resort whether I had or had not been metamorphosed.

I opened my door and my arms.

She gazed, nonplussed.

“Pardon me, Monsieur, I’ve made a mistake...”

“Alas, no, you’re not mistaken, angel of my life! It’s really me, your friend. Don’t you recognize my voice? Enter without fear. Nothing has changed here apart from my head; and then, believe me, it’s only a transitory head that I have here...I can give myself any head you like; you only have to choose. Look, here’s the card of the animal who will render me a handsome fellow.”

*MR. JOHN BREAD*  
*American Sculptor*  
*124 Rue de Vaugirard*

She remained petrified. Then, suddenly: “No, it’s not possible that that’s you. Adieu, Monsieur!”

And there she goes, descending the stairs four at a time. I shout over the banister: “Rose, Rosa! What would you like my new head to look like? Reply to me, I implore you...it won’t cost Mr. Bread any more. Would you like me to have a turned-up nose or a cleft chin? Do you like that sort of thing? Would you like my wayward little beard to be reassembled into a moustache, and an imposing imperiale? Rosa...!”

But Rosa was already far away.

I began to rage against Mr. Bread, who was the cause of the fact that I was about to spend a detestable evening, when I could have promised myself a charming one.

It was too late to go in search of the accursed American sculptor, who was probably not at home anyway. Sufficiently edified as to the reality of the change that had been operated in me, I did not judge it appropriate to show my horrible head to anyone else. So I deprived myself of dining, as I had the habit of doing, with a few of my friends, and I went to dine on my own in a restaurant where no one knew me, and then I went home to bed.

TO BE CONTINUED IN THE BOOK