

THE ANGEL ASRAEL

1150

I. The Three Damned Souls

Thus God has wished it: in the torments of Hell there are moments of relaxation, and almost of repose. The flames cease to spring forth then, folding into themselves, fading no longer exhaling anything more than a smoke as pale as the mists of Flanders at sunset. The lightning ceases to bristle then, no longer throwing forth sparkling darts. The cries cease then, the plaints expire, the howls fall silent, and in the eternal abysses there is a sad obscurity and a bleak silence. One might think that Hell and its victims have sunk into a profound slumber.

But sleep, by means of which one forgets the pains of the body and the distress of the soul, the mysterious benefit given by the Almighty to humans in exchange for the miseries of this base world, is not made for the reprovéd. A numbness replete with malaise grips their limbs, stiffened by tortures; a glacial cold penetrates their bones, semi-calcined by the flames; an anguish compounded of stupor and impatience weighs upon their heads, and without thought being entirely annihilated by it, mingles a dolorous uncertainty therein.

Nevertheless, a kind of joy shines in the fatigued eyes of the damned souls and the devils, simultaneously torturers and companions in torment of the damned, when the shadow of the hand of God, extending over Hell, casts that cruel appeasement over it. Yes, a kind of joy shines in their eyes, and, in order to understand it, it would be necessary to know how horrible the sufferings of Hell are—but no mortal thought is able to comprehend what such sufferings are, none! And yet, the imagination of humans, so poor and so imperfect in creating for itself an image of happiness, becomes rich and fecund in order to invent horrible torments.

St Paul has said: “The flames of the earth, compared with the flames of Hell, are only painted flames. And if the rich man whose foot drove poor Lazarus from his table could obtain from that pauper a single drop of water to refresh his burning tongue, he would change his clamors of despair into benedictions and transports of joy.”

Now, it is not for a frail motive that benedictions and joy would be able to penetrate such an abode.

For a few hours, Hell had been plunged into the appeasement that God only deigns to accord at long intervals, when a piercing scream suddenly burst forth beneath those mute vaults, an expression of both triumph and dolor. Suddenly, the flames were reignited, and their roaring sheaves woke up and bit the damned. The demons resumed their own torments and their duties as torturers, and Satan raised his hands despairingly to his forehead, on which the iron crown was red and resplendent, like an aureole.

Devils and damned souls raised their eyes, and saw above their heads a demon who was flying in circles, with wings extended, repeating the cry that had reawakened Hell, and holding two men and a young woman in his claws, by their hair. At a sign from Satan he furléd his wings and knelt down before the infernal throne, without releasing his triple prey, who, upright and panting with terror, dared not raise their eyes to look upon the horrible face of the master to whom they belonged forever.

First there was an old man. His balding forehead attested that he had worn a helmet more than once and hidden his face beneath the plates of his visor. Beside him stood a youth whose gaze was seeking a pale and beautiful woman, whose arms were striving modestly to veil her breasts, and who was blushing at the lubricious gazes and impure laughter of the demons.

Never had such merriment contracted the lips of fallen angels. To begin with, they enjoyed the poor woman's embarrassment, at length and with pleasure; afterwards, they lifted up her hair, which veiled her shoulders slightly; they parted her hands, and ran their filthy claws over her delicate limbs, amused on seeing them tremble convulsively at that frightful contact.

The old man and the youth could not contain their indignation and their jealousy. The demons understood that, with an inexpressible joy. Placing them facing the young woman, holding their heads in order that they could not turn away and placing iron fingers on their eyelids in order that they could not be lowered, they continued the cruel game for a long time, which amused the accused cohorts greatly. The damned souls, surprised, sat up on the ardent couches of the abyss in order to watch their executioners' frolics.

That lasted for several hours.

But ennui is the finest chastisement imposed by God on the reprovéd, and ennui did not take long to contract the diabolical brows: ennui, the deadliest evil of the eternal fires; the ennui that does not permit an idea to unfurrow the brow and nourish the activity of thought. Soon, therefore, the persecutions that had previously enthused them to such a degree fatigued them.

They sought hard to reanimate them by refinements, but nothing could do it. In vain they took the young woman in their black arms, covered her with noxious kisses and then passed her on to another; in vain they knotted their claws in her long hair and whirled the poor bewildered victim over their heads; their blasé enjoyment was not reanimated. Folding their fatigued arms over their chests, they interrogated with their eyes and in silence the orders of Satan.

The sovereign demon had already turned his head away a long time ago, and he was parading his indecisive and aimless gaze hither and yon. In the end, he brought them back to the three souls standing in his presence, and, after having considered them with a distracted attention, he spoke to them.

"Who are you, old man with a harsh and boastful expression?"

"Jacques, Seigneur de Crèvecoeur."

"And you, honeyed youth who is playing timid?"

"Daniel de Cantaing, seigneur of the village of that name,

"And you, tearful beauty, who have taken it into your head to ape modesty here, where there is truly no place for it? Speak, and quickly, else..."

The blow followed, or rather accompanied, the threat, for Satan struck the young woman violently with his iron scepter. She shivered under the rude impact.

"My name is Jeanne de Beaumetz, and this is my very noble and very redoubtable lord, husband and master."

"Good, I understand. Your sins are more of those sins that all resemble one another, the monotony of which is a torture for me. Stupid human race! You only know how to march in the tracks of others. Is it impossible for you, then, to put your feet anywhere but where those who preceded you placed theirs? Wretched fools, who are caught in traps still fully garnished with remains, whom example does not render wary, and who have the pretention to be wicked when they are merely imbeciles bound by routine! Your imagination must be very poor not to be able to invent some new crime.

"If you want to be damned, at least don't be damned for a ridiculous peccadillo to which too much honor is done in charging the infernal spirits with chastising it. We live in Hell ourselves, but at least it's for having almost conquered Heaven. It's for having shaken the one who presently calls himself the Almighty on his throne. We reached as high as him, though! But for traitors, but for cowards, but for hazard, above all—hazard, even more powerful than Jehovah!—yes, I would be God at present, and it's Jehovah who would be wearing the iron crown! Mine would be Heaven, mine the angels, mine the choirs of Seraphim, mine the hymns of virgins, mine the universe, and mine nature!

"No matter; I did not triumph, but I march as his equal. Those adorations, of which he is so proud, I have troubled; that worship, in which he contemplates himself, I share with him, I receive more of it than him. Seven legions of angels took part in my revolt. Let him count his elect, and he will see whether he finds them as numerous as my reprovéd.

"You see, stupid mortals, that in order to damn myself, I raised myself up to be the equal of God. And you, what have you done? You, handsome youth, received a kiss from a woman; you, brutal old man, gave two thrusts of a dagger; this madwoman preferred Hell to Paradise, and that in order not to be separated from a lover she will quit for eternity. Imbecile creatures, is that not your story? The same as that of all the others..."

But it's necessary that I hear it with its futile details; I have to submit to that tedium. Come on, Astaroth, don't strut so much on account of these three souls conquered for my kingdom; don't brag about such a little thing as a splendid victory. Certainly, it wasn't worth the trouble of waking me up with your boastful cry just now. It wouldn't take much for me to plunge you into the most profound abysses of my realm for three centuries, reducing you to the condition and torments of a simple mortal.

"Tell me for what reasons these three creatures are damned; tell me, since it's necessary that you tell me, alas, and so that I can decide the genre of torture to which it's appropriate to subject them."

II. Jeanne de Beaumetz

That speech by the King of the Abyss wounded Astaroth's pride profoundly. Nevertheless, he enclosed his wound within himself, for the demons surrounding him were directing piercing and mocking gazes at him, rejoicing in the humiliation to which their rival had been subjected in his triumph.

Feigning an insouciant indifference, therefore, he lay down nonchalantly at the foot of the throne, propped himself up on one elbow, and started speaking in these terms:

"Satan knows that about two years ago, the efforts of the spirits of the infernal empire to doom humans were obtaining no other result than bringing Christians who, sooner or later, could not fail to become the prey of Hell. No soul predestined for Heaven, no soul that was an object of predilection for the angelic slaves of Satan's rival, were deserting the road of salvation to enter that of perdition. Paradise was triumphant over Hell, and every time that one of us, following the terrible conditions that you have laid down, exposed his spiritual nature and attempted, under the penalty of losing it, to seduce a privileged soul, he returned alone after the expiration of the term of his voyage. Then you stripped him of his wings and relegated him disdainfully among the souls of mortals suffering in our gulfs.

"No demon any longer wanted to run such dangerous risks; I smiled with pity at their pusillanimity and the incompetence of those whom the example frightened so much, and I departed. You gave me three years to accomplish the work of the conquest of one human, and now, scarcely two years after I left, I am bringing you three victims. But as you have said, the work was so facile that truly, I admit, I was wrong to bring them with so much racket. I should have thrown them myself, without notifying you, into some obscure corner of Hell, and waited until hazard enabled me to talk to you and inform you of my success.

"Two years ago, scarcely had I quit Hell and reached the atmosphere of the terrestrial globe than I sensed myself embalmed by a pure and sweet perfume of virtue, a perfume whose divine impressions human organs only experience vaguely, but which the rebel angels cannot mistake. In spite of my demonic wisdom, which makes me appreciate good and evil at their true value—which is to say, to comprehend that both are vain distinctions—that perfume of virtue produced in me a dolorous vertigo, which nevertheless did not lack a sort of charm. I immediately headed for the region from which it was exhaled, and I found myself above the Château de Beaumetz.

"There, my eyes, whose rays do not know the obstacles that limit the sight of terrestrial creatures, perceived a young woman of rare beauty, who was on her knees reciting prayers. Three times I ought to have drawn away, quivering with rage, for three times she made the sign of the cross; and there were above her two angels who, with their white tunics, their blond hair and their sanctimonious manner, were receiving those prayers and bearing them to the feet of the master whose servile slaves they are.

"That young woman was named Jeanne de Beaumetz.

"She was expecting, in a few days' time, her father, the old Sire Hugues de Beaumetz, who had departed ten years before for the Holy Land with the Sire de Crèvecoeur. Jeanne was thanking the mother of Jesus, "the Holy Virgin," as she put it, for having finally returned her father to her, a poor orphan, whose dear mother, the chatelaine Catherine, had been lying in the tomb since the feast of the Kings. Now, the feast of All Saints was approaching. Poor mother! How tender she had been! With what bounty she had been kind enough to encourage the amour of her daughter and the young sire Daniel de Cantaing. Daniel had generously taken the side of Catherine de Beaumetz, defenseless and persecuted in a cowardly manner by the avid seigneurs of the vicinity, who had ravaged and pillaged her domain. Daniel, polite, timid and gentle, showed himself to be such a loving suitor, such a good Christian and, above all—which

does no harm—a becoming youth skilful at playing the sistrum; he even composed virelays like a professional troubadour.

“In three days, her father would return to the château; and in three days, the chaplain would hand to the Sire de Crèvecoeur a written document made by order of Dame Catherine de Beaumont on her deathbed. In that document, she recommended her noble spouse, if ever he returned from the Holy Land, to have the marriage celebrated of her daughter Jeanne to Sire Daniel de Cantaing, in consideration of their chaste love and the services that the said sire had rendered to his fiancée’s family. For, without him, not one stone would remain atop another of the Château de Beaumetz, and the veritable seigneur of that domain, on his return, would have searched in vain for its vast lands and high towers. He would no longer have found anything but vassals submissive to various sires and naked lands divided between avid predators.

“Immediately after that discovery, which I owed to the chatter of the angels who were glorifying themselves in bearing such ingenuous prayers to their God and who repeated them joyfully, I planned the means of winning for Hell that woman, whose soul they were so certain of guiding to Paradise after having led an edifying life on Earth. I took flight in the direction from which the sires de Beaumetz and de Crèvecoeur were coming.

“Truly, it is something to see, the manner in which God recompense his own. The two imbecilic knights, reduced by the sermon of I know not what bald Capuchin, who is roasting here among so many others of his species condemned to the fire, and inflamed with a fine zeal, melted down their gold and silver vessels, pledged four years of their income, removed from the exploitation of their lands the youngest and most capable vassals, and left their mothers, wives and daughters behind to go and deliver the tomb of their God—who does not care about it—by making war on the Saracens, who had never done them the slightest harm.

“Six years later they were coming back without having liberated the Holy Land. In vain they had put on their banners: *God wishes it!* In vain they had battled like fanatics; in vain they had had themselves blessed and reblessed by the Pope, by bishops, by priests; in vain they had charged themselves with relics from the crest of their helmet to the guard of their sword. The Saracens, those heretics, remained the stronger, and the knights of the Almighty obtained nothing from their fine zeal but wounds, misery, fatigue and leprosy. Oh, I forgot something else: their domains were pillaged and their wives had gone off with a few handsome sires who were not such fervent Christians.

“Is that not your story, Jacques de Crèvecoeur? On setting foot on the soil of Flanders, did you not learn that nothing in the world remained to you? That your château had been dismantled, that your wife had been seduced by Nicolas d’Oisy three years before, and that, on the news of your return, discarded by her seducer, she had thrown herself in the Escaut?

“When he learned of the misadventures of his companion in peril, the old Sire de Beaumetz felt deeply moved, and began to shed warm tears. I took advantage of that ridiculous tenderness to slide into his soul a project no less ridiculous, and I had all the more influence of him because that morning, at breakfast, he had eaten an enormous piece of roast pork and emptied a large bottle of wine without taking the trouble to enquire as to what day of the week it was and whether it might not be Friday. I therefore set about breathing into him a spirit of vertigo that greatly troubled and obscured his ideas, which were already not very clear.

“I caused him to recall, although he had had nothing to do with it, that the sire de Crèvecoeur had only taken up the cross for the crusade in accordance with his advice, that of the sire de Beaumetz. I caused to pass before his eyes a host of so-called services and so-called proofs of devotion that the sire de Crèvecoeur had lavished upon him, so effectively that the dull-witted dupe took that old warrior by the hand and said: ‘Jacques, we have fought side by side for a year; we have shared our bread more than once; we have supported the same sufferings for the same cause, and on your return you have found neither a wife nor a fortune. I want, my brother in arms, to render you a wife and a fortune. Therefore, within three weeks you shall espouse in legitimate marriage my daughter Jeanne, and I shall share with you, in equal parts my castellany of Crèvecoeur. In addition, I’ll aid you to combat the wretched felons

who have profited from your absence to invade your property, and we'll treat them as we did the Saracens.'

"Jacques de Crèvecoeur, who was dying of the desire to accept—'Say no if you dare, old hypocrite!'—feigned generosity and obstinately refused such fine offers.

"Then the sire de Beaumetz took his dagger, in the hilt of which there was a fragment of the true cross—at least, he thought so, although it was only an old splinter of oak taken from the forest of Mormal; a monk, a fabricator of relics, had found it more convenient to pick up the fragment of the true cross there than to go and look for one in Judea—kneeling before the relic, swore this oath: 'On my share of Paradise and on the holy fragment of the true cross that I am holding, I make an oath that what I have said will be accomplished, whatever might happen. May the Holy Virgin aid me to bring it to the end, and the Devil take me if I fail!'

"Assured of my prey and having nothing more to do henceforth than let the results of my ruse unfold, I set about furnishing opportunities for mortal sin to fifteen or twenty Christians who could not fail to arrive among us sooner or later. Among that number it is necessary to count seven fornicating monks, four obscure honest men suddenly summoned to the delicate functions of judges or collectors of taxes, and a few other misdeeds that I no longer remember. As they were not men to repent but, on the contrary, to sink more deeply into sin and impenitence every day, I paid no more heed to them and am sure that not one of those who are dead is missing from here; the others will arrive at their leisure, I guarantee it.

"Two days later, therefore, I went to the Château de Beaumetz, where a brilliant reception was being prepared for the seigneur who was coming back, after such a long absence and so many perils. I saw Jeanne everywhere, running around, going up and downstairs, and never leaving Messire Daniel far from her side, who was aiding her briskly, and divined her desires before she had formulated them fully.

"Perched on the summit of a turret, I could not help laughing at their confidence in the future and a happiness that had escaped them forever. My bursts of laughter became so forceful that the tower shook and I had to fly away, else it would have collapsed. At any other time, crushing a few hundred peasants and sending them to another world without confession would have appeared to be quite a good joke, but the terror of such an accident would have spoiled the little joy that remained for our two lovers of savor, and I needed the blow already raised above their heads to strike them in the midst of a complete happiness; otherwise they would not have felt the impact as much.

"Finally, the cries of vassals and their crowd, which ran precipitately out of the avenue of the château, informed me of the arrival of the sire de Beaumetz. Jeanne, her eyes full of tears, threw herself into the old man's arms, covered him with kisses, and could not weary of clutching to her heart the father that Haven had returned to her...and who would give the name of son-in-law to the young and handsome sire de Cantaing.

So, how the damsel longed to see drawing away from that father the knight with the gray beard and the face scarred by blows of the lance and sword, who no more quit the Seigneur de Beaumetz than his shadow quit him—a shadow that rendered so apparent a beautiful yellow sun, such as there are in the region of Flanders in winter. But the importunate old man, encased in his armor, remained there, marching in measured step, sniffing the castellany and the young woman and, so to speak, digesting them in advance. To the one he gave a smile, a veritable grimace apt to terrify the poor thing; he looked at the other from the corner of his eye, saying to himself: *It appears to me to be in a good state, and there's the high forest that it's necessary to sell at a price of lovely golden angelots.*

"Already he saw himself as the father of a line of children and the possessor of a rich domain. For myself, I stood there laughing, jubilant at all the hopes and all the joys that were about to be disappointed.

"When the crowd of vassals had shouted enough and testified to enough delights, they were given twelve or fifteen barrels of beer to slake their thirst and drink to the health of the lord and master. I took a drop of sweat from my brow and cast it among those drunkards, and they fought ne another so fiercely that twenty-nine fell in the melee and the next day the provost hanged four of those who had struck most rudely, one of them at his own brother and another at his son.

“While they were drinking and building up to that battle, the sire de Beaumetz summoned his richest tenants to appear before him. When they had gathered, he set his fist on his hip, spoke for half an hour without saying anything, and concluded in these terms: ‘Now, then, there will be recompense for those who have done well during the crusade, and punishment, such as fines and confiscations, for the others who have acted as faithless vassals devoid of loyalty. In addition, I make it known that three weeks from today, on the day of the Feast of Saint André, our beloved daughter Jeanne will marry this noble knight here, Messire Jacques de Crèvecoeur.’

“At those words, Jeanne, who, her eyes sparkling with joy, had expected to see her father’s speech conclude with the name of Daniel de Cantaing, uttered a piercing scream and fell unconscious. Daniel, more dead than alive, threw himself back into the crowd. As for this gross seigneur here, Jacques de Crèvecoeur, he strove to reanimate the damsel, whom his presence rendered sicker than ever. She might even have died of dolor, but as that would not have suited my plan at all, since she could be that means have gone straight to Paradise, I approached her ear and whispered into it mysterious words that attenuate the power of death. Jeanne therefore returned to life, and was carried away to her apartments.

“While that was happening, the chaplain handed the sire de Crèvecoeur the parchment that he had written on the orders of Jeanne’s mother, which contained the lady’s last will. The seigneur had the contents of the vellum explained to him, and the almoner told him at length, after which the sieur de Beaumetz replied:

“‘Master, I have made a vow on my share of Paradise, and I have sworn to accomplish it while kissing the pommel of my dagger, in which a holy and precious relic of the wood of the true cross is contained. There is no power either in Heaven or on earth that can release me from such an oath. It is therefore necessary that I accomplish it. In consequence, I am throwing this vellum in the fire. In order that my worthy and defunct spouse, who is, I hope, in Heaven, will not hold it against me that I cannot execute her last will, you will celebrate a mass every day for two years, for the repose of her soul, accompanied by appropriate prayers.’

“‘Now, go tell my daughter Jeanne to be ready to obey me with good grace; otherwise I will give her my paternal malediction and, if necessary, will drag her to the altar myself. Finally, the sire de Crèvecoeur must know nothing of this secret; you will answer to me for that with your head. Remember that I have the right of high and low justice, and that your title of cleric will be worthless in this instance.

“‘The sire de Cantaing was here a little while ago. Hey, young squire, will you not go in quest of him for me? Look, there he is, mounting his horse, and thinking of leaving us. Tell him that your master needs to speak to him for a few moments.’

“Daniel came at a slow pace, and nevertheless with a sort of hope that I amused myself by inspiring in him. But he no longer retained that hope when he heard Jeanne’s father say: ‘Messire Daniel, seigneur de Cantaing, my very honored and defunct spouse Catherine de Cisoing, dame de Beaumetz, had resolved to unite you in legitimate marriage with my daughter Jeanne, but I have made a vow on the pommel of my sword, which contains a relic of the true cross, and no power on earth or in Heaven can release me from that oath. I have come, therefore to require you, as the good and loyal knight that you are, no longer to present yourself before my daughter and not to confide to any person in the world what had been resolved in her regard between my wife and you. In doing that, you will acquire unlimited rights to the esteem of an old knight who has fought for years to deliver the Holy Sepulcher from its infidel oppressors.’

“Daniel promised all that the sire de Beaumetz wished and departed in an inexpressible dolor. I leapt on to the rump of his horse as he quit the château and whispered a thousand confused projects of despair and vengeance to him.”