

Storylandia

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Thomas Hrycyk

L'Amande et la Fleur

“See the orient dew?” the Japanese soldier asked. “See how it sheds from the bosom of the morning.” The old man called it *Sennin*. He told me it was Chinese and adopted in love. He also believed it was part of the spirits of nature—or of the air—to him it was all the same. The old soldier’s front tooth was missing and the other was covered in a sort of pink molasses. He pulled out paper and sat down on the rock in front of me. He placed some heroin in the paper, licked his lips, and rolled it up setting the cigarette in his mouth and tilting it upward at a 45 degree angle. The heroin, having been packed too tightly, puffed out on his exhale as brown snow between us. He stared at me with one good eye, taking in shallow breaths. I think he was on the lookout and convinced the war wouldn’t end until his own eye bore it. From then on, I understood little else about him. He said he came up from the village just down the mountain, though he evidently was lost and had reached the age where he should have been thinking of his next incarnation. He began to talk up the sato-wood as he took it from his bag and peeled its skin, stuffing the upper part of his boots with it. “I came from Chang Kan, go that way,” his arms flailed in an eastern direction as he spoke. “Spicy bushes burn better there. Find the fence. Near the river. Near the mountains. Only so many ways

there.” He strolled off mumbling. “*O ma ni pa dme hum.*”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

He hadn’t the faintest idea. The old man limped along, trying to forget all that happened before him. He scooped up pebbles near the edge of the trail and hurled them into the brush as if to scare away some demons.

I met another Japanese soldier up near Huzhou, said he came up somewhere between Kamakura and Enoshima. He took all his belongings and was throwing them into a pile. There were women sitting at the stream pounding clothes on rocks. He kept piling up his possessions and eventually removed his clothing. Behind him was Yixing with ugly blotches of villages in the hills and slums where nature should have been left alone. Even from the river you could hear the terrified squeal of a pig throughout the night and it found ways to keep you awake. The soldier wasn’t even sure of himself as he spoke, washing in the shallow stream that pushed up against his ankles. He told me he visited a man who spoke many tongues and was described only as *fulvous hue’d* and *whistling*. He had information on his missing wife. “You know what they say here?” he asked, pushing water up to his armpits. “They call you *Pyigling pa.*”

“What’s that?”

“*Inconnu.*”

“Oh.”

“I couldn’t.”

“Couldn’t?”

“Take their heads or their children.”

As the day moved on, it became mist-wreathed in its best face. The normal filth was washed off by the vaporous spritz of moonlight. My nights—usually

spent slumbered on the shores of Beihai or Chang Fei Sha where the waters of the Sea laugh up at you—were far behind me now. The mountain landscape in front of me swam in blue. I walked along the trickling creek, hundreds of miles from soldiers, from sounds, and from Time and its racking. Behind me was the godly work of Yeou. In front of me was so much more. Up all the inclines and slopes and steep climbs, I eventually found my way to a flat plateau. I discovered an open-spaced wattle and daub shack with loose slats in its framing. There were stones and mud in a crude design with crooked lines and strange tiny windows peeking through. There was a rough wooden framework with a wooden partition down the center, the windows looked to have slanted eyebrows above them. For as high up as it was, it was well kept and preserved. It appeared to be built in a hurry but that in no way subtracted from its structural integrity.

After miles of travel, the fatigue disease was on me, and this was the best time to cease and desist. I approached the shack hoping to find someone friendly inside. There was no door, only a fur tarp on the entrance, dewed in the mist.

“The rose colored sphinxes, those came from the 1867 Exposition. I myself am more interested in the early gothic antiques I keep in my private stables,” she grabbed my arm tightly and pulled me out onto the patio and into the yard as she continued speaking. “Gobelins tapestries, Japanese frames, Breton furniture, carved figurines, it is my own collection. But what I see as interesting you, my dear, is you take a look at the library of over 10,000 books. There I keep priceless documents pertaining to the French Revolution, facsimiles

of their true origin and color, rare books by Baudelaire Verhaeren and Gide, and every book on artwork that ever existed before and during this century." Phèdre de Belzunce laughed. We made our way back into the château. "Father hides his collection of ancient firearms and weapons. Mother never let him keep them out on the display; that right is for Mother and her Beauvais tapestries. They're much more pleasant on the eyes." Phèdre stopped in the hallway taking both of my hands into hers. She twirled in a circle and swayed around me. We danced for what seemed like hours. Her warm hands embraced as equally as the whole—her body into mine. Her footwork was light and magnificent. "There is more to see but you must be tired. How much did you sleep?" she asked. The questions continued one after the other. *Was there much at the orphanage to do? Did you read a lot? I bet you read a lot. Painters read a lot, I hear. Have you met other artists? Did you always work alone? What inspires you? Did you sleep a lot? etc., etc., ad almost infinitum.*

I stared quizzically *en revanche*. I was never much of a talker. Plus, she had swept me away with her hospitality and beauty.

"You can sleep here, my lovely Jules, but not too late, for tomorrow is Christmas," her eyes lit up as she spoke. "The night before has certainly lent itself to being perfect wouldn't you agree?"

I nodded.

"After the star found our Saviour, it was supposed to find a nail and hang itself up in our corner of the universe. This was our era of

splendor. Its divine mission wasn't over though for it was handed its sublimity too early. Why are the predecessors to Christ to be forgotten? That is why I set out the most royal and holy of monstrosities to illuminate with might and good power. Though it had no idea what I value, I sent it on its way across the globe. It's on the chalets, glory be to God, they tell me that stars shine on laughing countries, the ones which by the night of penetrating perfumes, chrysanthemums that blossom at the base of these mountains, waking the herdsmen and hunters alike, it will provide an illuminating force for laboring. The red velvet fur of the smaller panda and the flowers bursting forth—it departs for the peonies which always watch the heavens and are happy for whoever keeps them as their charms." Phèdre laughed again as we made our way to the dining room. She sat down with a pillowy *umph*. It had been close to midnight and I had not slept all of the night before. I had been far too anxious to move out of the orphanage and everything in the moment had seemed far too surreal.

"I cannot go a long way," I told her. "Sleep comes soon."

"You mustn't bed yet, this young evening is far from over." Phèdre clapped her hands together. "The radio of Cavalleria Rusticana is downstairs. We can spread out on velvets on our stomachs and listen, yes?"

"Will the hour after midnight dismiss me?"

"Yes," she responded. "Everything past it is yours."

The Christian midnight is a solemn time as of yore. For it was midnight which repaired

what was wrong and the Imperial Magi and the sailing of Maries to Oppidum-Ra which corrected that which needed it. Christmas midnight, Iczot Hallelal...

I began to drift off as the radio played. I ended up somewhere between the two worlds. I found myself in a nightmare of heavy curtains, dreaming only of all the ruin I was about to cause in this poor girl's world. There are people, and people of varying depths and intricacies of character, none that compare with my own, who are so much more deserving to be occupying this scene of paintings of old ancestors I am unable to appreciate. I awoke from my state and picked myself up. This was a difficult task, seeing as how my soon-to-be-wife was draped over me in heavy slumber. Her breaths were so shallow, I checked a few times to make sure her heart still beat in its chamber. I made my way to the bedroom. Beyond the double-wide bay window with its ruby blinds half-drawn, as far out as I could see, the suburbs of Paris were wrapped in the smoke of slums and warehouse factories. Out there, all those beasts of burden like me, with their ugliness and appetites for more—thinking they can get the most out of life—thinking they drew the number no one else could. A heavy snowfall blanketed the streets of Paris.

I walked onward. The dining room looked like an untouchable crypt with drawings in sanguine by Boucher and Watteau and *St Vincent Taking the Place of Two Galley Slaves* by Leon Bonnat. The nudes by Puvis de Chavannes in the den struck me as being more blown-out-looking-things comparatively. There was a

large botanical table whose lilac breche marble sloped top reflected itself on the beach glass, surrounded by candelabrum from Tiffany and Company. The remains of dinner, four sweets, were placed on the table facing away from one another. Rhubarb pies, apple tarts, strawberries with Devonshire cream, and trembling jellies—the color and transparency of amber. One gathers that the master chef would walk about the house with his thumb permanently stuck in old cookery books or in a Dumas gastronomic dictionary. He did haunt the kitchen in most hours, even in the middle of the night. He was usually found weeping tears of blood over failed concoctions. He was one of true ambrosia and sweat.

The château seemed incredibly well-run and polished as if to reflect in on itself, all of its light, airy, speckless six acres of well-designed grounds. The garden outside was shaped to Le Nôtre's taste with Cedars and Japanese copper beeches carefully planted. Some of the trees' trunk measurements were over six metres. I made my way through the reception room which was seven and a quarter metres high, filled with daguerreotypes, crates of Japanese porcelain figurines, locked cabinets, and a jumbled array of unusual furniture. The walls had been hung with mezzotints of cathedrals and ancient churches along with being covered in cryptic maxims: *Absentes absunt* over the entrances and *A diabolo qui est simian dei* on the back of the chairs. All the rooms seemed so full of memories for Phèdre and her family. I found my way into the bedroom and slept.

The next morning, I awoke and made my

way downstairs. Some cats marched across the Persian rugs as no one cared to observe. On a lacquered table incrustated with Mother of pearl, there resting on a grinning negro-held frame was a photograph of Phèdre and her family. I picked it up and took a gander. I had rarely seen a photograph in my life. It had nearly brought me to tears.

The gifts were now being brought out by the servants, each handled so delicately. The way the Belzunces looked out into the hallway waiting for the next servant to tiptoe into the chambers, you would have believed that Proteus had metamorphosed into a cabochon ruby clip, able to give the future. The next few minutes were quiet like tombstones until Monsieur de Belzunce chimed in as often as he does.

Phèdre's father was the embodiment of quixotic nobility. He was incredibly thin and tall. He looked cadaverous in nature with deeply sunken, glaucous eyes, fleshless lips, and dark beady pupils that seemed to have sped toward you like raging bullets. As usual, he was inordinately preoccupied by his ancestry. He managed nevertheless to coax a procession of dead kings from his sometimes scattered memory. "It has been said that I have a cultivated taste for a princely past. They have called me Simon Zelotes. I prefer to be known as a genealogical zealot, it is a more fervent accuracy."

"Are you well-versed in Antoine Phillippe de la Trémoille?" I asked.

"If he ever lost a pearl of sweat, I hunted the Earth for it." Although Monsieur de Belzunce was no longer at the forefront of political debates