

PENDULUM

by
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12:55. LeVieux knotted his muffler under his chin. The terrier in his basket settled his snout beneath his paws and declined to leave the glow of the electric fire in the watchman's little office.

The flashlight beam bobbed down the narrow corridor before him. He blew a shiver through his lips as he stepped out into the vast darkness beneath the central dome. He preferred the nighttime here, when he could not see the flight of the steel cable meters and meters up into the dome. His rubber-soled shoes padded soft as cats' paws on the marble floor. In the roving flashlight beam, the noosed man, the screaming horse, a defiant fist, the motionless column-lady, all blazed briefly into view, violent white marble and deep, jagged shadows.

It was getting harder for the old man to hoist his legs over the railing. He set the flashlight down carefully; the pendulum's brass orb gleamed at the light's edge. He caught the faintly swaying cable and drew the plumb weight to the edge of the circle, positioning its ornate point above the numeral 1 thickly painted on the rail. He waited, the ponderous orb poised, until his glowing watch face showed precisely 0100. Then he let it go, and the tethered globe sliced

out into the darkness. It came back to him after a moment, brushing past the big black 1, and vanished again.

No one had ever told LeVieux that he was supposed to keep Foucault's pendulum swinging through the long deserted nights in the Pantheon. In fact, he had never quite understood the pendulum, how it proved that the earth itself was turning. His son had tried to explain it once, but LeVieux suspected that Jean-Claude didn't really understand it either. He had watched the video they played for tourists during the day, but while it was high on drama, it didn't explain the principle of it very well. Somehow, though, as long as he was making his rounds, it seemed disrespectful to just let it hang there, stopped. It even made him a little anxious... if the steady swing truly did prove that the world was turning on its appointed course, well, what might not happen if it stopped for too long? He knew that it stopped when he was not there – though of course the day staff kept it going for the visitors. Nevertheless, the old man always looked in on the great stately pendulum through the nights and set it going again by the hours of his cheap little watch, bought from a furtive vendor in the caverns of the Gare du Nord.

The pendulum once more gravely swinging, LeVieux padded through the rest of his round, playing his little beam across the pillars and volutes and the hideously huge and garish frescoes, spilling brawn and hoofs and whipping hair and genitals (why did those ancient heroes always end up stark naked in the midst of battle?). All was silent, dark, cold, the invisible dome always looming. He was glad to return to his little snugger, with the companionable terrier, electric heater, an armchair and a coffeepot.

As he cranked the spiky key in the lock, a polite voice murmured behind him, "Pardon me, please, monsieur, but may I trouble you to let me come in? It's just so terribly cold downstairs."

The gentleman who spoke was so very pale, so very bony, with sunken cheeks and a bald head, clad only in a flimsy white wrapper of odd design. But good humor shone in his eyes, and he smiled so apologetically as he shivered in his strange garment that the old watchman opened the door and bowed him in. A bit of company was not unwelcome.

LeVieux pulled the armchair up close to the purring heater. The stranger gathered his wrapper and swept a deep, old-fashioned bow before seating himself.

“I do thank you,” he said, rubbing the gooseflesh on his skinny arms. “Sometimes it’s just more than an old man can bear.”

“I am LeVieux, the night watchman. You know I should not allow you to be here.”

The visitor smiled again. “Francois Marie Arouet at your service.”

Arouet. LeVieux knew that name, had seen it written down somewhere in large letters. Something about the old man’s wry smile was familiar too, and that paleness, that marble-white paleness.

“Do you suppose,” began the pale old man, “could I possibly ask you for just a little cup of coffee? It’s been so long... oh, I really do miss the coffee!”

“Of course.” As LeVieux began to spoon the black grains into his battered little pot, the terrier woke up and growled.

“So sorry to intrude,” said M. Arouet.

“Be polite,” said LeVieux to the terrier. “I have a little cream or sugar if you’d like.”

“Oh, no, black, thank you.” Arouet cradled the cup in his gaunt fingers and breathed the steam with a look not short of bliss upon his face. He tossed back the hot coffee in a gulp, and LeVieux promptly filled the cup again.

He made a second pot, and this time got a cup for himself.

“Did your wife teach you to make such coffee?” asked Arouet.

“I’ve been a widower many years,” LeVieux answered, “so I’ve learned to make my own. It is one of life’s little pleasures, isn’t it? A good hot cup of coffee.”

“Ah, a self-sufficient man. I thought you must be, keeping charge of this deadly mausoleum all alone these long cold nights. Do you live in Paris?”

“Too expensive for an old pensioner like me. I have a little apartment out in Drancy; the trains are convenient enough and this little job keeps the ends together. Out there they have a bit of green space for a garden patch, so it’s not so bad.”

“*Il faut cultiver nos jardins,*” Arouet quoted merrily. “So glad to hear that has not been quite forgotten. I once lived in the Place des Vosges. So did many of my friends.”

“Oh, so Victor Hugo was your neighbor then?” LeVieux ventured a little joke of his own. He and his wife had visited the stilted and empty Hugo museum in the Place des Vosges.

Arouet laughed. “Oh, no, our paths did not cross then, but you could say he is my neighbor now!” The old man stood up, shrugged his wrap around his shoulders and bestowed another graceful, antique bow. “And now, having absorbed enough of your time, your warmth, your comfortable chair and your excellent coffee, I shall bid you good-night with many thanks. I believe your pendulum may need another push by now.”

LeVieux shook his hand, still so cold in spite of the coffee and the heater. “I should show you out.”

“Please, no need. I’m perfectly acquainted. Good night.” And he slipped out the door.

Voltaire, LeVieux suddenly thought. I’ve been having coffee with Voltaire. He thrust his head out the door, but the corridor was empty.

“Monsieur Voltaire!” he cried. “Please! Come back any time!”

In the morning, on his way home with the terrier on a string, he stopped at the Monoprix and bought a new coffeepot, shiny and sleek and holding many cups.

But his visitor did not return; enough days went by that LeVieux became glad that he had not mentioned the incident to anyone. Perhaps he had dozed in his chair, as he sometimes did, as he was doing now, drifting gently back and forth between memories and the armchair and some half-felt, half-guessed resting state ... till a rapid thumping on his door roused him. Not a courteous rap of the knuckles, but the insistent hammer of a meaty fist. The terrier barked. LeVieux heaved himself out of his chair and flung open the door, coming face to face with a thickset old man whose eyes blazed with impatience.

“Is he here? I heard he’s about and that he might be here, drinking coffee with you. I’m looking for him!”

“Monsieur, please, who are you looking for?” Though he thought he knew the answer.

“Voltaire, of course! My God, to think that I might meet him after all this time! To actually speak to him, to shake his hand, the great father of liberty, foe of injustice and cruelty... have you seen him, tell me!”

“It was almost a week ago he was here, I think. But sir, may I ask who you are?” But LeVieux’s mind was primed now, and that bulbous nose, the mole, the impetuosity...

“Hugo, of course! Victor Hugo, the writer. Surely you have heard of me?” LeVieux laughed aloud.

“Monsieur Hugo, but of course I know you! The whole world knows you! Please, welcome, I am so glad to meet you... oh, what would my wife say, she loved Les Miserables... she spent a whole year reading it to me. She made me take her to the musical play...”

“A play?” Hugo looked pleased. “Someone made it into a play? Was it any good?”

“Oh, yes, it was quite spectacular. It played in theatres all over the world! It was a little like an opera – all songs, you know, and of course not the whole story...”

“Yes, yes, of course not. How about Notre Dame de Paris? Was that made into a play too?”

“The hunchback story? The Americans made some films of it, I know, that weren’t bad.”

“Films? What do you mean, films?”

“Movies? Moving pictures? ... Photographs, see, they act out scenes, and record the actors in photographs in a long row. Then when you run all the pictures very quickly, they seem to be moving, so it’s like watching a theatre play only it’s just pictures, not live people. M. Hugo, can I make you some coffee?”

“No, no thank you... really, though, have you seen Voltaire? Can we find him?”

“I just saw him the one time, and I have to tell you, this is all so strange... I mean, he and you died many years ago, so how is it you are turning up again now?” Hugo shrugged.

“I don’t know. There was this slow pulse, a sort of great sweeping heartbeat, and I just woke up. And found myself in the basement of this dreadful place. I always hated this damn building... so pretentious, like an enormous stone sponge cake.”

“But how did you know about Voltaire here? I mean, if you were dead...”

“My cryptmate, Zola, has been getting restless lately too. He was out and about the other night and ran into Rousseau, who mentioned seeing Voltaire.”

Rousseau. Zola. They were wandering on his night watch too? My God.

“So let’s go down to Voltaire’s tomb and see if he’s around.”

Hugo sighed. “Funny, though, how he isn’t really here at all. Those vandals dumped his bones in a garbage heap somewhere, and they never found him. I wonder why he’s haunting the place now. But let’s go have a look.”

LeVieux tied up his muffler and led the way with his little flashlight.

“If you wouldn’t mind, let me just look in on the pendulum as we go by...”

“Is that old Foucault’s pendulum? They hung it back up there?” Hugo wondered, peering up into the lightless space.

“Yes, and I give it a push on my rounds, just to keep it going.”

“Good for you! Keeps the earth turning, doesn’t it.”

As they marched through the dark, LeVieux kept thinking there were pale shapes floating just beyond his vision, even wisps of speech hastily hushed as they passed by. But at Voltaire’s darkly gleaming monument, he spoke up loudly, his words echoing: “Monsieur Voltaire! Someone wishes to meet you!” And from behind a column, the lean white figure came forward with a cheerfully extended hand: “How very pleasant to see you again, M. LeVieux! And your friend is...?”

“Monsieur Victor Hugo!” announced LeVieux gleefully. Hugo strode past him, grasping Voltaire’s hand in his thick-fingered paw, and dropped to one knee before him. He pressed the frail fingers to his brow and murmured, “Maître!” And Voltaire smiled.

Hugo brought Zola by for coffee a few nights later. As LeVieux filled the pot, Zola pounced on his newspaper. A hundred years and more later, but strikes, greed, wars, crime – it was much the same. But he stopped to show LeVieux an arts review, with photographs .

“What is this? Manet at the Orsay? This is the Orleans train station!”

“Oh, no, they rebuilt it into a huge, beautiful art museum. Tourists come from all over the world to look at the Impressionist paintings.”

“The Impressionists? This is *Edouard* Manet? *My* old friend?”

“Yes, yes, and Monet and Renoir and Degas and van Gogh...”

“Do you mean to say that all those young painters that I wrote about, that I championed, that everyone said were wild, useless young cads churning out messy, decadent, incomprehensible smears – they’re all now famous?” Zola was beaming. “I knew it! I *knew* they were the future! Oh, I hope they all can see it now!” He happily swallowed his coffee, and begged LeVieux to bring him a newspaper every night so he could keep up with the wonderful and terrible events of this new world. LeVieux promised.

And so it was he crept down into the crypts to leave the day’s issue outside Zola’s chamber. He had left a woolen cap and some thick socks at Voltaire’s place on his way down; the old man was always cold and no wonder, with that bald marble head and bare feet all the time.

His flashlight beam caught a burly fellow standing silently before a display board, fingering his broad, wiry beard as he slowly read down the account of the life and death of Jean Jaurès: philosopher, legislator, socialist, humanist, the murdered pacifist. Startled, he turned to face LeVieux.

“They went ahead and did it, didn’t they?” he said bitterly. “They had their damned war after all.” LeVieux nodded.

“Yes, Monsieur Jaurès, they did. In spite of everything you did, everything you said, everything you tried, they had their war.” Jaurès’s shoulders sagged.

Finally, hoarsely, he asked, “How bad was it? Tell me.” LeVieux was silent. How to tell Jean Jaurès how bad the Great War was.

“It was more terrible than I can say.”

“How many dead?”

“More than a million...”

Jaurès groaned. “A million dead!”

“A million Frenchmen,” said LeVieux slowly, “and a million British...” Jaurès covered his face with his hands. When he raised his eyes, they swam in tears.

“I told them. I knew it.” He took a deep breath. “Did they *learn* anything, damn them?”

LeVieux hesitated. Then he shook his head.

“It ended in 1918. Twenty years later, it started again.” Besides, the mess in Russia. The horrendous bomb in Japan. Korea. Indochina. “And again. And again. It wasn’t the war to end wars at all,” he said sadly. “The Americans are meddling in the Middle East, hardly a day goes by without a bombing in Jerusalem.” Jaurès did not wipe away the tears sheeting down his face. Then LeVieux held out his newspaper. “But look! Look, maybe we did learn something!” The front page of the newspaper bore a large photo of a mass of people, a sea of people, surging down the rue de Rivoli, carrying signs.

“See this? These are French people, our people, *your* people – they are marching against these wars.”

“Yes. Thank you,” said Jaurès softly, “but the question is – can they stop them? I thought that the citizens of France and Germany together could turn their leaders away from that first war. I was wrong.” He turned away and slowly, blindly, slipped back into his crypt chamber. LeVieux stood miserably at the doorway.

“Do you know how there are more schools named after you than anyone else in France? Did you know that people filled the streets in mourning for you? You’re in the Pantheon, Jaurès, where France lays its greatest heroes! Is there no comfort there?”

But there was only cold and silence.

LeVieux climbed heavily up the twisting stair. He had to stop and catch his breath at the top; his chest felt tight and uncomfortable. Too much coffee with his new friends, perhaps, giving him the jitters and heartburn. Time to check on the pendulum, as long as he was here.

A cigarette ember glowed and faded behind a pier.

“Please!” cried LeVieux wearily. “You cannot smoke here!”

“Oh, of course, sorry.” A tall balding man in a weatherbeaten leather jacket ground out the cigarette on the sole of his boot and shoved the butt in his pocket. “Sorry,” he said again. “Listen, can you tell me what I’m doing here? I haven’t been in here in years, I wasn’t anywhere near Paris the last thing I knew, and now it’s as though my heart has just started up again, and here I am.” LeVieux gazed at the man’s homely face, and the inscription on the wall behind him. He sighed. This was beginning to make him so sad.

“Commander de Saint-Exupery, it is you, isn’t it?” The man nodded. “Look behind you.” And Saint-Exupery turned to read the memorial chiseled into the wall, haloed in the flashlight’s beam.

“I went down, didn’t I,” he said.

“Yes,” said LeVieux. “But do you know, a few years ago a fisherman brought up your silver bracelet in his net. And he knew exactly who you were. We even found your plane. But we

don't know where you are. So, I suppose, you're here, where people come to remember you and salute you and thank you, for the beautiful things you have written."

"Thank you," said the pilot.

LeVieux suddenly dug into his pocket and produced a stub of pencil.

"Please, Commander," he said, holding out the pencil, "Please, would you draw me a sheep?"

Saint-Exupery took the pencil, his black eyebrows arching high in merriment. "How about just here? Right here on the wall?" LeVieux grinned and nodded. And in a moment, scrawled on the austere and solemn wall, was a lumpy, crooked-looking sheep that somehow had a terribly sweet expression.

"Thank you!" cried LeVieux. "Forgive me, I have to finish my rounds, but please come down to my office for coffee. Ask Hugo or Voltaire if you see them, they know where it is."

He trudged over to the railing, set down his flashlight, and began to hoist himself over. But his foot caught and he fell. Saint-Exupery hurried over and helped him to his feet.

"Maybe you should crawl under the rail," he said. "You'll get hurt." LeVieux stood leaning on the pilot's arm, and wheezed, "With my knees, I'd never be able to get up."

"Whatever you're doing then, let me do it."

"Just start the pendulum again," LeVieux said.

"Like this?" The pilot vaulted over and pulled the heavy orb to where LeVieux stood at the rail. LeVieux nodded.

"Now let it go." As the pendulum sailed away into the dark, Saint-Exupery stretched and inhaled deeply.

"That is better," he said. "Are you all right?"

“If I just sit down for a bit.... Please, just hand me my flashlight and I won’t trouble you any more.” And Saint-Exupery watched the old man shuffle off.

But when he stepped into his office, Voltaire was there, curled up in the armchair with his new cap pulled down around his ears. Zola wanted to know where his newspaper was, and Hugo was fussing with the coffeepot and feeding cookies to the terrier.

“You’ll make him vomit if you give him those!” LeVieux said, more sharply than he meant to. He was suddenly so tired, he just wanted a little rest and quiet for a bit. “Please, I’m sorry, I’m not feeling very well.” Voltaire leapt up and put LeVieux gently into the armchair. LeVieux was grateful to him. Suddenly he said, “Why are you all here?”

“I just wondered if you had the paper,” Zola began.

“No, no, I mean, why are you all wandering around here at night like this? Isn’t there an afterlife or something like that for you? Haven’t you been resting quietly in your graves all these years?”

Voltaire chuckled. “I certainly never expected one,” he said. “and this is just the Pantheon.”

“You aren’t here at all to begin with!” Hugo cried.

“Neither is Saint-Exupery,” said LeVieux. “But I was just upstairs talking to him by his memorial.” The others looked puzzled. LeVieux coughed.

There was a tap at the door. Hugo let Saint-Exupery into the little room.

“Speak of the devil.” LeVieux smiled.

“I just thought I should see that you were all right,” the pilot said. “And it’s stopped. The pendulum. I think I didn’t swing it hard enough. Should I try it again?”

“It’s stopped,” murmured LeVieux. “It’s stopping.” He was so very tired, and a little cold. Voltaire bent over him, and loosened the muffler around his throat. It seemed to be a lot of work just to breathe, to let the air into his chest. He struggled to sit up, holding out his hand to the young, wrecked pilot.

“It’s like I told him!” he cried hoarsely. “You have to be here! It doesn’t matter if you really are or not, this is where we need you to be.”

Voltaire hushed him gently, with a thin arm round the old man’s shoulders. LeVieux leaned back into the embrace of his friend, and the breath that whispered out of his mouth could not find its way back in.

In the morning, the night watchman was found lying in the center of the painted circle beneath the pendulum. The point of the orb hung motionless just above his breast. It was cold in the dome, and perfectly still.