# A Fog in Santone

O. Henry

The drug clerk looks sharply at the white face half concealed by the high-turned overcoat collar.

“I would rather not supply you,” he said doubtfully. “I sold you a dozen morphine tablets less than an hour ago.”

The customer smiles wanly. “The fault is in your crooked streets. I didn’t intend to call upon you twice, but I guess I got tangled up. Excuse me.”

He draws his collar higher, and moves out, slowly. He stops under an electric light at the corner, and juggles absorbedly with three or four little pasteboard boxes. “Thirty-six,” he announces to himself. “More than plenty.” For a gray mist had swept upon Santone that night, an opaque terror that laid a hand to the throat of each of the city’s guests. It was computed that three thousand invalids were hibernating in the town. They had come from far and wide, for here, among these contracted river-sliced streets, the goddess Ozone has elected to linger.

Purest atmosphere, sir, on earth! You might think from the river winding through our town that we are malarial, but, no, sir! Repeated experiments made both by the Government and local experts show that our air contains nothing deleterious—nothing but ozone, sir, pure ozone. Litmus paper tests made all along the river show—but you can read it all in the prospectuses; or the Santonian will recite it for you, word by word.

We may achieve climate, but weather is thrust upon us. Santone, then, cannot be blamed for this cold gray fog that came and kissed the lips of the three thousand, and then delivered them to the cross. That night the tubercles, whose ravages hope holds in check, multiplied. The writhing fingers of the pale mist did not go thence bloodless. Many of the wooers of ozone capitulated with the enemy that night, turning their faces to the wall in that dumb, isolated apathy that so terrifies their watchers. On the red stream of Hemorrhagia a few souls drifted away, leaving behind pathetic heaps, white and chill as the fog itself. Two or three came to view this atmospheric wraith as the ghost of impossible joys, sent to whisper to them of the egregious folly it is to inhale breath into the lungs, only to exhale it again, and these used whatever came handy to their relief, pistols, gas or the beneficent muriate.

The purchaser of the morphia wanders into the fog, and at length, finds himself upon a little iron bridge, one of the score or more in the heart of the city, under which the small tortuous river flows. He leans on the rail and gasps, for here the mist has concentrated, lying like a foot-pad to garrote such of the Three Thousand as creep that way. The iron bridge guys rattle to the strain of his cough, a mocking phthisical rattle, seeming to say to him: “Clickety-clack! just a little rusty cold, sir—but not from our river. Litmus paper all along the banks and nothing but ozone. Clacket-y-clack!”

The Memphis man at last recovers sufficiently to be aware of another overcoated man ten feet away, leaning on the rail, and just coming out of a paroxysm. There is a freemasonry among the Three Thousand that does away with formalities and introductions. A cough is your card; a hemorrhage a letter of credit. The Memphis man, being nearer recovered, speaks first.

“Goodall. Memphis—pulmonary tuberculosis—guess last stages.” The Three Thousand economize on words. Words are breath and they need breath to write checks for the doctors.

“Hurd,” gasps the other. “Hurd; of T’leder. T’leder, Ah-hia. Catarrhal bronkeetis. Name’s Dennis, too—doctor says. Says I’ll live four weeks if I—take care of myself. Got your walking papers yet?”

“My doctor,” says Goodall of Memphis, a little boastingly, “gives me three months.”

“Oh,” remarks the man from Toledo, filling up great gaps in his conversation with wheezes, “damn the difference. What’s months! Expect to—cut mine down to one week—and die in a hack—a four wheeler, not a cough. Be considerable moanin’ of the bars when I put out to sea. I’ve patronized ‘em pretty freely since I struck my—present gait. Say, Goodall of Memphis—if your doctor has set your pegs so close—why don’t you—get on a big spree and go—to the devil quick and easy—like I’m doing?”

“A spree,” says Goodall, as one who entertains a new idea, “I never did such a thing. I was thinking of another way, but–—”

“Come on,” invites the Ohioan, “and have some drinks. I’ve been at it—for two days, but the inf—ernal stuff won’t bite like it used to. Goodall of Memphis, what’s your respiration?”

“Twenty-four.”

“Daily—temperature?”

“Hundred and four.”

“You can do it in two days. It’ll take me a—week. Tank up, friend Goodall—have all the fun you can; then—off you go, in the middle of a jag, and s-s-save trouble and expense. I’m a s-son of a gun if this ain’t a health resort—for your whiskers! A Lake Erie fog’d get lost here in two minutes.”

“You said something about a drink,” says Goodall.

A few minutes later they line up at a glittering bar, and hang upon the arm rest. The bartender, blond, heavy, well-groomed, sets out their drinks, instantly perceiving that he serves two of the Three Thousand. He observes that one is a middle-aged man, well-dressed, with a lined and sunken face; the other a mere boy who is chiefly eyes and overcoat. Disguising well the tedium begotten by many repetitions, the server of drinks begins to chant the sanitary saga of Santone. “Rather a moist night, gentlemen, for our town. A little fog from our river, but nothing to hurt. Repeated Tests.”

“Damn your litmus papers,” gasps Toledo—“without any—personal offense intended.”

“We’ve beard of ‘em before. Let ‘em turn red, white and blue. What we want is a repeated test of that—whiskey. Come again. I paid for the last round, Goodall of Memphis.”

The bottle oscillates from one to the other, continues to do so, and is not removed from the counter. The bartender sees two emaciated invalids dispose of enough Kentucky Belle to floor a dozen cowboys, without displaying any emotion save a sad and contemplative interest in the peregrinations of the bottle. So he is moved to manifest a solicitude as to the consequences.

“Not on your Uncle Mark Hanna,” responds Toledo, “will we get drunk. We’ve been—vaccinated with whiskey—and—cod liver oil. What would send you to the police station—only gives us a thirst. S-s-set out another bottle.”

It is slow work trying to meet death by that route. Some quicker way must be found. They leave the saloon and plunge again into the mist. The sidewalks are mere flanges at the base of the houses; the street a cold ravine, the fog filling it like a freshet. Not far away is the Mexican quarter. Conducted as if by wires along the heavy air comes a guitar’s tinkle, and the demoralizing voice of some senorita singing:

“En las tardes sombrillos del invierro En el prado a Marar me reclino Y maldigo mi fausto destino—Una vida la mas infeliz.”

The words of it they do not understand—neither Toledo nor Memphis, but words are the least important things in life. The music tears the breasts of the seekers after Nepenthe, inciting Toledo to remark:

“Those kids of mine—I wonder—by God, Mr. Goodall of Memphis, we had too little of that whiskey! No slow music in mine, if you please. It makes you disremember to forget.”

Hurd of Toledo, here pulls out his watch, and says: “I’m a son of a gun! Got an engagement for a hack ride out to San Pedro Springs at eleven. Forgot it. A fellow from Noo York, and me, and the Castillo sisters at Rhinegelder’s Garden. That Noo York chap’s a lucky dog—got one whole lung—good for a year yet. Plenty of money, too. He pays for everything. I can’t afford—to miss the jamboree. Sorry you ain’t going along. Good-by, Goodall of Memphis.”

He rounds the corner and shuffles away, casting off thus easily the ties of acquaintanceship as the moribund do, the season of dissolution being man’s supreme hour of egoism and selfishness. But he turns and calls back through the fog to the other: “I say, Goodall of Memphis! If you get there before I do, tell ‘em Hurd’s a-comin’ too. Hurd, of T’leder, Ah-hia.”

Thus Goodall’s tempter deserts him. That youth, un-complaining and uncaring, takes a spell at coughing, and, recovered, wanders desultorily on down the street, the name of which he neither knows nor recks. At a certain point he perceives swinging doors, and hears, filtering between them a noise of wind and string instruments. Two men enter from the street as he arrives, and he follows them in. There is a kind of ante-chamber, plentifully set with palms and cactuses and oleanders. At little marble-topped tables some people sit, while soft-shod attendants bring the beer. All is orderly, clean, melancholy, gay, of the German method of pleasure. At his right is the foot of a stairway. A man there holds out his hand. Goodall extends his, full of silver, the man selects therefrom a coin. Goodall goes upstairs and sees there two galleries extending along the sides of a concert hall which he now perceives to lie below and beyond the anteroom he first entered. These galleries are divided into boxes or stalls, which bestow with the aid of hanging lace curtains, a certain privacy upon their occupants.

Passing with aimless feet down the aisle contiguous to these saucy and discreet compartments, he is half checked by the sight in one of them of a young woman, alone and seated in an attitude of reflection. This young woman becomes aware of his approach. A smile from her brings him to a standstill, and her subsequent invitation draws him, though hesitating, to the other chair in the box, a little table between them.

Goodall is only nineteen. There are some whom, when the terrible god Phthisis wishes to destroy be first makes beautiful; and the boy is one of these. His face is wax, and an awful pulchritude is born of the menacing flame in his cheeks. His eyes reflect an unearthly vista engendered by the certainty of his doom. As it is forbidden man to guess accurately concerning his fate, it is inevitable that he shall tremble at the slightest lifting of the veil.

The young woman is well-dressed, and exhibits a beauty of distinctly feminine and tender sort; an Eve-like comeliness that scarcely seems predestined to fade.

It is immaterial, the steps by which the two mount to a certain plane of good understanding; they are short and few, as befits the occasion.

A button against the wall of the partition is frequently disturbed and a waiter comes and goes at signal.

Pensive beauty would nothing of wine; two thick plaits of her blond hair hang almost to the floor; she is a lineal descendant of the Lorelei. So the waiter brings the brew; effervescent, icy, greenish golden. The orchestra on the stage is playing “Oh, Rachel.” The youngsters have exchanged a good bit of information. She calls him, “Walter” and he calls her “Miss Rosa.”

Goodall’s tongue is loosened and he has told her everything about himself, about his home in Tennessee, the old pillared mansion under the oaks, the stables, the hunting; the friends he has; down to the chickens, and the box bushes bordering the walks. About his coming South for the climate, hoping to escape the hereditary foe of his family. All about his three months on a ranch; the deer hunts, the rattlers, and the rollicking in the cow camps. Then of his advent to Santone, where he had indirectly learned, from a great specialist that his life’s calendar probably contains but two more leaves. And then of this death-white, choking night which has come and strangled his fortitude and sent him out to seek a port amid its depressing billows.

“My weekly letter from home failed to come,” he told her, “and I was pretty blue. I knew I had to go before long and I was tired of waiting. I went out and bought morphine at every drug store where they would sell me a few tablets. I got thirty-six quarter grains, and was going back to my room and take them, but I met a queer fellow on a bridge, who had a new idea.”

Goodall fillips a little pasteboard box upon the table. “I put ‘em all together in there.”

Miss Rosa, being a woman, must raise the lid, and gave a slight shiver at the innocent looking triturates. “Horrid things! but those little, white bits—they could never kill one!”

Indeed they could. Walter knew better. Nine grains of morphia! Why, half the amount might.

Miss Rosa demands to know about Mr. Hurd, of Toledo, and is told. She laughs like a delighted child. “What a funny fellow! But tell me more about your home and your sisters, Walter. I know enough about Texas and tarantulas and cowboys.”

The theme is dear, just now, to his mood, and he lays before her the simple details of a true home; the little ties and endearments that so fill the exile’s heart. Of his sisters, one, Alice, furnishes him a theme he loves to dwell upon.

“She is like you, Miss Rosa,” he says. “Maybe not quite so pretty, but, just as nice, and good, and–-”

“There! Walter,” says Miss Rosa sharply, “now talk about something else.”

But a shadow falls upon the wall outside, preceding a big, softly treading man, finely dressed, who pauses a second before the curtains and then passes on. Presently comes the waiter with a message: “Mr. Rolfe says—”

“Tell Rolfe I’m engaged.”

“I don’t know why it is,” says Goodall, of Memphis, “but I don’t feel as bad as I did. An hour ago I wanted to die, but since I’ve met you, Miss Rosa, I’d like so much to live.”

The young woman whirls around the table, lays an arm behind his neck and kisses him on the cheek.

“You must, dear boy,” she says. “I know what was the matter. It was the miserable foggy weather that has lowered your spirit and mine too—a little. But look, now.”

With a little spring she has drawn back the curtains. A window is in the wall opposite, and lo! the mist is cleared away. The indulgent moon is out again, revoyaging the plumbless sky. Roof and parapet and spire are softly pearl enamelled. Twice, thrice the retrieved river flashes back, between the houses, the light of the firmament. A tonic day will dawn, sweet and prosperous.

“Talk of death when the world is so beautiful!” says Miss Rosa, laying her hand on his shoulder. “Do something to please me, Walter. Go home to your rest and say: ‘I mean to get better,’ and do it.”

“If you ask it,” says the boy, with a smile, “I will.”

The waiter brings full glasses. Did they ring? No; but it is well. He may leave them. A farewell glass. Miss Rosa says: “To your better health, Walter.” He says: “To our next meeting.”

His eyes look no longer into the void, but gaze upon the antithesis of death. His foot is set in an undiscovered country tonight. He is obedient, ready to go.

“Good night,” she says.

“I never kissed a girl before,” he confesses, “except my sisters.”

“You didn’t this time,” she laughs, “I kissed you—good night.”

“When shall I see you again,” he persists.

“You promised me to go home,” she frowns, “and get well. Perhaps we shall meet again soon. Good night.”

He hesitates, his hat in hand. She smiles broadly and kisses him once more upon the forehead. She watches him far down the aisle, then sits again at the table.

The shadow falls once more against the wall. This time the big, softly stepping man parts the curtains and looks in. Miss Rosa’s eyes meet his and for half a minute they remain thus, silent, fighting a battle with that king of weapons. Presently the big man drops the curtains and passes on.

The orchestra ceases playing suddenly, and an important voice can be heard loudly talking in one of the boxes farther down the aisle. No doubt some citizen entertains there some visitor to the town, and Miss Rosa leans back in her chair and smiles at some of the words she catches:

“Purest atmosphere—in the world—litmus paper all long—nothing hurtful—our city—nothing but pure ozone.”

The waiter returns for the tray and glasses. As he enters, the girl crushes a little empty pasteboard box in her hand and throws it in a corner. She is stirring something in her glass with her hatpin.

“Why, Miss Rosa,” says the waiter with the civil familiarity he uses—“putting salt in your beer this early in the night!”