

Dr Tenace

©Yves Bernas 2014

Cover pictures based on the wood engraving by
Camille Flammarion, from his book:
“L’atmosphère: météorologie populaire”,
published in 1888.

This novel is dedicated to my son William.

Many thanks to Kathrin
for her encouragement.

Chapter 1: Morgue 15

As a doctor, you are interested in life, you fight for it and rejoice when you've healed, when the heartbeat is regular, the cheeks are pink and the eyes shine with hope and not with fever. After you've signed his authorisation to leave the hospital, you walk the patient to the door and say:

— I never want to see you here again Mr. Barns, you promise?

As a surgeon you're usually sad when you did not manage to save someone, like the young boy whose parents brought him in so late that his appendix burst and produced the lethal peritonitis. You're not sad because you messed up and were a bad doctor, 'cause you surely weren't. You're sad because someone died in front of you and you couldn't do anything about it. Perhaps this is why so many doctors have a couple of drinks more than the rest of us. It's a hard job to clink glasses with the dead. James Tenace was a doctor, but he wasn't sad when someone died, he was interested. He had the professionally compassionate look on his face, so common to undertakers. He had always wanted to be present when someone died. He had even given instructions to the nurses to call him when someone was about to kick the bucket. When he came, he entered the room quietly, got closer to the dying person, caress his cheeks, maybe thereby smelling what was still left of the breath and coveting, would take both his cold hands and peer deep into the fainting eyes. He would then sit down on the chair next to the bed, still holding the dying person's hand to avidly scrutinise all around his body in a frenzy.

To say that Doctor Tenace loved death is probably too much, but decay, especially mental or soul decay fascinated him. He was hypnotised by the last minutes of all sorts of living creatures struggling with death. He loved their panic, their trembling, their eyes at a loss, looking one last time around the room to see if they still knew someone, before this sudden calm would invade just before it was all over. This is when he would stand up, bend down over the corpse and possibly rejoice, holding the stethoscope, that the heartbeat would never be irregular again.

I always wondered what kind of physical pleasures such events triggered in his body, because afterwards he always looked sweaty, compulsively excited, and his eyes would glitter like engaging swords in the subdued room before he would routinely order the nurse to take the corpse to:

— Morgue 15 please!

Tenace had not always been like that. On the contrary, he used to fight for life even when most of his colleagues had already given up. It's not clear what changed him. Some say it was a love affair, one that actually had not quite reached this stage.

Chapter 2: Sarah Schein

Sarah Schein was a Jewish beauty, dark curly hair, extremely vivid and mocking. Arrogant and elitist, she would despise a man as soon as possible if she could detect the slightest hint that he would not be up to her expectations and these were certainly great, all the greater since it might have been the only greatness she would ever achieve.

But Doctor Tenace had been fascinated by her in his youth, her eyes shining like the hearth of her soul. Her smile mocked the entire world and she was so sure of herself, like one can only be when one has had a perfect childhood. Her parents had loved her so unconditionally, in a glimpse of divineness she would never forget. She would radiate back this divineness at the most unexpected moments, even through the narrow doors of her smirk.

Poor Tenace fell for that, not only the quick mouth and the dark locks, her childishness and insolence; that was the sunny side of it, but he fell for the impossible, the perpetual challenges she kept on giving him, all he had to reach and change before she would finally let him have her. Tenace started to believe in this promise of a later paradise, in another life, and started to get used to the idea that happiness was not for now but for later, once you're dead. Perhaps this is why he was so fascinated by death. He had renounced to be happy in his very life and was ready to endure the challenges and rejections, eternally waiting for the moment when she'd finally say yes.

His life had shrunk to checking a daily list of to-do's and the only, but great, pleasure in it was when this list was done. He was

so used to things going wrong that he could not enjoy things going right. They were a bad sign, the sign that it was going to go wrong again. This is why he enjoyed and preferred when things went wrong, end of story. It was secure, nothing could get worse and that was good, so good that he could relax and rest in this dead end.

But what Tenace didn't realise is that in Sarah's mind, even this other life was definitely not meant to include him. When he reckoned that, it was too late; he had already started to hate her.

For Tenace, life was exterior to human beings; it visited them like the wind, blew over streets and houses and in a twinkle, it was somewhere else, leaving people at their windows, complaining, "It's dead here!"

Chapter 3: Anna Haridana

These were his thoughts as he was looking out the window of his office at Falkennest, a medical institution specialised in trying to get patients back from the coma they fell in after surgery or accident. Tenace opened the file on his desk: Anna Haridana. Anna was the worst case, no sign of life except her breath. She had a poached eye which she had never bothered to vitrify. Perhaps if she had had the money she would have had it replaced, even with gold, since her father was Russian.

Tenace read "Married to the painter and lacquerer Miguel Sofrer since 1958", then further: during the trial it was not completely clear either to the judge or to the General Attorney or even to Anna's public lawyer, who was the accused and who was the culprit. But since one of them was dead and the other one about the same, none of these wigged officials was very much troubled by this uncertainty. Why Robert Stank, the Attorney General, insisted on Anna's presence in Court was a mystery, since she could neither understand nor hear the questions posed by the court, not even the final sentence. She was just a flabby packet on a wheelchair disrupting the sudden silence of the high-ceiling church that served as a court room with her hoarse breath. If he could have, Robert Stank would have ordered the coffin to court.

The circumstances of the accident -should I say murder- are unclear. All that is sure is that Anna and Miguel were found lying on the round perron after having both smashed through the second-floor window of the dining room and flown to the ground screaming. Who pushed who is unclear. Miguel died instantly. The

neighbours, Mr and Mrs Rütli, said that a fight about money had been going on. They testified that they have clearly heard Miguel accusing his wife of having stolen money from him for years. He is supposed to have yelled at his wife just before the fatal flight:

— 200,000 Francs in that bank account! How on earth did you get it? If you weren't so fat and ugly, I could guess how you got it.

This is when she grabbed the knife. Though small, it was glittering in her hands just like her eyes, and Miguel knew she was going to kill him unless he stopped her. But he was much angrier at her that she had been stealing from him than he was that she intended to kill him. Money was more valuable than life. He stood up, rushed at her, not caring about the knife, just longing for her throat. He clawed his hands around her throat, screaming and pushing her across the room, holding her gullet, his arms so stretched that it seemed to keep the knife away. Most probably it was because the knife was too short, since it was an oyster knife. He began to shove her around the room with a strength and determination neither of them suspected him to possess. He kept on looking into her eyes and perhaps he saw in them that she still loved him and was never going to kill him, but then again why did she steal all that money? These were the fateful seconds of his life; he did not have time to answer his questions. He did not have the patience anymore. He had asked himself these questions over and over again, forgiving her everything, her moods, her unfounded accusations, her animosity, her verbal abuse, her contempt, her refusal and domination. But this time, he'd had enough. He had come to the conclusion that the solution was this stained-glass window representing the dome of the Universe according to

Flammarion. He did not even feel much when she stabbed him with that oyster knife; perhaps he thought it was the door to heaven. And anyhow he had his eyes closed and was thrusting her. He moved like a bull rushing to his torturer. She was imploring him with her eyes, but somehow it seemed that she did not care either. Whatever would come, if it was his way to show her his feelings, whatever feelings, at least feelings. Their voyage lasted an eternity and they went through the stained-glass like the milkman through the door. The window exploded and they stopped screaming for three seconds, honouring the silence, and then there was a big thump, like a big pat on the back. That was it.

Tenace closed the file and his thoughts drifted. He remembered his father saying:

— I'm 54 and I'm done with my life. Ain't that good, the next years are free, no duty! Duty is an excuse for not doing what you want! Tenace was afraid of not being afraid to die. He kept on thinking that if you're not afraid to die, death would come and get you. There he was, abashed and not caring to survive, indifferent to death. He thought, it could come when it wanted. At the same time this very idea scared him because he thought it was like lowering your guard. Accepting the possibility of one's own end coming any second, wasn't that the ultimate wisdom and freedom? He could not totally adhere to that and kept on thinking he was somehow spitting at life. Maybe the answer should have been to want something, to really want something extraordinary, instead of surfing like a parasite on the organic waves of life. He also thought if you refused to live, you'd get another life, and that

thought suited him because he wasn't pleased with his, where he was born and how his life had started.

Tenace placed the file back on his desk and looked through the window. Old Yvonne, who looked like a turtle, was being walked by young Maja. He fancied Maja, a young nurse, short blond hair, blue, slightly mocking eyes, sporty, joyful, 200 percent alive and always humming a tune like she would bring babies to bed.

This story was too close to his; Anna Haridana could have been his mother. A tear drop was about to be conceived by his lachrymal glands, when, probably, the satisfaction of being alive, at least for the prospect of a dinner with young Maja, made his cheeks spread apart to press his lips together in a smile of solidarity for the living.