

A NIGHT OF FEVER

By Pierre Loti.

THERE is a sort of intoxication which may have been caught long ago in the rice-fields of Indo-China, or even in the great swamps of Guinea and Senegal—a very strange condition of poisoning that lurks latent in one's inmost being, and returns every years or two, for a few hours, interfering considerably with the ordinary course of life.

Sailors who have spent some years in these lands are invariably acquainted with this singular malady which time cannot eradicate. It brings back the memory—one might almost say the sight—of certain regions of the earth in which there is an excess of both rain and sunshine.

No sooner does the fever begin than I see again, as though I were on the spot, endless, green, velvety stretches of rice-fields beneath a grey, lowering sky, or dismal, grassy plains on the confines of a Sahara solitude, desolate tracts on which grow mighty water-lilies that unfold their petals every evening at the hour of twilight.

It is about nightfall that this fever makes its appearance; at first the sensation is rather a pleasant one, although the head is heavy and the temples burning. The mental life is momentarily doubled in intensity, and the field of imagination, aided by a strange drowsiness, extends indefinitely; the most extravagant projects seem easy to carry through; delightful and profound phrases are improvised—sometimes quite childishly insignificant if they return to the mind on the morrow, though it may happen that the most entrancing strains of music are composed, melodies that call up a world of mystery and enchantment, but even then they split up into commonplace little songs when the attack is past. All through the succeeding night the head is racked with pain and feels as though confined with an iron band, while a terrible thirst comes over one. At last, when dawn appears, the fever has almost always gone; there remains only a sense of lassitude—the painful stage caused by the pitiless lucidity that follows on the dreams of the night. The awakening is always accompanied by a sort of dreary clairvoyance, more particularly if it happens in the morning. In this state of sudden weakness—which would make you think that life was ebbing away, did you not know by experience that the weakness lasts but an hour—you have, in a way that has never before been experienced, that feeling that time is rapidly flying and that all human effort is useless; there appears almost a physical sensation of the rapid, irresistible gliding away into death.....

This Christmas evening the fever has attacked me. Only this morning I left Paris, all alone, for my hermitage on the banks of the Bidassoa, as is my yearly custom, to attend a midnight mass to be given just across the river, in an old Capuchin convent.

It is very annoying that the fever should have chosen such a date and so I do all I can to resist it.

Stretched on a sofa by the fireside, in a small room on the ground floor, where December evenings are generally spent in these parts, I await the hour of midnight. My Basque servant is sitting up with me, reading some story of brigandage or smuggling.

The lonely house is wrapt in absolute silence. And yet, on winter evenings, you hear the dismal howling of the wind, for my windows, overlooking the sea, are continually being lashed by squalls and showers of rain driven across the Bay of Biscay. However, this forms one of the charms of the spot: in the dark, moonless nights of the inclement season, when you feel somewhat isolated from the rest of the world by the little garden walks that have become all wet and black, it is

delightful to listen to the gusts and shrieks of the hurricane outside.

This time there is silence all around; the breakers have ceased to wall and lament, and the branches of the trees, in my garden, so often tossed by the sea breeze, are now perfectly still. Outside it must be a beautiful Christmas eve, clear and calm.

On the sofa to which the fever has confined me, as close to me as possible, lies Ratonne, my black-and-white tabby, asleep with her paws softly stretched out against my knees. Belaud, my grey tomcat, has begged to be excused, having business in the solitary gardens of the neighborhood, where, I suppose, some midnight feline mass is being celebrated.

At last, in the peaceful garden, a quartet of male voices is heard in joyous song of old-time rhythm, the beginning of those Christmas carols that are sung from door to door, and, as custom demands, my servant will have to offer each of the singers cider or wine. I can hear it all in the semi-slumber of the fever, and along with the confused recollections of past Christmas-tides brought back by this music, there mingles the insistent recollection of a dismal marsh in Senegal, when the giant moon is rising, and great lilies cover the surface of the water.

When these singers have gone, others, succeed them at short intervals, and these are followed by the piping treble voices of children.

"The little ones from the villages down by Suberno," says my servant, who goes out each time to bring liquid refreshment for the new arrivals. "They have a creche to exhibit, and a Father Christmas as well; if the commander permits, they might come inside....."

"Very well, if they have so many fine things to show, tell them to come along; we must not give them offense."

The little procession has some difficulty in entering, scraping the wall, for what they are carrying is certainly cumbersome. They are six in number, of the same height, and about ten years of age; the leader marches in front with a lantern, four others carry on their shoulders a litter made of branches and containing the creche, a little house of laurel twigs. The last one, the sixth, who takes the part of Father Christmas, is seated somewhat like a little Buddha in this niche of verdure, and as a Santa Claus must always wear a beard of some sort, a pair of long moustaches have been traced on his childish face with a piece of burnt charcoal, and there, his cheeks all smutty, he sits enthroned and motionless in his green litter, rolling his bright, sparkling eyes from side to side. Their dignity and bearing are perfectly admirable as they sing in a frankly fasetto voice, quite serious and all in perfect tune, accenting each word in the old song.

Evidently they have themselves cut down these branches from the neighboring woods and put the whole thing together, in accordance with immemorial tradition. Then they have walked a distance of over two leagues, along mountain paths, with long staffs in their hands, which give them the appearance of little orang-outangs, or of quaint prehistoric beings. And, in spite of the smiles with which their visit is greeted, they leave behind the impression that something very ancient, something serious, has just taken place..

No sooner have they gone than we sink once again into profound silence. Shortly I hear a quarter-past ten strike from the church steeple of Fontarabia on the other side of the river. Thereupon my servant says to me:

"It is perhaps time I went for Ignacio and Pantchiket (a Basque diminutive of Francois), for the commander promised that they should have some cakes to eat here before starting.

"Before starting! Well, I shall never have strength to attend this mass, for the fever is increasing, and my headache is growing worse...."

Ignacio and Pantchiket now appear on the

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