

Masquerade

a Role-Playing Game by
Ashok Desai

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France, 1870. A terrible, incurable disease is ravaging the population, leaving its victims twitching and writhing in agony, waiting for a merciful death to claim them. Two factions have arisen to combat this dreaded plague, each with their own beliefs about its nature, each with their own methods of tackling it. Who shall be the one to save all of France from its dread effects? Who, in the end, is right? That is something for you to decide.

Important Note Regarding Ingredients

Masquerade is an ambitious attempt to include both camps of ingredients in a unique multi-level game. Players may take the parts of the Masks, travelling actors who defeat the Rot using imagination, misdirection and trickery, for whom I have used the ingredients from Camp B. Players may also take the role of physicians attempting to stop the disease using science and social influence, in which case their ingredients come from Camp A. If you are unsure about how to mark this game for its use of ingredients, please assume that I chose the Camp B ingredients as my primary inspiration.

This document contains some blank spaces. These have been left deliberately to make the later addition of artwork easier.

Mask Ingredients

Thread (page [PN])

The Masks believe that the dreadful disease is caused when a tangle occurs in the threads of the Loom of Fate. The game, for them, centres on untangling these threads.

Inconsistency (page [PN])

A tangle occurs on the loom when there is a discrepancy between the pattern that the Fates are weaving and the lives of the people they are weaving with. It is up to the masks to manipulate peoples' lives so that the two match.

Sacred (page [PN])

the Masks believe that all plays are as sacrements to the Muses whom they worship. They can use sacrements in play to influence other peoples' decisions, by putting on the right play at the right time to make people think about what they are doing.

Physician Ingredients

Currency (page [PN])

Physicians are wealthy people, and they can use that money to their own advantage by bribing officials to give them special powers, or by hiring helpers of their own.

Drug (page [PN])

The science of medicine is in a critical stage and new discoveries are made on an almost daily basis. The players may be able to discover exactly the right drugs to prescribe to finally defeat this evil disease, but first they need to understand it.

Memory (page [PN])

A person stricken by the plague first loses his memory. If the players are unlucky enough to be infected, they may find their skills and abilities degrading as their minds rot away. Can they complete their task before the disease claims them?

Concerning the disease *Ebonising Amnesia Mactabilis*, which the peasants call 'La Pourriture' (the Rot): it is an extremely deadly and contagious illness characterised in its early stages by near total memory loss, and in later stages by steadily increasing chronic pain, convulsions, bleeding from the nose and ears, disfiguring scarring of the epidermis and decay of the patient's internal organs.

Though inert in its early stages, the Rot quickly becomes highly infectious once the patient enters the secondary and tertiary stages of infection and should be isolated quickly. The Rot is thought to be transmitted via contamination of food sources with infected tissues and bodily fluids, and in the final stages by simple proximity to the dying victim.

Unknown in France until October 1870, this dreadful malady is spreading at epidemic rates across the country. Already half of our great nation has been decimated by its dark influence, and of the other half scarcely a village has not suffered its debilitating effects at all.

Thus far preventative measures have proven fruitless. There is no cure. No physic can discover what drugs to prescribe, nor can such measures as the burning of the bodies prevent the spread. In fact there is reason to believe that burning only serves to hasten the spread of the disease and should not be undertaken for any reason. It is possible that it creates a miasma of tainted air from which others may be infected. (This frivolous theory of tiny 'germ' beasts in the blood being the cause of all disease is something I will not encompass in my research until it has been more thoroughly tested.)

It chills my heart to know that even now the agonised cries of those touched by the Rot are ringing through the Parisian streets without my very door, and disturbs me even more to know that the only release these wretched souls shall have from their suffering is a timely death. Had I freedom of conscience I would recommend they be killed in mercy. As matters are, let God show them what mercy he can.

George Michaud, *medecin generaliste*, Paris

* * *

The Fates they were, the ladies grim
Who gift each mortal's path to him,
Proud Lachesis, whose solemn gaze
Would mark the measure of his days,
Sweet Clotho then would work the loom,
And weave his path from cot to tomb,
Atropos who, with silver shears,
Cut from the cloth the wasted years,
They wove our lives, their measure sure,
And yet they guard our fates no more.

* * *

O kind Erato, did you mean,
For this to be your final scene?
Did'st see the glinted shear held high?
Did'st know the moment you should die?
O beautiful Muse, we wonder how,
Your death could leave us loveless now.

* * *

And in their room the maddened Fates,
Tear at the loom and scream in hate,
The knife descends, the shuttle spins
And each life ends ere it begins.

* * *

Brother, sister, don your masks,
For we have dreams and hopes and tasks,
That nought but we can undertake,
We pledge our lives for duty's sake,
Our silken robes are finely sewn,
Our faces hid shall ne'er be known,
For only we would thus presume,
To free the tangles from the loom,
To give the Fates the cloth they crave,
And thus our sibling souls to save.

* * *

Fragments from a tattered script found in the ruins of the Digne Theatre, which was burned down by an unruly mob.

About Role-Playing

The hobby of role-playing as we know it today is a fairly young one, and began life as a tactical simulation of fantasy tales not dissimilar from those of Tolkien. The first publically available RPG, 'Dungeons and Dragons', hit the shelves in 1974 and is still going strong today, albeit in a somewhat evolved form. It has since been joined by hundreds if not thousands of other role-playing games, each with its own methods and distinct atmosphere. Masquerade is one such game.

At its very basis, role-playing is not so much a game as a form of improvisational theatre. Unlike most games, RPGs do not commonly have a winner and a loser, and the objectives are frequently determined by the players rather than the game itself. Perhaps then role-playing is not so young as first it seems. Many ancient cultures, including the Japanese and the Greeks, had theatres that staged impressive plays for the entertainment and enlightenment of the crowd.

Drama, therefore, could be said to be the heart and soul of the hobby. Though there is no set script for the play that the participants will enact, and dice (or other random factors) are frequently used to determine what each persona on the stage can accomplish, it is still mostly about taking on the mantle of someone other than oneself and acting through a series of fictional events. When playing Masquerade, drama is very important for a whole host of reasons which will become apparent soon enough.

How do I Role-Play?

This is one subject that is far better demonstrated than described, so the best way to learn it is to find a group of experienced players and join in with them. The usual format is for each participant to assume the identity of a fictional persona, often called his 'Character', and act through a story. Rather than attempting to perform the actions, which may prove difficult or dangerous under normal circumstances especially if the story is an exciting one, he simply describes what his character is attempting to do.

In traditionally styled role-playing games such as Masquerade, one player is afforded a special title. Games Master (GM) is the most universally accepted, though each game tends to have its own terminology. In Masquerade, we call this person the Rose Queen (or King, if he is male). It is the Rose Queen's duty to interpret the rules of the game, tell the players what the world around their characters is like, and determine what all the other people in the story say and do. In essence, the RQ writes the story and determines how the players' actions affect its course.

As has been said, it is far better to demonstrate how role-playing works, so here is a brief excerpt from a typical game of Masquerade.

RQ: You arrive at Geoffrey Bisol's abode, an old house with blackened timbers and white walls made of wattle and dawb. It leans slightly into the street, seeming to loom vertiginously over you. Candlelight flickers on the downstairs window.

Emile: I want to get inside and find his poetry book without disturbing him. Is there a lamppost nearby that I can climb to get to his bedroom window?

RQ: There certainly is, but it's a tricky climb. You'll have to make an Acrobatics roll to succeed.

Emile: (Rolling the dice) Blast, I've failed! Do I fall?

RQ: No, but a gendarme has spotted your shadow cast against the walls by the lit lamp and has come to investigate. (The Rose Queen puts on a French accent to indicate she is speaking as the police officer.) "Monsieur, what are you doing up there?"

Emile: "I thought the moon had become trapped in this little glass cage and climbed up to set it free."

RQ: "Hah, always acting the fool! Well come down this instant my friend." He seems willing to believe you, but you can bet that he'll be watching that house for an hour or two just to be certain you don't burgle it.

Emile: I'll have to find another way to get that book.

Two Truths, One Choice

What is Truth? Is it the same as fact, or does it have a less literal nature where, as the poet says, beauty is truth? Can these mutually exclusive ideals of fact and fancy coexist, or must people choose one side or the other? Masque is a game that stands between the two contrasts. Both views have their own kind of reasoning and their own adherents. Which will you be, hard fact or gentle fancy?

There is no need to pick sides as in some kind of war, for the real truth of the matter is that the views of either could be correct. Maybe science shall someday produce a cure for La Pourriture. Maybe someday Calliope herself will descend to the Earth and show herself to the unbelieving masses. Maybe. Right now, nobody knows who is right or wrong, the physicians with their complex contraptions and strange concoctions, or the Masks with their elaborate plays and pseudo-religious culture.

Because of the duality inherent in the setting, Masque presents two unique perspectives on the recent calamities that have befallen the human race. Text contained within a light-coloured box gives the poetic, symbolic views that the Masks have adopted. Text in a darker frame represents the theories of respected scientists. It is up to you to decide who should be right and who should be wrong, if both cannot be right nor both wrong.

The Rot Sets In

It was on the morning of April the first 1870 that gendarmes in the French port of Marseille made a gruesome discovery. Found in the unsanitary poor areas surrounding the docks, the body was that of a local beggar, though so disfigured that it proved difficult to identify. The corpse was covered in grotesque scars, and jet-black veins of corrupted matter laced his skin in patterns that seemed to writhe as one looked upon them. The body was twisted with the violent convulsions of death, and locals reported hearing agonised cries and sobs for days prior to the find.

This was the first recorded victim of Ebonising Amnesia Mactabilis, a disease that became known as 'La Pourriture': the

Rot. It would not be the last. Within a week Marseille was at the centre of an epidemic. The dead piled up in the alleys of the poor districts where they fell, and those with enough provisions barricaded themselves indoors and prayed. Before a fortnight had passed the first outbreaks in Paris occurred, the disease having been carried thence by frightened refugees fleeing the port.

The Rot proved extremely contagious. Though its mortality rate was not total (around 97%) victims rarely emerged from their ordeal unchanged. The disease had a disfiguring and amnesiac effect that left even those who survived it with crippling deformities, no memory of who they were, or both. The physicians of the age were baffled, unable to do anything to slow its spread across the nation or to treat its effects. It seemed as if the whole of France would be subsumed in pestilence. And then, four whole years after it began, the disease began to abate for no reason at all.

Masks Amidst the Crowd

It was shortly after this sudden respite that people started to notice a strange new organisation that had sprung up a year or two after the plague had begun in earnest. Known as the Theatre of the Muse, this travelling band of players moved from village to town to city performing their unconventional plays. Each actor was clad from top to toe in elaborate theatrical costumes, and each wore a stylised mask of some sort that covered even their eyes. Not a single inch of flesh was on show. What is more, the actors seemed immune to the disease and not one of their number was ever counted amongst the dead.

As the authorities began to pay attention to the Theatre, it became apparent that

there was a distinct pattern to the way these vagabonds moved from place to place. Where they arrived, an outbreak of the plague would invariably spring up soon after. When the sickness receded, they would move on. This anomaly was a closely-guarded secret for over a year to keep the populace from panicking while the government attempted to ascertain whether the players were spreading the disease or curing it. At last, a young doctor studying the problem spoke out and the public's interest was aroused.

The announcement had mixed effects, mostly bad. Mobs of crazed peasants arose to burn down theatres and persecute the actors. Those who had felt the calming presence of the plays protested the Masks' innocence. Those caught in between could only watch on bemused as a seemingly benign organisation became either angels or demons in the eyes of the people they professed to serve.

The Origin of the Masks: a Scientific View

Though there are many theories about how the Theatre of the Muse began, one story from the early days of the plague sticks in my mind as a possible explanation. This tale concerns a gentleman, Adam Escalle, a rich man and philanthropist who had marked himself as a champion of the poor.

When the Rot struck Paris, Mssr. Escalle bravely, but foolishly, entered the poorer quarters accompanied by his personal physician to bring what comfort and succour he could to those affected by the disease. Naturally it was not long before both fell afoul of the sickness (I refer you to my notes on the infectiousness of La Pourriture.)

When his condition became apparent, Adam barricaded himself in his private rooms, refusing all contact and comfort save from those already affected by the disease, whom he took in and tended to still despite his worsening condition. When the Rot began to attack his body he begged one of his companions, a seamstress, to make for him a mask and suit that would totally cover his form and face so that none would have to look upon his hideously twisted visage. He was even buried in this suit to spare the delicate sensibilities of the mourners. Coincidence? Or did this man somehow inspire the creation of the Theatre?

George Michaud, medecin generaliste, Paris

The Chief Physician's Report

Though its spread has slowed in pace to a point where France can at least hope to be rid of it one day, La Pourriture is still very much at large in the country and particularly in the smaller villages where medical assistance is poor or non-existent. Fresh outbreaks are reported everywhere with no perceptible pattern or clue to how the disease spans such wide distances. At least the slowing of its pace has allowed the beleaguered doctors of France to put together information on the illness and circulate it as widely as possible.

Symptoms

It is theorised that the disease can lie dormant in a host for as long as a month, since fresh outbreaks in towns once declared clear are common. Once it becomes active within the patient its first symptom is amnesia, a sudden and acute loss of memory. The patient forgets who he is almost entirely, hanging on to only a few scraps of images that were most important to him in his previous life. Some are less affected than others, but most victims begin to wander aimlessly in a dazed condition.

The disease enters its secondary phase within one or two days of emergence. This stage is characterised by steadily increasing chronic pain throughout the body, muscular weakness and discolouration of the skin. This latter symptom appears in distinctive ribbon-like marks that can be quite attractive despite the dread message that they convey. The patient may also suffer bleeding from the nose and ears, and may vomit blood and pass blood in their excreta and urine.

The final stage of the illness occur about two days after its emergence. The blackened tissue begins to bunch up, shrivel and scar into terrible disfigurement, often bursting open as bleeding sores. The sufferer's body is wracked by painful convulsions, both internal and external haemorrhaging, and the decomposition of the lungs and brain. Death comes usually within three to six hours of entering this final stage.

Treatment and Prevention

Presently there is no cure for the Rot, although a small proportion of sufferers recover in time. It is more important to isolate the patient so that others nearby cannot be infected. The primary stage of infection seems to be largely inert, although it is clear that the disease becomes contagious well before its secondary phase begins. It is therefore necessary to quarantine the sufferer as soon as any symptoms manifest, both for the protection of those around them and for their own safety. Early stage sufferers often forget extremely important instincts such as 'don't touch fire' and may endanger their lives as a result.

By the secondary stage, the disease is clearly contagious, though it does not appear to be airborne yet. It is thought to be passed on through bodily fluids, particularly blood and saliva. All areas surrounding the patient should be kept spotlessly clean, and they should eat using crockery and utensils that is reserved for their use only and boiled immediately after. Avoid physical contact wherever possible. Those who must enter the presence of the infected should wear a linen drape across eyes, nose, mouth and ears, and their clothing should likewise be boiled immediately after contact with the patient.

During the final stages of the disease it becomes extremely infectious. No measures are 100% effective in preventing the spread of the disease. The patient should be locked in a tightly sealed room and visited by no-one until at least three days after their eventual passing. The body should not be burned, but should be either buried or (if possible) dissolved in acid. A section of the catacombs of Paris has been set aside for the bodies and bones of Rot victims, and similar measures are being made available in other cities across the country.

Recovery

La Pourriture is a terrible malady, but it does not always kill those it affects. Around three people in every hundred survive its onslaught. Of those three, one will recover during the primary stages, one during the secondary stages, and one poor soul during the final stages. Though the pain and convulsions pass from them, the results of the disease are still horribly visible in the form of lingering amnesia in the case of first-stage survivors, and disfiguring blemishes and scars in the case of those who recover after a more protracted illness.

There is some debate over whether a recovering patient presents a further threat to others around them. Present thinking seems to suggest that they do not become carriers of the disease, but still people are afraid to approach them and they are often treated like lepers even by former friends and family. Their bodies, once they die of other causes, are extremely sought after by physicians researching the causes of the Rot, who hope to glean some measure of information on why they survived from the cadaver.

Superstition is rife in the less civilised towns and villages. Those who survive the Rot in rural areas are often the subject of witch hunts and lynchings at the hands of a crazed mob. How could anyone survive the devil-disease except by making a pact with the devil himself? Worse still are the unscrupulous doctors who are not willing to wait until Rot survivors die. These so-called 'scientists' are more than happy to kill to get their hands on a fresh specimen, though they prefer to pay others to do the deed.

The Religion of Masks

The players of the Theatre of the Muse claim a different cause behind the Rot, a supernatural reason. Learned men scoff at these legends as a confused muddle of classical mythology and pay them no heed, saying that exposure to the plague has left the Masks incapable of telling reality from the chaos of their own fevered imaginings. Yet the Masks are most dedicated to their beliefs, verging on the fanatical in fact. To understand their reasons, one must first understand the origins of the Theatre's strange religion.

In ancient times the Greeks believed the destiny of every man was made for him by divine beings called the Moerae, meaning 'apportioners', though they are more commonly remembered as the Fates. These three women together made the threads of each mortal life. Clotho would spin it with her distaff, Lachesis measured it against her rod and declaimed its allotted length, and Atropos stood near with her abhorrent shears to cut the thread when its owner's life was at an end. The Moerae are like demons to the Masks, and they fear Atropos more than any mortal danger.

The Masks also pay homage to a second group of Greek deities, the Muses, who were the patrons of all the arts. These goddesses were responsible for bringing inspiration to all writers and artists. Though the Masks venerate all Muses, there are three in particular that they hold more sacred than the others. These are Calliope the chief of the Muses and patron of epic poetry, Melpomene the patron of tragedy, and Thalia the patron of comedy. They also hold a special place for Erato the patron of love poetry, although not quite in the same fashion as they do the others.

The Madness of Gods

The ancient worship of these primal goddesses of creation and fate are well-known to scholars the world over, but the Masks claim knowledge of a more recent and tragic history that links the Muses, the Fates and La Pourriture. At first they were very open about these unconventional beliefs, and several plays were written on the subject, but mumblings of heresy from the Church disquieted their leaders to such a degree that these plays are rarely seen nowadays for fear of recriminations from the clergy.

The legends tell of how the Fates, tired of spinning the threads of mortal life, constructed a loom on which to weave those threads into a cloth fine enough to clothe the goddess Aphrodite. As the loom began to spin and click however, the Fates realised in horror that the threads were moving of their own accord as their human owners lived their lives. Tangles began to occur in the cloth, and Atropos called out to her sisters to stop, but they were blinded by the beauty of the cloth as it unrolled from the loom, and would not do so.

As tangle after tangle clotted in the loom, Atropos struck out blindly with her shears, cutting away at the knots in an attempt to keep the cloth smooth, for now she too was entranced by its beauty and could not think to stop it. Yet with each stroke of the shears, humans whose lives were not truly over lost their fates. Their memories were the first things to go and their bodies, deprived of the divine knowledge of their allotted destiny, would soon follow. These humans became victims to the Rot.

When she saw what was happening on earth, kind Erato (Muse of love poetry) ran to the Fates and begged them to stop. When they refused to listen, enthralled by their own handiwork, the Muse tried to wrest control of the loom from Clotho who sat at the board. With a shriek, Atropos turned upon her and buried her shears in Erato's beautiful neck. The goddess fell sprawled across the loom, and the fates returned to their weaving. There they sit to this day, weaving their beautiful cloth, with Atropos standing ready to cut out the clots as they occur.

The Formation of the Theatre

When the other Muses heard of their sister's death they mourned for her. The Fates were powerful foes indeed, and the Muses knew it would be folly to attempt to take direct action against them. Instead, they took to studying the fabric of the cloth as it wound off the loom. They watched the ways in which the threads of fate moved and, in time, came to understand how and where a tangle would form in the pattern. Human life is not neat, and rarely forms the beautiful symmetry that the Fates long for. It wants to weave patterns of its own, and that is how the tangles occur.

With this knowledge, the Muses formulated a plan. They took some of the bodies that had been left without a fate and replaced those strands with long golden hairs plucked from their fallen sister's head. Those mortals were saved from the horrors of the Rot, and became the first of the Masks. The Muses charged these servants with protecting the weave of the world from Atropos' shears, and so that they could do this they invested the Theatre with a little of their own fibre. As Muses their province was the arts, and so drama was the power that was given unto the masks; the power to change the hearts of men with words.

And so it is to this day. The leader of the theatre, who wears a skull-like mask and a crown of crimson roses in honour of the fallen Muse Erato, communes with the Muses to discover whose lives will form a tangle in the Fates' cloth. At the Rose Queen's orders, the actors go out into the world to influence those lives at their source, smooth out the inconsistencies between one pattern and the other, and thus prevent tangles from occurring. Where there are no tangles Atropos' shears are not necessary, and the scourge of the plague does not fall upon the innocent.

Religion and Folklore

Science has one view of La Pourriture and the Theatre of the Muse has another, but these are not the only players on the stage of the world. The common people have ideas of their own, though they tend to fall within one of three camps. The intellectuals and ruling elite lean mostly toward the views held by France's leading physicians. The creative folk, the artists and artisans, are sympathetic with the Masks though they rarely share their beliefs. The poor folk have a tendency to turn either to superstition or the Church for guidance on the matter.

French religion of the era is dominated by the Christian faith, largely Roman Catholic, and most people profess to believe in God even if they do not regularly take communion, confess their sins or attend church services. This places the Roman Catholic Church in a strong political position, a position that some of the more traditional fire and brimstone preachers have taken advantage of in order to keep their flock in line. The Pope himself has forborne to comment on the cause of the plague, but certain of his subordinates have not been so diplomatic in their preachings.

As of the present day, the Church has no official stance upon the plague, and each local bishop tends to put his own spin on the theme. There are two basic theories put forward; either the Rot is a punishment sent by God because of humanity's continued moral degradation, or it is a curse placed upon humanity by witches and heretics living in the midst of the faithful. Sadly though the former stance is more widespread amongst the clergy (who do not want to spark an unwarranted inquisition) the latter is far more widely believed by the populace. Which would you rather believe, that the horrors of La Pourriture were a malicious spell cast by the agents of evil, or a result of your own failings?

Superstition and Hearsay

The poorer quarters of the cities and especially the small rural villages of France are rife with gossip and old folk 'wisdom' that has little basis in fact. Too often a local yokel will make up some crazy cure of dubious veracity just so that they can look clever in front of their friends and family. A lot of old wives' tales and folk legends have also become entangled in the truth, and it is now very difficult to tell which of these gems are based on any kind of fact, and which are entirely fictional. A selection of superstitious beliefs commonly held by French peasants in regard to both La Pourriture and the Masks follows.

"The Good Lord wiped the face of the Earth clean once for its sins, He may do so again. This plague is maybe another kind of Great Flood, and the Masks his Angels of Death."

"The Masks? Monsters and pagans one and all, be sure of it! Involved in the black art of witchcraft if I'm any judge. The peasants are right to burn them."

Causes of the Plague

☞ A trail of cloven hoof-marks was found near the drinking water supply of Marseille shortly before the first outbreak of the plot, proving that the Devil himself had been bathing therein!

☞ The Rot began when villainous students of anatomy in search of bodies to dissect and examine broke into an old forgotten plague pit.

☞ Naughty children who are disrespectful to their elders and disobey their parents or answer back are always the first to catch the Rot.

☞ Finding a large toad beneath your bed means you will soon be taken ill. Having a frog under your bed will keep toads away.

Curing the Plague

☞ Carry a stone of purest quartz to each cathedral in France and leave it on the altar overnight. When the stone turns black, your affliction will be cured.

☞ The drilling of a small hole into the middle of the forehead will cause all of the little demons that are sitting on your memories to come spilling out.

☞ La Pourriture can be cured by taking poison to 'kill the rot'. The variety of poison varies from one region to the next. Parisian folk swear by deadly nightshade, but on the coast Hemlock is more commonly taken.

☞ If you can find and kill the person who infected you, then the disease will leave.

About the Masks

☞ They wear their sinister masks to hide the fact that they have no faces! Those costumes are entirely empty underneath.

☞ They can give you the plague just by looking at you, so long as they take their masks off first.

☞ If you remove their masks, they lose all of their supernatural powers and will shrivel up and die of the Rot in a matter of minutes.

☞ They are Satan's emissaries sent to keep an eye on the devil disease and make sure that it takes a firm root in every part of France.

☞ Shaking hands with a Mask is a mixed blessing. It is said that if you do so then within the week you will either find the love of your life or be stone dead.

☞ If you die of La Pourriture, the Masks come in the night and steal away your body, which they reanimate in their secret theatre temple as a new Mask.

The Aftermath

Though the disease itself was terrible in the extreme, there were those who pulled through it who suffered worse from its aftermath. Even those who had not been permanently disfigured by the built-up scar tissue and black corruption that occurs during the later stages of La Pourriture were still stricken with memory loss. For those with an innate resistance to the disease it could be as mild as forgetting the last year or so of their lives. For those who pulled through by some divine miracle, it could be total.

Many of those who forgot themselves due to the Rot became as children again, without even the ability to speak or walk. Even these were lucky, for though their former selves were entirely eroded they could yet be taught to do so again. In such circumstances much of the strain fell upon the relatives, particularly spouses and children, who had to cope with the fact that their relative was no longer the person he used to be. Still, though tragic, they posed no immediate danger to the general public.

Worse than the 'reborns' (as total amnesiacs were sometimes called) were the atavists, and they could not be helped. Reduced to the level of mere animals, they had just the wits left to forage for food and move about unaided, albeit on all fours. Those of a peaceful nature became as docile as rabbits, content to browse on whatever edible vegetation they could find and digest. Those who had been of a violent disposition before the mental rot set in proved to be extremely dangerous to those around them.

The Spread of Atavism

An atavist-turned-carnivore would eat anything he could wring the neck of, including humans. Though on average quite rare, these dangerous man-beasts would frequently spring up in dense populations in the poorer districts. There they formed primitive packs amongst themselves and lived by waylaying whatever flesh walked by, falling upon their benighted victims with savage howls. Strangely the atavists seemed to get on well with others suffering the same condition, even the relatively docile ones, a fact that no doubt led to their banding together in this manner.

In large cities such as Marsailles and Paris, the packs were rounded up and either executed or institutionalised by the police force. Most of the less violent ones ended their days behind the sheltering walls of the local sanitarium, happily nibbling on what raw meat and vegetables the wardens gave to them. The carnivores by and large went to the guillotine when the sanitarium guards could no longer stand their ravings and meaningless violence. Still, there were other smaller villages that had neither the police force or the mental health facilities to cope with the problem.

During the latter months of 1870, as the plague spread across a France already weakened by the Franco-Prussian war, there were many poor villages that simply could not cope with the influx of atavists, both from amongst their own citizens and migrating in from other locales. Though in some cases a militia could be formed to deal with the problem, or else a trained detachment of specialists obtained from a neighbouring city, even so there were remote villages far away from civilisation that fell entirely to this atavistic threat.

There may still be some isolated farmsteads out there ruled over by the animalistic aftermath of La Pourriture. The French military deal with whatever such communes they become aware of in a quite brutal fashion, but it seems that all they end up doing is driving the beasts to other villages or hunting grounds in the wild. The biggest fear however is not the danger these prowling savages pose to life and limb, but the possibility that they could still be carrying the disease from place to place, putting any attempts at eradicating it in jeopardy.

The Zoonotic Strains

If the human animals were not bad enough, it was discovered in mid-July 1871 that the disease had made the leap to the lower animals. At that time it seemed to be confined to a small population of wolves in the vicinity of Mont Blanc. Despite a frantic attempt to wipe out the carriers before this mutant strain could get any further, it was soon found in a number of other locales inhabiting not just wolves but also bears, and even domestic animals like cows, sheep, dogs and cats started to fall afoul of it.

The problem with the animal versions of the disease is that early diagnosis proved problematic. An amnesiac cow acts more or less the same as a normal one, barring a slightly more vacant stare than usual and a tendency to bump into things. There are certainly no overt signs of infection that can be easily tested for, and by the time the beast is convulsing or screaming in pain the sickness is already fully infectious. By then it's wise to sacrifice an entire herd, who will no doubt be mostly infected already in any case, than risk the diseased cattle infecting humans.

Since those days it has been proven that animals have a far higher probability of living through the early stages of the Rot than humans do. This makes them doubly dangerous as carriers, especially given how much contact they have with humans, and many small agricultural settlements have been decimated as a result. Those that are not wiped out by the plague can find their own animals becoming violent as a result of their own infection. Although it may sound amusing to hear of a village whose cows rose up and tore them to pieces, it is certainly no joke to see the herd suddenly rise up in anger and stampede in your direction.