

Le Messe Noir

J.K. Huysmans from La Bas (Down There)

Jn a fiacre they went up the rue de Vaugirard. Mme. Chantelouve was as in a shell and spoke not a word. Durtal looked closely at her when, as they passed a street lamp, a shaft of light played over her veil a moment, then winked out. She seemed agitated and nervous beneath her reserve. He took her hand. She did not withdraw it. He could feel the chill of it through her glove, and her blonde hair tonight seemed disordered, dry, and not so fine as usual.



Felicien Rops

“Nearly there?”

But in a low voice full of anguish she said, "Do not speak."

Bored by this taciturn, almost hostile tete-a-tete, he began to examine the route through the windows of the cab. The street stretched out interminable, already deserted, so badly paved that at every step the cab springs creaked. The lamp-posts were beginning to be further and further apart. The cab was approaching the ramparts.

"Singular itinerary," he murmured, troubled by the woman's cold, inscrutable reserve.

Abruptly the vehicle turned up a dark street, swung around, and stopped.

Hyacinthe got out. Waiting for the cabman to give him his change, Durtal inspected the lay of the land. They were in a sort of blind alley. Low houses, in which there was not a sign of life, bordered a lane that had no sidewalk. The pavement was like billows. Turning around, when the cab drove away, he found himself confronted by a long high wall above which dry leaves rustled in the shadows. A little door with a square grating it was cut into the thick unlighted wall, which was seamed with fissures. Suddenly, further away, a ray of light shot out of a show window, and, doubtless attracted by the sound of the cab wheels, a man wearing the black apron of a wine shop keeper lounged through the shop door and spat on the threshold.

"This is the place'." said Mme. Chanteloupe.

She rang. The grating opened. She raised her veil. A shaft of lantern light struck her full in the face, the door opened noiselessly, and they penetrated into a garden.

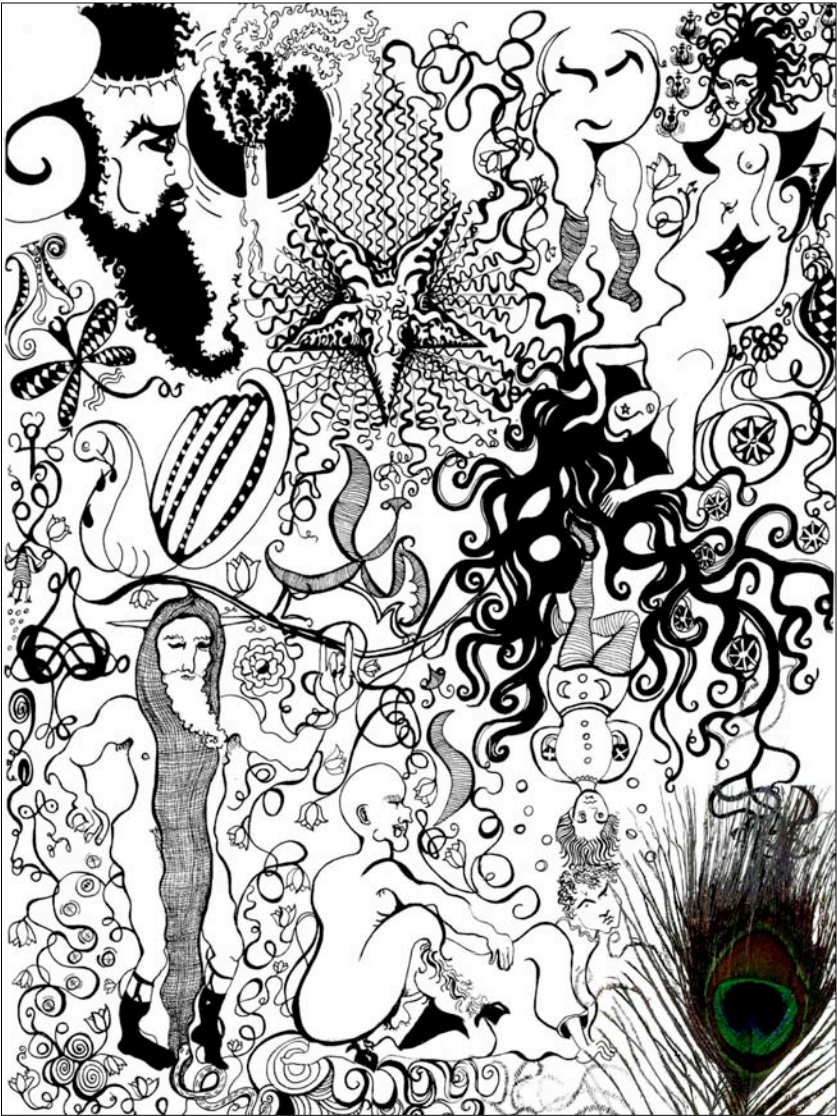
"Good evening, madame."

"Good evening, Marie. In the chapel?"

"Yes. Does madame wish me to guide her?"

"No, thanks."

The woman with the lantern scrutinized Durtal. He perceived, beneath a hood, wisps of grey hair falling in disorder over a wrinkled old



Eric K. Lerner

face, but she did not give him time to examine her and returned to a tent beside the wall serving her as a lodge.

He followed Hyacinthe, who traversed the dark lanes, between rows of palms, to the entrance of a building. She opened the doors as if she were quite at home, and her heels clicked resolutely on the flagstones.

“Be careful,” she said, going through a vestibule. “There are three steps.”

They came out into a court and stopped before an old house. She rang. A little man advanced, hiding his features, and greeted her in an affected, sing-song voice. She passed, saluting him, and Durtal brushed a fly-blown face, the eyes liquid, gummy, the cheeks plastered with cosmetics, the lips painted.

“I have stumbled into a lair of sodomists.—You didn’t tell me that I was to be thrown into such company,” he said to Hyacinthe, overtaking her at the turning of a corridor lighted by a lamp.

“Did you expect to meet saints here?”

She shrugged her shoulders and opened a door. They were in a chapel with a low ceiling crossed by beams gaudily painted with coal-tar pigment. The windows were hidden by great curtains. The walls were cracked and dingy. Durtal recoiled after a few steps. Gusts of humid, mouldy air and of that indescribable new-stove acidity poured out of the registers to mingle with an irritating odour of alkali, resin, and burnt herbs. He was choking, his temples throbbing.

He advanced groping, attempting to accustom his eyes to the half-darkness. The chapel was vaguely lighted by sanctuary lamps suspended from chandeliers of gilded bronze with pink glass pendants. Hyacinthe made him a sign to sit down, then she went over to a group of people sitting on divans in a dark corner. Rather vexed at being left here, away from the centre of activity, Durtal noticed that there were many women and few men present, but his efforts to discover their features were

unavailing. As here and there a lamp swayed, he occasionally caught sight of a Junonian brunette, then of a smooth-shaven, melancholy man. He observed that the women were not chattering to each other. Their conversation seemed awed and grave. Not a laugh, not a raised voice, was heard, but an irresolute, furtive whispering, unaccompanied by gesture.

“Hmm,” he said to himself. “It doesn’t look as if Satan made his faithful happy.”

A choirboy, clad in red, advanced to the end of the chapel and lighted a stand of candles. Then the altar became visible. It was an ordinary church altar on a tabernacle above which stood an infamous, derisive Christ. The head had been raised and the neck lengthened, and wrinkles, painted in the cheeks, transformed the grieving face to a bestial one twisted into a mean laugh. He was naked, and where the loincloth should have been, there was a virile member projecting from a bush of horsehair. In front of the tabernacle the chalice, covered with a pall, was placed. The choir boy folded the altar cloth, wiggled his haunches, stood tiptoe on one foot and flipped his arms as if to fly away like a cherub, on pretext of reaching up to light the black tapers whose odour of coal tar and pitch was now added to the pestilential smell of the stuffy room.

Durtal recognized beneath the red robe the “fairy” who had guarded the chapel entrance, and he understood the role reserved for this man, whose sacrilegious nastiness was substituted for the purity of childhood acceptable to the Church.

Then another choir boy, more hideous yet, exhibited himself. Hollow chested, racked by coughs, withered, made up with white grease paint and vivid carmine, he hobbled about humming. He approached the tripods flanking the altar, stirred the smouldering incense pots and threw in leaves and chunks of resin.

Durtal was beginning to feel uncomfortable when Hyacinthe rejoined him. She excused herself for having left him by himself so long,

invited him to change his place, and conducted him to a seat far in the rear, behind all the rows of chairs.

“This is a real chapel, isn’t it?” he asked.

“Yes. This house, this church, the garden that we crossed, are the remains of an old Ursuline convent. For a long time this chapel was used to store hay. The house belonged to a livery-stable keeper, who sold it to that woman,” and she pointed out a stout brunette of whom Durtal before had caught a fleeting glimpse.

“Is she married?”

“No. She is a former nun who was debauched long ago by Docre.”

“Ah. And those gentlemen who seem to be hiding in the darkest places?”

“They are Satanists. There is one of them who was a professor in the School of Medicine. In his home he an oratorium where he prays to a ‘statue of Venus Astarte mounted on an altar.’”

“No!”

“I mean it. He is getting old, and his demoniac orisons increase tenfold his forces, which he is using up with creatures of that sort,” and with a gesture she indicated the choirboys.

“You guarantee the truth of this story?”

“You will find it narrated at great length in a religious” journal. *Les annales de la saintete*. And though his identity was made pretty patent in the article, the man did not dare prosecute the editors. - What’s the matter with you?” she asked, looking at him closely.

“I’m strangling. The odqur from those incense burners is unbearable.”

“You will get used to it in a few seconds.”

“But what do they burn that smells like that?”

“Asphalt from the street, leaves of henbane, datura, dried nightshade, and myrrh. These are perfumes delightful to Satan, our

master.” She spoke in that changed, guttural voice which had been hers at times when in bed with him. He looked her squarely in the face. She was pale, the lips pressed tight, the pluvius eyes blinking rapidly.

“Here he comes!” she murmured suddenly, while women in front of them scurried about or knelt in front of the chairs.

Preceded by the two choir boys the canon entered, wearing a scarlet bonnet from which two buffalo horns of red cloth protruded. Durtal examined him as he marched toward the altar. He was tall, but not well built, his bulging chest being out of proportion to the rest of his body. His peeled forehead made one continuous line with his straight nose. The lips and cheeks bristled with that kind of hard, clumpy beard which old priests have who’ have always shaved themselves. The features were round and insinuating, the eyes, like apple pips, close together, phosphorescent. As a whole his face was evil and sly, but energetic, and the hard, fixed eyes were not the furtive, shifty orbs that Durtal had imagined.

The canon solemnly knelt before the altar, then mounted the steps and began to say mass. Durtal saw then that he had nothing on beneath his sacrificial habit. His black socks and his flesh bulging over the garters, attached high up on his legs, were plainly visible. The chasuble had the shape of an ordinary chasuble but was of the dark red colour of dried blood, and in the middle, in a triangle around which was an embroidered border of colchicum, savin, sorrel, and spurge, was the figure of a black billy-goat presenting his horns.

Docre made the genuflexions, the full- or half-length inclinations specified by the ritual. The kneeling choirboys sang the Latin responses in a crystalline voice which trilled on the ultimate syllables of the words.

“But it’s a simple low mass,” said Durtal to Mme. Chantelouve.

She shook her head. Indeed, at that moment the choir boys passed behind the altar and one of them brought back copper chafing-dishes, the other, censers, which they distributed to the congregation. All the

women enveloped themselves in the smoke. Some held their heads right over the chafing-dishes and inhaled deeply, then, fainting, unlaced themselves, heaving raucous sighs.

The sacrifice ceased. The priest descended the steps backward, knelt on the last one, and in a sharp, tripidant voice cried:

“Master of Slanders, Dispenser of the benefits of crime, Administrator of sumptuous sins and great vices, Satan, thee we adore, reasonable God, just God!

“Superadmirable legate of false trances, thou receivest our beseeching tears; thou savest the honour of families by aborting wombs impregnated in the forgetfulness of the good orgasm; thou dost suggest to the mother the hastening of untimely birth, and thine obstetrics spares the still-born children the anguish of maturity, the contamination of original sin.

“Mainstay of the despairing Poor, Cordial of the Van-quished, it is thou who endowest them with hypocrisy, in-gratitude, and stiff-neckedness, that they may defend them-selves against the children of God, the Rich.

“Suzerain of Resentment, Accountant of Humiliations, Treasurer of old Hatreds, thou alone dost fertilize the brain of man whom injustice has crushed; thou breathest into him the idea of meditated vengeance, sure misdeeds; thou incitest him to murder; thou givest him the abundant joy of accomplished reprisals and permittest him to taste the intoxicating draught of the tears of which he is the cause.

“Hope of Virility, Anguish of the Empty Womb, thou dost not demand the bootless offering of chaste loins, thou dost not sing the praises of Lenten follies; thou alone receivest the carnal supplications and petitions of poor arid avaricious families. Thou determinest the mother to sell her daughter, to give her son; thou aidest sterile and reprobate loves; Guardian of strident Neuroses, Leaden Tower of Hysteria, bloody Vase of Rape!

“Master, thy faithful servants, on their knees, implore thee and supplicate thee to satisfy them when they wish the torture of all those who love them and aid them; they supplicate thee to assure them the joy of delectable misdeeds unknown to justice, spells whose unknown origin baffles the reason of man; they ask, finally, glory, riches, power, of thee, King of the Disinherited, Son who art to overthrow the inexorable Father !”

Then Docre rose, and erect, with arms outstretched, vociferated in a ringing voice of hate:

“And thou, thou whom, in my quality of priest, I force, whether thou wilt or no, to descend into this ‘host, to in-carnate thyself in this bread, Jesus, Artisan of Hoaxes, Bandit of Homage, Robber of Affection, hear! Since the day when thou didst issue from the complaisant bowels of a Virgin, thou hast failed all thine engagements, belied all thy promises. Centuries have wept, awaiting thee, fugitive God, mute God I Thou wast to redeem man and thou hast not, thou wast to appear in thy glory, and thou sleepest. Go, lie, say to the wretch who appeals to thee, ‘Hope, be patient, suffer; the hospital of souls will receive thee; the angels will assist thee; Heaven opens to thee.’ Impostor I thou knowest well that the angels, disgusted at thine inert-ness, abandon thee! Thou wast to be the Interpreter of our complaints, the Chamberlain of our tears; thou wast to convey them to the Father and thou hast not done so, for this intercession would disturb thine eternal sleep of happy satiety.

“Thoti hast forgotten the poverty thou didst preach, enamoured vassal of Banks! Thou hast seen the weak crushed beneath the press of profit; thou hast heard the death rattle of the timid, paralyzed by famine, of women disembowelled for a bit of bread, and thou hast caused the Chancery of thy Simoniacs, thy commercial representatives, thy Popes, to answer by dilatory excuses and evasive promises, sacristy Shyster, huckster God!

“Master, whose inconceivable ferocity engenders life and inflicts it on the innocent whom thou darest damn - in the name of what original sin ? - - whom thou darest punish - by the virtue of what covenants ? - - we would have thee confess thine impudent cheats, thine inexpiable crimes! We would drive deeper the nails into thy hands, press down the crown of thorns upon thy brow, bring blood and water from the dry wounds of thy sides.

“And that we can and will do by violating the quietude of thy body, Profaner of ample vices, Abstractor of stupid purities, cursed Nazarene, do-nothing King, coward God!”

“Amen!” trilled the soprano voices of the choirboys.

Durtal listened in amazement to this torrent of blasphemies and insults. The foulness of the priest stupefied him. A silence succeeded the litany. The chapel was foggy with the smoke of the censers. The women, hitherto taciturn, flustered now, as, remounting the altar, the canon turned toward them and blessed them with his left hand in a sweeping gesture. And suddenly the choirboys tinkled the prayer bells.

It was a signal. The women fell to the carpet and writhed. One of them seemed to be worked by a spring. She threw herself prone and waved her legs in the air. Another, suddenly struck by a hideous strabism, clucked, then becoming tongue-tied stood with her mouth open, the tongue turned back, the tip cleaving to the palate. Another, in-flated, livid, her pupils dilated, lolled her head back over her shoulders, then jerked it brusquely erect and belaboured herself, tearing her breast with her nails. Another, sprawl-ing on her back, undid her skirts, drew forth a rag, enormous, meteorized; then her face twisted into a horrible grim-ace, and her tongue, which she could not control, stuck out, bitten at the edges, harrowed by red teeth, from a bloody mouth.

Suddenly Durtal rose, and now he heard and saw Docre distinctly.

Docre contemplated the Christ surmounting the taber-nacle, and with arms spread wide apart he spewed forth frightful insults, and, at the

end of his forces, muttered the billingsgate of a drunken cabman. One of the choirboys knelt before him with his back toward the altar. A shudder ran around the priest's spine. In a solemn but jerky voice he said, "Hoc est enim corpus meum," then, instead of kneeling, after the consecration, before the precious Body, he faced the congregation, and appeared tumefied, haggard, dripping with sweat. He staggered between the two choirboys, who, raising the chasuble, displayed his naked belly. Docre made a few passes and the host sailed, tainted and soiled, over the steps.

Durtal felt himself shudder.' A whirlwind of hysteria shook the room. While the choirboys sprinkled holy water on the pontiff's nakedness, women rushed upon the Eucharist and, groveling in front of the altar, clawed from the bread humid particles and drank and ate divine ordure.

Another woman, curled up over a crucifix, emitted a rending laugh, then cried to Docre, "Father, father!" A crone tore her hair, leapt, whirled around and around as on a pivot and fell over beside a young girl who, huddled to the wall, was writhing in convulsions, frothing at the mouth, weeping, and spiting out frightful blasphemies. And Durtal, terrified, saw through the fog the red horns of Docre, who, seated now, frothing with rage, was chewing up sacramental wafers, taking them out of his mouth, wiping himself with them, and distributing them to the women, who ground them underfoot, howling, or fell over each other struggling to get hold of them and violate them.

The place was simply a madhouse, a monstrous pandemonium of prostitutes and maniacs. Now, while the choirboys gave themselves to the men, and while the woman who owned the chapel, mounted the altar caught hold of the phallus of the Christ with one hand and with the other held a chalice between "His" naked legs, a little girl, who hither - to had not budged, suddenly bent over forward and howled, howled like a dog. Overcome with disgust, nearly asphyxiated, Durtal wanted to flee. He looked for Hyacinthe. She was no longer at his side. He finally caught

sight of her close to the canon and, stepping over the writhing bodies on the floor, he went to her. With quivering nostrils she was inhaling the effluvia of the perfumes and of the couples.

“The sabbatic odour!” she said to him between clenched teeth, in a strangled voice.

“Here, let’s get out of this!”

She seemed to wake, hesitated a moment, then without answering she followed him. He elbowed his way through ‘the crowd; jostling women whose protruding teeth were ready to bite. He pushed Mme. Chantelouve to the door, crossed the court, traversed the vestibule, and, finding the portress’ lodge empty, he drew the cord and found himself in the street.

There he stopped and drew the fresh air deep into his lungs. Hyacinthe, motionless, dizzy, huddled to the wall away from him.

He looked at her. “Confess that you would like to go in there again.”

“No.” she said with an effort. “These scenes shatter me. I am in a daze. I must have a glass of water.”

And she went up the street, leaning on him, straight to the wine shop, which was open. It was an ignoble lair, a little room with tables and wooden benches, a zinc counter, cheap bar fixtures, and blue-stained wooden pitchers; in the ceiling a U-shaped gas bracket. Two pick-and-shovel labourers were playing cards. They turned around and laughed. The proprietor took the excessively short-stemmed pipe from his mouth and spat into the sawdust. He seemed not at all surprised to see this fashionably gowned woman in his dive. Durtal, who was watching him, thought he surprised an understanding look exchanged by the proprietor and the woman.

The proprietor lighted a candle and mumbled into Durtal’s ear, “Monsieur, you can’t drink here with these people watching. I’ll take you to a room where you can be alone.”

“Hmmm,” said Durtal to Hyacinthe, who was penetrating the mysteries of a spiral staircase, “A lot of fuss for a glass of water!”

But she had already entered a musty room. The paper was peeling from the walls, which were nearly covered with pictures torn out of illustrated weeklies and tacked up with hairpins. The floor was all in pieces. There were a wooden bed without any curtains, a chamber pot with a piece broken out of the side, a wash bowl and two chairs.

The man brought a decanter of gin, a large one of water, some sugar, and glasses, then went downstairs.

Her eyes were sombre, mad. She enlaced Durtal.

“No!” he shouted, furious at having fallen into this trap. “I’ve had enough of that. It’s late. Your husband is waiting for you. It’s time for you to go back to him - - “

She did not even hear him.

“I want you,” she said, and she took him treacherously and obliged him to desire her. She disrobed, threw her skirts on the floor, opened wide the abominable couch, and raising her chemise in the back she rubbed her spine up and down over the coarse grain of the sheets. A look of swooning ecstasy was in her eyes and a smile of joy on her lips.

She seized him, and, with ghoulish fury, dragged him into obscenities of whose existence he had never dreamed. Suddenly, when he was able to escape, he shuddered, for he perceived that the bed was strewn with fragments of hosts.

“Oh, you fill me with horror! Dress, and let’s get out of here.”

While, with a faraway look in her eyes, she was silently putting on her clothes, he sat down on a chair. The fetidness of the room nauseated him. Then, too—he was not absolutely convinced of Transubstantiation—he did not believe very firmly that the Saviour resided in that soiled bread - but - In spite of himself, the sacrilege he had involuntarily participated in saddened him.

“Suppose it were true,” he said to himself, “that the Presence were real, as Hyacinthe and that miserable priest at test — No, decidedly, I have had enough. I am through. The occasion is timely for me to break with this creature whom from our very first interview I have only tolerated, and I’m going to seize the opportunity.”

Below, in the dive, he had to face the knowing smiles of the labourers. He paid, and without waiting for his change, he fled. They reached the rue de Vaugirard and he hailed a cab.

As they were whirled along they sat lost in their thoughts, not looking at each other.

“Soon?” asked Mme. Chantelouve, in an almost timid tone when he left her at her door.

“No,” he answered. “We have nothing in common. You wish everything and I wish nothing. Better break. We might drag out our relation, but it would finally terminate in recrimination and bitterness. Oh, and then-after what happened this evening, no I Understand me? No!”

And he gave the cabman his address and huddled himself into the furthest corner of the fiacre.