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Théophile Gautier



## The Opium Pipe

**T**HE OTHER DAY, I DISCOVERED my friend Alphonse Karr sitting on his divan by the light of a candle although it was daytime. He was holding a tube of cherry-wood, tipped with a kind of porcelain mushroom into which he was dropping a brownish paste not unlike sealing wax. The paste flared and sputtered in the bowl of the mushroom as he inhaled, through a small amber mouthpiece, the smoke which gradually pervaded the room with a vague odour of Eastern perfume.

Without saying a word, I took the apparatus from my friend and put the end to my lips. After a few puffs I experienced a not unpleasant kind of dizziness which closely resembled the sensations of the early stages of intoxication.

It was the day on which I prepare my column, so, after hanging the pipe on the wall, we went down to the garden to greet the dahlias and play with Shutz,

a happy creature whose only function is to provide a note of black against a carpet of green turf.

I went home, dined, repaired to the theatre to endure some play or other and returned to go to bed – inevitably, and that temporary demise is a necessary apprenticeship for one's definitive death.

The opium I had smoked, far from producing the drowsiness I had expected, gave me nervous palpitations as if it had been the blackest coffee, and I turned and twisted in bed like a grilled carp or a chicken on the spit, the bedclothes continually slipping, to the great annoyance of my cat who had rolled into a ball on the edge of my quilt.

At last the slumber I had sought so long dusted my lids with its gold, my eyes grew warm and heavy and I fell asleep.

After a couple of hours which were black and immobile, I had a dream.

And here it is: I was back with my friend Alphonse Karr as I had been in reality, that morning. He sat on his divan of yellow drape, with his pipe and burning taper. There was one difference: the sun had ceased to throw onto the walls the blue, green

and red reflections of the stained glass windows like a swarm of multicoloured butterflies.

Just as I had done some hours back, I took the pipe from his hands and slowly commenced to inhale the intoxicating fumes.

A beatific languor quickly overpowered me and I experienced the identical daze I had felt when drawing on the pipe in reality.

So far, my dream had been in accordance with the exact limits of the everyday world, repeating as in a mirror all the actions of my day.

I was ensconced in a heap of cushions and lazily I leant back to gaze at the blue spirals as they floated in the air and melted into a cloud of cotton-wool.

My eyes naturally rested on the ceiling which was ebony black relieved by gold arabesques. By dint of gazing at it with the ecstatic intensity which precedes the advent of visions, it began to appear blue, that hard blue of the skirts of night.

“You’ve had your ceiling painted blue,” I said to Karr who, impassive and silent, had started another pipe and was puffing out more smoke than a stove pipe in winter or a steamboat in any season. “Not at



all, dear fellow,” he replied, his nose emerging from the cloud, “but you most definitely seem to have painted your stomach red, with the aid of Bordeaux more or less Laffitte.”

“Heavens, why don’t you tell the truth – all I’ve drunk is a wretched glass of sugared water, in which a horde of ants have quenched their thirst, a swimming school for insects.”

“The ceiling probably got bored with being black and turned blue. Apart from women, I know nothing more capricious than ceilings. It’s just a ceiling’s caprice really, nothing out of the ordinary.”

Whereupon Karr withdrew his nose into the smoke cloud with the satisfied expression of somebody who has furnished you with a clear and satisfying explanation.

However, I was only half convinced, finding it difficult to credit ceilings with such a degree of fantasy. I continued to gaze at the specimen above me with some anxiety.

It grew ever more blue, like the sea’s horizon and the stars began to open their eyelids with their gold lashes; these eyelashes of extreme thinness

lengthened right into the room which they filled with sheaves of prismatic colour.

Black lines slashed the azure surface, but I soon realized they were the beams of the upper floors of the house which had become transparent.

In spite of the ease with which one accepts in dreams the most bizarre occurrences, all this did begin to reappear questionable, even suspect, and I thought that if my friend Esquiros, the Magician, had been there, he would have provided me with more satisfactory explanations than those of Alphonse Karr.

Just as if the thought had the power of evocation, Esquiros suddenly appeared before us, rather like Faust's poodle emerging from behind the stove.

His face was animated, his expression triumphant, and, rubbing his hands, he declared: "I can see as far as the Antipodes and I have the discovered the speaking mandrake."

The apparition astonished me and I said to my friend, "Karr, can you imagine how Esquiros, who was not with us, has contrived to enter without opening the door?" "Nothing simpler," replied Karr,

“it is the done thing to come in through closed doors. You are surely aware of the insulting expression – ‘He’s the kind of man who’s always battering down open doors’.”

I couldn’t think of an objection to such a logical train of thought and was convinced that Esquiros’s presence was in fact perfectly explicable and quite proper.

However, he was looking at me with a strange expression and his eyes were growing monstrously large: they were burning bright and as round as shields heated in a furnace, while his body kept dissolving into the shadows till I could see no more of him than his two flaming and luminous eyeballs.

Veils of fire and torrents of magnetic effluvia quivered and whirled about me, intertwining inextricably and growing ever closer until sparkling wires penetrated my every pore, growing into my skin like the hair roots in my scalp. I was in a complete state of somnambulism.

And then I beheld little white flakes sailing through the blue emptiness of the ceiling like tufts of wool carried away by the wind, or like the neck feathers of a dove falling one by one by one through the air.

I was trying hard to guess what they were when a deep peremptory voice murmured in my ear in a strange accent, “they are spirits!!!” The scales fell from my eyes; the white mists took on more defined forms and I distinctly perceived a long line of veiled figures ascending the curves of a spiral from right to left; they soared as if an imperious breath had raised them into the air and given them wings.

In the corner of the room, seated on the moulding of the ceiling, was the form of a girl clothed in loose muslin drapery.

She had crossed her naked feet which she dangled carelessly; they were indeed charming, small and transparent, recalling to my mind those lovely feet of jasper which peep white and pure from beneath the black marble skirt of the Isis in the Museum.

The other phantoms touched her on the shoulder as they passed, saying: “We’re ascending to the stars – come with us.”

The wraith with the alabaster feet replied, “No! I don’t want the stars, I would wish to live six months longer.”

The procession passed and the wraith was left alone, swinging her pretty little feet and striking the wall with her heel, rose-coloured, pale and tender like the heart of a wild convolvulus; although her face was veiled, I sensed that she was young, adorable, delightful and my soul soared towards her, arms outstretched, wings beating.

The wraith felt my turmoil by means of intuition or sympathy and said in a voice as quiet and crystal clear as the musical glasses, "If you dare go and kiss the mouth of the girl I was, her whose body is lying in the black city, I shall live six months more and my second life will be yours."

I got up, asking myself a pertinent question: was I perhaps the toy of some illusion and all that had passed but a dream?

It was the last flicker of the lamp of reason as it was extinguished by sleep.

I asked my two friends what they thought of it all. Karr, imperturbable as ever, maintained that the adventure was a common one, that he had had several of the same kind and that I was very naive to be surprised by such a trifle.

Esquiros explained it all by reason of magnetism. "Very well then, I'll go; but I'm still wearing my slippers." "That doesn't matter," said Esquiros, "I have the presentiment of a cab at the door."

I left the house to see, in very truth, a two-horse cabriolet apparently waiting for me. I got in. There was no coachman. The horses went their own way: they were jet black and galloped so furiously that their cruppers rose and fell like waves, and showers of sparks glittered in their train. They took the Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne first, then the Rue Dellefonds and the Rue Lafayette and after that, roads I did not know.

As the carriage proceeded, the objects about me assumed strange shapes: the houses had a cross-grained look as they huddled by the roadside like old women bent over their spinning wheels; I saw wooden fences and streetlamps for all the world like gibbets: soon the houses disappeared entirely and the carriage sped through the open country.

We were crossing a comfortless, sombre plain, under a low leaden sky and an interminable procession of slender little trees came hurrying towards

us on both sides of the road – it was like an army of broomsticks in retreat.

Nothing could have been more sinister than that livid immensity, slashed with black stripes by the thin silhouettes of the trees; there was not a star to be seen, not a thread of light relieved the wan depths of the penumbra.

At length we came to a town unfamiliar to me, with houses in a peculiar style which, as I glimpsed them through the shadows, seemed incredibly small to be inhabited: the carriage though far broader than the roads it was traversing was not held up as the houses withdrew right and left, like scared pedestrians, and made way for it.

After the carriage had changed direction several times, I felt it melt beneath me, the horses vanished into smoke and I had arrived.

A reddish light filtered past a bronze door which was ajar. I pushed it open and found myself under the stone vaulting of a low room paved in black and white marble; an antique lamp set on a pedestal of violet breccia illuminated with its livid light a recumbent figure which I took at first for a statue,

like those that sleep with clasped hands, a greyhound at their feet, in Gothic cathedrals: but I soon realized it was a real woman.

Her face was of a bloodless pallor that can be best compared to the tint of yellowing beeswax, her matt hands, white as the consecrated wafers, were crossed on her breast; her eyes were shut and the lashes reached the middle of her cheeks: all was dead in her but for the mouth, fresh like a flowering pomegranate, sparkling with an opulent purple life and half-smiling as in a happy dream.

I bent over her, I pressed my mouth on hers and gave her the kiss which was to bring her back to life.

Her lips, moist and warm as if the breath had just left them, palpitated under mine and returned my kiss with incredible spirit and fervour.

Here there is a gap in my dreams and I do not know how I returned from the black city, but it was probably mounted on a cloud or a gigantic bat. But I do remember finding myself with Karr in a house belonging neither to us nor any of our acquaintances.



In spite of this, all the details of the interior and its arrangement were perfectly familiar to me; I see clearly the chimney-piece in the style of Louis XVI, the folding screen with its floral pattern, the lamp with its green shade and the book-filled shelves flanking the fireplace.

I was sitting in a deep winged armchair and Karr, his heels on the mantelpiece, his weight supported by his shoulders if not by his head, was listening with a pitiful, resigned expression to the account of my expedition which I myself considered to have been a dream.

Suddenly the violent pealing of a bell was heard and I was informed that a lady wished to speak to me. "Show the lady in," I replied with some emotion and with a presentiment of what was about to happen.

A woman dressed in white, her shoulders covered by a black cape, entered stepping lightly, and halted in the subdued light of the lamp.

A remarkable phenomenon ensued, for I saw three different physiognomies succeed each other in her face. For a moment she resembled Malibran, then

M\*\*\*, and finally the girl who had said she did not want to die and whose last words to me had been, "Give me a bouquet of violets."

But those resemblances soon passed like a shadow over a mirror, the features of the face acquired stability and definiteness and *I recognized* the dead girl I had kissed in the black city.

Two pink spots flushed her cheekbones and her eyes shone like burnished globes of silver; she had the beauty of an ancient cameo and the blonde transparency of her complexion added to the resemblance.

She stood in front of me and asked me (a strange demand) to tell her her name.

Without hesitation, I replied that it was Carlotta, which was perfectly true and then she told me she had been a singer and that she died so young that she had known nothing of the pleasures of life and that before plunging forever into a frozen eternity, she wished to enjoy the beauty of the world, intoxicate herself with every pleasure and drown in an ocean of earthly delights, that she felt an unquenchable thirst for life and love.

And as she uttered all this with an eloquence of expression and a poetry it is not in my power to reproduce, she knotted her arms around my neck and enlaced her slender hands in the locks of my hair.

She spoke in verses of marvellous beauty unattainable by the greatest poets in a conscious state and when verse did not suffice to render her thoughts, she added the wings of music, trills, necklaces of notes purer than perfect pearls, holding-notes, sounds spun out above human capacity, all that soul and spirit can imagine of tenderness, adorable coquetry, of love, ardour, of the ineffable.

“Six more months of life, only six more months,” was the burden of all her song.

I could clearly see all that she was about to say before the thought came from her mind or her heart to her lips and I would myself finish the verse or the song she began: I possessed the same transparency for her and she could read me just as fluently.

I do not know to what summit these ecstasies, which were not moderated by Karr’s presence, might have attained, had I not suddenly felt something shaggy

and rough pass over my face; opening my eyes, I saw my cat which was rubbing its whiskers against mine in lieu of a morning greeting – for the dawn was filtering its trembling light through the curtains.

Thus did my opium dream come to an end, leaving no trace other than a vague melancholy, a common sequel of this kind of hallucination.

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