

The Tower and the Shadow
[Ch. 5, §3.2, The Scientific Image]

During my travels along the Saône and Rhône last year, I spent a day and night at the ancestral home of the Chevalier de St. X, an old friend of my father's. The Chevalier had in fact been the French liaison officer attached to my father's brigade in the first war, which had—if their reminiscences are to be trusted—played a not insignificant part in the battles of the Somme and Marne.

The old gentleman always had *thé à l'Anglaise* on the terrace at five o'clock in the evening, he told me. It was at this meal that a strange incident occurred; though its ramifications were of course not yet perceptible when I heard the Chevalier give his simple explanation of the length of the shadow which encroached upon us there on the terrace. I had just eaten my fifth piece of bread and butter and had begun my third cup of tea when I chanced to look up. In the dying light of that late afternoon, his profile was sharply etched against the granite background of the wall behind him, the great aquiline nose thrust forward and his eyes fixed on some point behind my left shoulder. Not understanding the situation at first, I must admit that to begin with. I was merely fascinated by the sight of that great hooked nose, recalling my father's claim that this had once served as an effective weapon in close combat with a German grenadier. But I was roused from this brown study by the Chevalier's voice.

'The shadow of the tower will soon reach us, and the terrace will turn chilly. I suggest we finish our tea and go inside.'

I looked around, and the shadow of the rather curious tower I had earlier noticed in the grounds, had indeed approached to within a yard from my chair. The news rather displeased me, for it was a fine evening: I wished to remonstrate but did not well know how without overstepping the bounds of hospitality. I exclaimed,

'Why must that tower have such a long shadow? This terrace is so pleasant!'

His eyes turned to rest on me. My question had been rhetorical, but he did not take it so.

'As you may already know, one of my ancestors mounted the scaffold with Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. I had that tower erected in 1930 to mark the exact spot where it is said that he greeted the Queen when she first visited this house, and presented her with a peacock made of soap, then a rare substance. Since the Queen would have been one hundred and seventy-five years old in 1930, had she lived, I had the tower made exactly that many feet high.'

It took me a moment to see the relevance of all this. Never quick at sums, I was at first merely puzzled as to why the measurement should have been in feet; but of course I already knew him for an Anglophile. He added drily, 'The sun not being alterable in its course, light traveling in straight lines, and the laws of trigonometry being immutable, you will perceive that the length of the shadow is determined by the height of the tower.' We rose and went inside.

I was still reading at eleven that evening when there was a knock at my door. Opening it I found the housemaid, dressed in a somewhat old-fashioned black dress and white cap, whom I had perceived hovering in the background on several occasions that day. Courtseying prettily, she asked, 'Would the gentleman like to have his bed turned down for the night?'

I stepped aside, not wishing to refuse, but remarked that it was very late—was she kept on duty to such hours? No, indeed, she answered, as she deftly turned my bed covers, but it had occurred to her that some duties might be pleasures as well. In such and similar philosophical reflections we spent a few pleasant hours together, until eventually I mentioned casually how silly it seemed to me that the tower's shadow ruined the terrace for a prolonged, leisurely tea.

At this, her brow clouded. She sat up sharply. ‘What exactly did he tell you about this?’ I replied lightly, repeating the story about Marie Antoinette, which now sounded a bit far-fetched even to my credulous ears.

‘The *servants* have a different account’, she said with a sneer that was not at all becoming, it seemed to me, on such a young and pretty face. ‘The truth is quite different, and has nothing to do with ancestors. That tower marks the spot where he killed the maid with whom he had been in love to the point of madness. And the height of the tower? He vowed that shadow would cover the terrace where he first proclaimed his love, with every setting sun—that is why the tower had to be so high.’

I took this in but slowly. It is never easy to assimilate unexpected truths about people we think we know—and I have had occasion to notice this again and again.

‘Why did he kill her?’ I asked finally.

‘Because, sir, she dallied with an English brigadier, an overnight guest in this house.’ With these words she arose, collected her bodice and cap, and faded through the wall beside the doorway. I left early the next morning, making my excuses as well as I could.