



A DEVOLUTION OF TERROR

I

DROPPING the garment of reason, of logical induction, and of common-sense, and putting off the vestment of some consoling and comforting religious belief, let the helpless, quivering soul stand forth frightened and appalled before the cruel, inexorable unknown against which it must fight for its life.

It is hard for us of to-day—who expect a reason to be given for everything, and who have our ideas as fixed as the intervals on a piano—to sympathise with, or in any way to realise, the shifting fluidity of the early mind, with its floating, unstable melting of one concept into another. Far back in the nebula of time, before man and beast and earth and sky became sharply differentiated in the human mind, we must try to image forth to ourselves those who were the beginners of the man-tribe, here in the lower valley of the Rhône.

II

Plunged in the dark of a long autumn night, the males and females and little ones of a human pack are huddled together in a narrow-mouthed cave of the fantastic limestone peaks of the Aupiho: the Alpilles that overlooked the then great mephitic marshes of the Rhône and the Durance.

A fierce wind—the strong, cruel magistral : the mistral, the god-wind—beats into the forlorn shelter as the terror-stricken human brutes crowd close together for warmth and for companionship.

With the few words and signs at their command, the poor souls shadow forth their vague concept of the fearful unknown : narrowed for them to dreadful, reptile-like, man-devouring beasts, lurking in the fetid, wide-spreading morass. They hint at the awful horrors of the swamps, and the agony of their uncomprehending terror is like that we can divine in the eyes of a dog in mortal fear.

Who knows if the terror have not devoured the day? As the good warm sun fell down, a huge black dragon (for there were dragons in those times) crouching on the mountains caught him—and suddenly the sun was not, and all around was bathed in a sea of blood, and blood was splashed up above along where went the sun's path. A naked savage stammers out shudderingly how he saw the great black beast grow and swell and vanish in the dark. The women burst into a keening wail for the dead sun, and cruel fear clutches at all their hearts. Who knows, who knows if the beast be not coming now? if the rushing wind be not its breath? if the whistling roar be not its voice, as it howls and raves outside? Who knows? Who knows?

In the black darkness an old man rises to his feet and bursts forth into a strangely modulated chant. The strident ululation rises and falls more like the howling of a wolf than a human voice. Suddenly a long note of triumph breaks into the whining howl, and ends in a wild shout of victory as the full moon springs up over the distant crags and floods the land with light. Lean, gaunt, naked, with rough shock of white hair and beard, the old man stands pointing with a finger as crooked as a bird's claw. The poor brutes grovel at the feet of the far-seer, the fore-teller, who has brought the light once more to them. The terror of the marsh and the howling wind are forgotten—and all is peace.

III

This early people lived and died ; and other peoples came and lived and died ; and time went on and on and there was no one to count the days nor to note the changes. The tribes of those we call Kelts drifted down to the Rhône valley, and as time flew by they mingled with the early peoples of the land and the memory of the ancient terror sank into their souls.

Some of these Kelto-Ligurians settled themselves near where now the tenth-century romanesque chapel of Nosto-Damo-de-Castéu stands high up on its rocky eminence not far from Tarascon. They learned to build unto themselves 'bori'—shelters of stone safely perched on the 'bau,' the precipitous rocks, of the Alpilles. They made themselves weapons with which to kill game and to defend their homes ; and pottery, shards of which are still found in their ancient haunt. They made tools wherewith to till the land, and in time they had flocks and herds for clothing and for food : so life was made easier for them, but fear stayed with them ever.

Again a long autumn night is slowly passing, and a cowering group, huddled together for warmth and companionship, crouches over a smoky fire. The black master-wind roars and tears at their rough shelter ; and as it howls outside, the wolf-like dogs crowded in with their masters rise growling, and with bristling hair snarlingly show their fangs.

Men and women and children press still closer together, and in low tones, with fearful backward glances, talk of the terror of the marsh : the multifiform horror that never dies, but has lived on from all time.

With more or less definite concepts in his mind, and with more or less clear-meaning words in which to express them, a man tells how, while hunting in the marsh, he caught a glimpse of a huge scaly creature gliding through the mud and slime. Another tells how at times the awful beast shows as a great curly-fronted thing like a bull. An old man tells how his son, now sick unto death, was caught by the darkness and kept night-

long in the swamps. His son did not see the beast whose breath is devouring fire that eats into the bones and slowly burns out the life of man; but he must have passed close to its lair, for his life is going out of him in burning flame.

All are silent as the mistral pounds and tears and rattles stones at the hut; while down the ravines the 'rouans,' the foam-fronted, glistening-horned water bulls, charge bellowing to join the great 'rouan,' the Rhône—bearing with them on their wild plunge to the sea the millet harvests swirling along with the drowned harvesters, and leaving behind them desolation and awed despair.

'Oh,' wail the women, 'will we never be delivered from the ancient terror!'

Then rose up certain astute men, and said: 'We who are the elders of the people, we will deliver you.' And these men drew themselves apart and went into dark places, where they took the terror of the people and (either of themselves entirely, or because of the strangers that had passed through the land) fashioned it into a god and showed it forth in a symbol.

They called the people together and said: 'The ancient terror is an awful god, and greatly to be feared; but when served as he should be, he will watch over and protect his own tribe, his chosen people. We the elders, the priests, are the servers of him.' Then the people fell at the feet of the servers of god and worshipped there.

In time, the god shone forth in a ghastly stone whereon was seen the scaly lizard, with gaping jaws (crocodiles lived in the Rhône even unto our own time), or a raging bull, or a devouring lion, or even man—so shifting are the attributes of a god. Then the priests set up this terror-god, this tarasque, in the different habitats of their tribe: a Kelto-Ligurian tribe known to the Romans as the Desuviatici. The people brought precious gifts to propitiate, and bloody sacrifice to placate, the terror-god.

Life grew better as time went on, and fear sank down out of sight in the hearts of the people.

It is very hard clearly to make out all this far past : through the Phœnician, Keltic, Greek, and Roman waves that have flowed over the land. It is still harder when the tide of Christianity sweeps in from the East and churns all this confusion into strange currents, refluxing on themselves in whirlpools that suck down the new creeds and cast them up again mingled with the old beliefs.

From our vantage-point of to-day, aided by the search-light of true science, we can look out over these troubled waters. We see the old gods and the new, the ancient rites and the modern ceremonies, all mingled in an inextricable confusion. We see how the ancient terrors lose their power, and are degraded ; either vanishing utterly or else changing in nature. But here and there we can clearly discern some fixed points slowly surging up in the mind of man.

We see the Roman Marius who delivered the land from the northern barbarians, and with him is Martha, the Syrian prophetess. Martha seems to detach herself from Marius and the Romans, and—possibly because of her taras, or taras-eicon—becomes the saving deity of the people near Tarascon, whom she delivers from danger.

In the dark ages, and the early middle ages, when reason was not and truth barely existed, again comes confusion ; for the monkish records tell that St. Martha of Bethany (whose legend says she came to this land from Palestine), as the price of conversion to Christianity saved the people from a frightful river-monster, the tarasque. In the whirl of time this tarasque has become in many minds but a symbol of conquered paganism, whose simulacrum is led meekly in a pious procession still held at Tarascon in honour of St. Martha's victory. The priests of the Roman Church carry on high in this procession the miracle-working relics of St. Martha ; before which the tarasque, the humbled and fallen terror of the past, makes three clumsy jumps in token of submission.

In dim remembrance of old times the people of Tarascon go, in

III

blossoming May, up to the deserted heights of Nosto-Damo-de-Castéu in gay pilgrimage to honour an ancient image of the Virgin Mother there enshrined. A pilgrimage full, though the people know it not, of strange memorials of their far past.

V

King René of Anjou, the laughter-loving Count of Provence, seeking to divert the melancholy of his beloved wife, Jeanne de Laval, turned the old-time Keltic terror into gay new fêtes : the games of the tarasque. These games still are played. The tarasque—a monster of wood and canvas, a plaything and a joy-producer—now goes through the sunny streets of Tarascon curveting to the most rollicking of airs set to very ancient words.

With rockets shooting fiery breath from its black nostrils, the old-time terror plunges viciously into the laughing crowd of onlookers, who scatter in fright—that may not be all pretence, as the nerves thrill down to long-buried fears. And under the rock on which towers King René's castle is pointed out the creature's old lair.

The people of Tarascon to-day are fiercely, if somewhat shamefacedly, proud of their tarasque, and many of them have a kind of unconscious loving dread of it. In this very year of the Lord 1896 they could be seen crowding to touch, and to make their children touch, la Tarasco—la maire-grand, the grandmother, as they call it—for that touch brings good luck.

The old god has fallen to be an amusement for the crowd and a study for the antiquarian. His image found at Tarasconnet (Noves) sits harmless in the museum at Avignon ; and another, from Les Baux, lies broken in an antiquarian's garden at Eyragues. Cornfields and vines are green where were the dark morasses in which he lurked, and the god is dead save in the poet's song and the tales whispered furtively at twilight.

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'Sòcio dóu Felibrige.'