

The Library of the Realm of Dreams

by Con Chapman

We were in Antibes, the last leg of a celebratory trip to France, our first time abroad since our honeymoon, only our second vacation without children in the twenty-five years of our marriage. United in this purpose, our interests otherwise diverged as they always have; adhesion is the binding force between two different materials, and we've stuck together this long because we go off on our own much of the time, and thus end up not getting on each other's nerves.

I said I wanted to go to the Médiathèque Albert Camus, she asked "Who's Albert Camus?" You see what I'm saying.

"He was a French-Algerian philosopher, a *pied-noir*."

"I thought that was a 'nightgown.'"

"That's *peignoir*, and it's not a nightgown, it's just a long women's outer garment that looks like a nightgown that you wear when you're not in bed." My dad was in women's clothes—I pay attention to this kind of stuff.

"So what is Camus if he's not a nightgown?"

"He's a *pied-noir*, which means 'foot-black.'"



"So he shined shoes?"

"No, that's a bootblack. The term originally referred to sailor working barefoot in the coal room of a ship, usually an Algerian. It came to mean a Frenchman who lived in Algeria before it became independent. They were doubly alienated, feeling distant from French culture and at the same time separate from the native Muslim . . ."

"Ok, that's *way* more than I need to know. You go, I'll take a nap."

I found the place on my phone and walked over to the Boulevard Gustave Chancel. As every French schoolboy knows, Chancel developed methods for the determination of vapor density. Handy thing to know if your vapor's getting dense.

There's no charge to enter but I don't want to check out a book, I've already got two going. I flip through the music and the films but since my ability to speak French can charitably be described as rudimentary, I can't bring myself to ask a librarian the particulars of where I would go to listen or watch. Instead, I wander around for awhile until I see a sign for *salle de bains*—the bathroom, and decide to go down to the *sous-sol*—the basement—where I gather they are located.

I take the elevator down and when I get off I enter a dimly-lit corridor with the bathrooms at the end and offices on either side. I try to walk quietly by an open door with light streaming out but stop when the occupant calls out “Excusez” at me. I look in and see—Camus, *lui-mauvais-meme*; translation, his own bad self.

“Do you know computer?” he asks.

“PCs, not Macs.”

“That is what it is. My monitor, *il est gelé*.” The frozen screen, the bane of the Microsoft user.

“Did you try the Task Manager?”

“I am afraid I will *perdre mon oeuvre*.” I know the feeling; I can't tell you how many brilliant gem-like phrases the world has lost just because I can't be bothered to save my work every thirty seconds.

“Let me try it,” I say, and I come around behind the great man, who smells of Gauloises and rose wine—my guess is he just got back from the traditional French three-hour lunch.

Gustave Chancel swaps vapors with a colleague

I hold down the control-alt-delete keys simultaneously and the screen goes blank, sending Camus into a paroxysm of fear; for a guy who wrote an essay on facing down suicide, he's kind of jumpy.

"Just close out of any other task you've got running and you should be fine." I see he's on the Suicidal Poet Predictor, a website that analyzes verse and tells you whether and how soon the author can be expected to self-destruct. "Here's your problem," I say. "You can always go back to it later. Okay?" I ask as I prepare to click "End Task."

"Okay," he says somewhat reluctantly. Leave it to an absurdist philosopher to deal with the tedium of the workplace by surfing the web.

"Merci" he adds when I return to his document. "If you were looking for the men's room it's down the hall."

"So . . . you actually work here?" I ask.

"Oui."

"What do you do?"



"I am in charge of the *catalogue raisonné* of dreams," he says, as if he's just told me he's a bus driver on the Juan-les-Pins route.

"What does that mean?"

"Let us say you lie down at night, ready for sleep. A melody or a phrase comes to you as you close your eyes, but you are too tired to get up and write it down. All of that stuff comes here."

"By a sort of aesthetic French drain?" I say, rather amused at my little jest.

"Yes," he replies, not cracking a smile. "It has to go somewhere. If left in the brains of the great mass of men, nobody would get up and go to work in the morning."

I can see that he takes his job very seriously. "So . . . do you have a file on me?"



"What's your name?"

I tell him, and he runs it through howmanyofme.com, a search engine that estimates the number of people in the world who share your name.

"There's only one 'Con Chapman,'" he says.

"My wife will be relieved to hear that."

He types my name into his network search box and comes up with . . . a bunch of crap I scribbled down in a notebook in the middle of the night a few years ago.

"Hmm," he hmms. "This is the halting beginnings of . . . a boatload of *merdre*."

I look over his shoulder and have to agree after reading "He Recalls a Poem Left Unwritten," which includes the deathless lines
*the sidewalk is pebble-grained,
like a basketball,
and in the white-purple glow
of the streetlamps he hears his own footfall.*

I gulp a bit, and a question enters my mind: "This isn't accessible by the general public, is it?"

"Only Platinum Members of the Médiathèque," he says matter-of-factly. "But they never do any hard research into unfinished works floating around in the ether. They just give the big money to go to the gala dinner and get their pictures in the paper."

"Just like America!" I say. "That's a relief. Are there any . . . potential masterpieces here that if left to steep in the subconscious of the artist over time, might break through to the bright light of artistic day?"

He makes a little *moue* and begins to scroll down an index. "Something by Thomas Berger, here's an idea for a Broadway musical based on the life of Kierkegaard . . ."

"*Søren!*" I exclaim, perturbed. "That's mine!"

"Somebody read a book you put it in, looks like they've got funding and are going to open in New Haven this fall."

"Well of all the low-down, scurrilous . . ."



Kierkegaard: "You're going out there an existentialist philosopher, but you're coming back . . . a star!"

"Hey—what did your President Kennedy's philandering bootlegger daddy say?"

"Life's unfair."

He's got me there. A thought occurs to me: "Say—can I go into my file . . ."

"Oubliez about it, pal," he says. "We've got a strict privacy policy here."

"But it's *my* half-baked stuff! I ought to be able to, you know, edit it, polish it up a bit, push it back down the chute. Maybe turn it into something I could actually get published someday."



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Joseph Kennedy, Sr.: "Life's unfair—to you."

He gives me that skeptical look familiar to generations of undergraduates who know him from his picture on paperback copies of *L'Etranger* they use to try to impress each other as college freshmen. "You cannot create experience," he says brusquely. "You must undergo it."

