

Colonel Royet: *On the Brink of the World's End*

(1928)

Introduction

For long hours, I have mediated before these pages, hesitantly, with a heavy heart, my head vertiginous, as if on the edge of an abyss...

Ought I to make public these memories of one of the most anguished and tragic periods through which humankind has passed, without being aware of it?

Was it permissible for me to evoke the terrible threat that the future might reserve for us?

Oh, what perplexity was mine before the ultimate decision!

However, I have decided. The terrible secret is choking me. For more than twenty years I have kept it, having sworn to do so to Monsieur Luissant, the venerated President of the Republic. Today, my oath is no longer binding, because the illustrious Statesman summoned me to his deathbed in order to release me from it—me, the last survivor of *those who knew*. More than that, the great and good citizen engaged me to publish my notes and memories.

“Now that panic is no longer to be feared,” he pronounced, in a voice already faint, “it’s necessary for people to know how close they came to Oblivion. Perhaps the frightful vision of the accident that nearly destroyed life on our globe will render them better.”

In delivering the lines to the printer, it is, therefore, a terrible will of which I am the executor.

It is also a confession, for which I glimpse the appeasement of a dolorous remorse. Although entirely virtuous, a responsibility weighs cruelly upon my life. Too sensitive and too pusillanimous, I lacked decision. I allowed a frightful peril to grow before me, without denouncing it. My determination stood up just in time to prevent the definitive catastrophe, but too late to obliterate the effect of frightful misfortunes already consummated.

Perhaps people will consent to absolve me on imagining the heights of alarm and terror that I was obliged to scale. But above my imperishable dolor, crushing my weak personality, *the Fact* will be imposed, colossal in itself, disconcerting in its causes.

The Fact!

The World nearly perished.

The cause?

An unforeseen cosmic phenomenon? A cataclysm of the physical order? An unleashing of natural forces?

No.

Terrestrial life was threatened by a single man, simultaneously a genius and a madman.

And the reason for that monstrous aberration?

An amorous despair!

I. Roger Livry

The fifth of August 192*.

That date hammers my skull, an ineradicable obsession that marks the point of departure of the fantastic adventure in which I was involved.

That morning, I was very happy. In agreement with my principal, I had organized the syllabus of my course in philosophy for the next scholarly year. With a light heart, I had just saluted the gold-lettered frontispiece of Louis le Grand. For two months, I was departing on vacation, bidding farewell to my Lycée, and to noisy and agitated Paris. I was finally going to take refuge in a “retreat” that I had chosen some time before: a hemicycle of high mountains in the Savoy, with the blue line of an Alpine lake in a valley.

My suitcases buckled, and my ticket in my pocket, I call in at Fontenay-sous-Bois to bid farewell to Roger Livry, perhaps to make one last attempt to drag him along with me. But will he break with his need for isolation? Will he consent to abandon his laboratory, interrupt his research as an alchemist of genius?

I ring the bell at the gate of his villa. Little Tourte, Livry's "laboratory assistant," comes to answer it. "Is Roger here?"

"Yes, M'sieur, in the laboratory—but we're leaving soon on a journey."

"On a journey!"

Why has Roger not told me about that project? Slightly anxious, I hasten my steps, heading straight toward the glazed roof of the laboratory, which is shining through the girdle of trees, in the filtered sunlight.

I knock discreetly and go in, as is my habit, without waiting to be invited.

As soon as he perceives me on the threshold, Roger looks at me suspiciously. He interrupts his work momentarily, which consists of arranging bottles of blue glass in the padded compartments of a black case with copper corners—a case similar to those used by commercial travelers.

Others are arranged around him, waiting to be loaded.

"Secret keeper! You didn't tell me you were leaving!"

Under that amicable reproach, which I try to clothe in a jovial tone, I cannot entirely hide my perplexity.

For a moment, Roger hesitates to reply, but then snaps: "Well, yes, I'm going to the Camp de Châlons."¹

"The Camp de Châlons? You want to see Suippes again, then, the chalk trenches, the frightful mud where we suffered and fought?"

Roger does not reply. He checks the stopper of one of the blue bottles. Abruptly, a suspicion grips me. The Camp de Châlons! But that is where Capitaine Berjac is garrisoned—the husband of Mademoiselle Thiérard-Leroy!

Does Roger intend to inflict the futile torture on himself of proximity to the woman who, in his mind, ought to be his wife?

Perhaps—because, his eyes vague, he seems to have forgotten my presence by his side; a bitter crease purses his lip; he has plunged once again into the dolorous dream that that hunts him.

In my turn, once again, I evoke, angrily, the absurd and unrealizable amorous dream that has poisoned the life, to calm and so rational, of Roger Livry.

How could one imagine that that man of science, concentrated in study, rendered even more antisocial, almost misanthropic, by the years of the war, could have been struck by a thunderbolt? And yet, that was what had happened seven months before.

One day in January, an untimely hazard took Livry to the home of Monsieur Thiérard-Leroy, the director of the Observatory.

Irony! His visit had only one objective, to solicit some statistical information of a meteorological nature, but it needed no more than a brief appearance of the astronomer's daughter in her father's study to cast a profound and durable disturbance into my unfortunate friend's soul.

I saw Roger arrive at my home like a madman the next day, begging me to go incontinently to Monsieur Thiérard-Leroy's house. Without further ado, on behalf of my comrade, I was to ask him for the hand of his daughter!

And, without any objection, I submitted to that irrational and precipitate demand, because I could not refuse Roger anything.

¹ The Camp de Châlons, or Camp de Mourmelon, was a huge tract of land transformed into a military base in 1857, which became the showcase of Napoléon III's Imperial Army, employed for vast parades. In the early twentieth century it also became an important center for experiments in aviation. During the Great War it had close links with the nearby Camp de Suippes, close to the Front, also used as a training ground and to store stocks of chemical weapons.

We had been united by the bonds of a fraternal amity since our first days at school; having entered the *École Normale* at the same time, we had lived side by side ever since. By virtue of delicacy, simplicity and modesty, Roger had been able to level our very different situations, and render a narrow intimacy possible between the multimillionaire that he was and a poorly-recompensed debutant schoolteacher like me.

In addition, in spite of its singularity, my embassy to Monsieur Thiérard-Leroy inspired high hopes in me. In spite of his rough exterior of a gangling and inelegant, almost hirsute man of study, Roger was, in sum, very presentable. After a session with the hairdresser and a lesson to teach him to tie his cravat, he would be able, like anyone else, to pay court to and please a young woman. Then again, in matters more serious than physique and costume, he offered what is conventionally known as a brilliant catch.

An orphan, Livry had inherited a colossal fortune from his uncle, a wealthy ironmaster, estimated at a hundred and twenty millions at least; and what was certainly better, in the eyes of a man of science like Monsieur Thiérard-Leroy, my friend had always made the noblest uses of his enormous income. A sworn enemy of luxury and snobbery, scornful of the idle life of pleasure that seemed open to him, Roger had been passionate about the study of chemistry since his adolescence. Exceptionally endowed with mathematical skills, he had initially gone into the *Normale-Sciences*, and had then resigned on graduating, desiring to devote himself more freely to scientific experiments and the experiments he carried out relentlessly.

Finally, during the hostilities, his conduct had been admirable. He had involved himself in the gas war, pursuing research at the front, under shell-fire, into the toxic substances employed by our pitiless enemies, inventing replies as he went along to their odious malevolence.

Five palms of his military cross and a red ribbon testified to his heroism.

Thus, I was beginning to count on the success of my comrade's project, perhaps a trifle eccentric and unreflective, when, as soon as I spoke, Monsieur Thiérard-Leroy placed a brutal impossibility before me; his daughter was engaged to be married to a childhood friend, Monsieur Berjac, an artillery officer; the marriage was arranged for the end of April.

What could I say to Roger's dolor when he learned about the abrupt termination of his first idyll?

It was so violent, so unmeasured, that I envisaged with anguish a morbid depression in that powerful brain, overtaxed by study and the terrible years lived since 1914.

Alas, since that fatal day, my friend's singular attitude had reinforced my fears. There was a series of furious crises, during which Roger uttered extraordinary threats, punctuated with phases of listlessness that were even more worrying.

Then, a kind of rage for work reassured me a little. Did not the laboratory where his perpetual effort was extended offer the best distraction from his troubles?

So, at that moment, my anxiety was perfectly legitimate, on seeing him abruptly quitting his elected refuge in order to go toward an indeterminate goal.

The Camp de Châlons! What projects might be lurking inside his head?

I wanted to reassure myself.

"You've chosen a singular place for a vacation," I said, taking advantage of a moment when he had interrupted his meditation in order to resume the organization of his strange luggage.

Roger raised his head. "A vacation? You're joking, Out there, I'll be better able to carry out the decisive experiments."

"Right! The war's over—and you've done enough in that accused region."

Roger clenched his fists.

"No, the war isn't over! Humans haven't ceased to be the shame of terrestrial life."

"You're very hard on your fellows."

The chemist laughed sardonically.

"Look at Jobert! Another serpent I've warmed in my bosom..."

Evidently, the example of Jobert seemed well chosen to support the rancor that Roger had against the human species—and my friend continued to evoke the disquieting physiognomy of his former assistant.

“I associated him with my work; I confided a part of my secrets to him—not all, fortunately. The rogue thanked me afterwards by stealing two centigrams of radium from me—which is nothing—and three hundred grams of Omega acid, which is more serious.” Roger brandished one of the blue bottles that he was in the process of packing carefully into his case, and added: “Look! A phial like this one...” An excitement illuminated his gaze. “With this, I could turn the world upside down!”

Poor Roger. I judged it pointless to object to his startling affirmation.

“Fortunately, you’re loyal to me, my boy,” the chemist said, in a more placid tone, giving an amicable tap on the shoulder to young Tourte, who had just come in, his arms laden with packages.

“And me?” I said, in a tone of mild reproach. “You don’t count me for anything?”

At that appeal, Roger relaxed. “Paul, my brother, take pity on my poor nerves, raked by suffering. Don’t abandon me. You can—you ought to—help me in my great task. Look, come with me!”

He takes hold of my hands and pressed them feverishly.

A brief hesitation, an egotistical impulse, quickly strangled, and I renounce the snowy summits of the great Alps in order to go with Roger to the dismal plains of barren Champagne.

I don’t have the right to leave him to struggle alone in the morbid crisis that he’s going through.

I can see very well what he intends to do at the Camp de Châlons; if necessary, I can oppose his possible eccentricities.

Then again, perhaps he doesn’t know about the presence of the Berjac household in that region.

“Go back to Paris quickly,” Roger concluded. “In two hours, I’ll pick you up with your suitcases.”

Without resistance, I consented.

Little Tourte escorted me back to the gate. Opening the batten of the door, the boy stood aside; then, tugging my sleeve, he pointed in the direction of the Bois de Vincennes.

“Jobert! Again!”

I saw an emaciated and bilious face disappear; it was, indeed Livry’s former laboratory assistant.

“Every time anyone goes out, he’s there, watching.”

While walking to the station, I tried to divine the reason for the surveillance exercised over the villa by that maniac. The idea occurred to me to alert the police—but what was the point, since, in a matter of hours, Roger would have left Fontenay. If Jobert manifested himself again when we returned, we would think again.

Why, oh why, alas, did I not yield to that first impulse by provoking the arrest of the radium thief that same day?

How many subsequent catastrophes would have been avoided!

II. Étienne Tourte, Apprentice Pastry-Cook

In the golden haze of the setting sun, the first military barracks raised on the edge of the Camp de Châlons emerged on the horizon.

Now we are penetrating the long street of the singular village that is Mourmelon-le-Grand: poor dwellings that the furies of the war have brought back to their origins as shacks weatherproofed with the aid of biscuit-tins, coiffed with tin-plate roofs, the debris of food-cans.

In the church square, the auto stops in front of a hotel that has remained almost intact.

The choice of our rooms is quickly made, because questions of comfort have never had great weight in Roger’s preoccupations.

He is far more interested in the transport of the two cases secured to the roof of the limousine. There are a thousand recommendations to avoid collisions. He does not take his eyes off them until they are installed in his room.

They worry me, those cases with copper corners, which suggest the most fantastic reflections to the idlers assembled in front of the automobile.

“A photographer,” suggests one.

“No, they’re glider pilots,” whispers another, with a knowing look—because, after a suspension, piloting gliders has become the order of the day again and the Camp de Châlons has become the terrain of choice for the pioneers of the new aviation; every new arrival is willingly seen as a seeker of wings.²

“That’s the very thing,” mutters Roger, who has overheard the comment in passing. “We’ll be glider pilots. An excellent pretext for not exposing our flank to curiosity-seekers. Anyway, as soon as possible I want to be at home. Let’s look for a house for sale.”

I start in surprise. Now Roger is thinking of becoming a property-owner in this desolate place.

It’s necessary to convince myself of that, when my friend drags me to see the village notary the next day. Roger asks for a furnished house, with the provision that it must be isolated and surrounded by large grounds.

Mention is made to him of a former brasserie situated outside the locality on the road to Suippes—but the buildings have been slightly damaged by the bombardments.

Roger wants to visit it immediately.

I still remember the painful impression that gripped me when the clerk serving as our guide opened the door of an enclosure surrounded by high but breached walls. In the middle stood a large building, half in ruins. The roof stripped of some of its tiles, the shutters worm-eaten and dislocated, a lantern sustained with great difficulty by its rusty iron fittings: such was the unappetizing spectacle that one discovers on the threshold of the “property.”

The interior of the building does not cede anything to the exterior appearance in dilapidation and dirtiness. Our entry has the effect of scaring away a band of rats, the sole masters of the dismal abode. In the rooms, there are broken windows, partly-collapsed ceilings and fractured floor-tiles.

“A few minor repairs will be made, on the entitlement of war damage,” said the clerk, to clear his conscience.

“I like the place as it is,” says Roger. “I’ll buy it.”

Two days later, it’s done. Roofers have replaced a few tiles; glazers have replaced a few broken panes. The worst of the dust has been swept away by vigorous thrusts of a broom. A local merchant has provided “furniture.” Not without audacity, he names thus some primitive camping material undoubtedly collected from the nearby trenches.

For his part, young Tourte occupied himself buying a stove and household utensils from a bazaar. With the best will in the world, the laboratory assistant offered to resume his original métier as scullion.

It was, in fact, by virtue of a singular misunderstanding that the boy found himself in Livry’s service in the quality of apprentice chemist.

A few days after Jobert’s abrupt departure, my friend had decided to look for another laboratory assistant. One Sunday, without realizing that he would find all the shops closed, he dragged me to the Rue des Ecoles, to his supplier of chemical products, from whom he was going to seek the necessary indications.

“In any case,” Roger repeated to me, in a tone of mystery and mistrust, I want two hands, hands from which I demand neither science nor intelligence, which will handle my retorts without wanting to know what they contain.”

We ran into closed shutters, of course.

Resentfully, the chemist stamped his foot on the asphalt; then he stated walking, mechanically following the sidewalk of a street going down toward the Boulevard Saint-Germain.

Suddenly, he stopped dead, his cane pointing to the front of a shop that bore the sign: *Laboratory*.

He pronounced the word in a loud voice; I read it in my turn. Unlike the other shop-fronts, that one allowed its frosted glass windows to appear. On the door, a handle seemed to invite entry.

“Let’s see,” said Roger, who did not renounce his obsessions easily.

He crossed the road and opened the door of the shop.

² Gliding clubs proliferated after the Great War, when an intense interest developed in extending distance and altitude records. Activity was particularly marked in Germany because of the prohibition of training for powered flight there, and there was a competitive reaction in northern France.

We both had a moment of amazement; then our gazes met and we smiled. Before us appeared the preparation-room of a pastry-cook or a confectioner. Shiny pans were hanging on the wall; on the shelves were molds of every form, bottles of candy, and to flatter or nostrils, the characteristic odor of chocolate mingled with vanilla and caramel.

In the room, with his elbows on the table, an adolescent was reading. He was little more than a child, clad in the classic costume of pastry-makers, a white hat and smock.

Ah, the hazard of destiny. Who could have suspected then that my life, those of our fellows, and the fate of the world, were going to depend on a heroic gesture on the part of that apprentice pastry-cook?

At the sight of us the child got up and then advanced toward the threshold. He removed his hat politely.

“What can I do for you, M’sieur?”

“Nothing, my friend,” said Roger, smiling. “We’ve made a mistake. Excuse us.”

“No offense taken!”

“So, why did Messieurs the confectioners take it into their heads to baptize their back-kitchen a laboratory?”

At the slightly scornful expression “back-kitchen,” the gamin raised his head, not without pride. “Well, M’sieur, we do chemistry here. We distill sugar, we manipulate perfumes and essences.”

The statement took on weight primarily because of our interlocutor’s attitude—that of a young cockerel rearing up—and by the moderated guttural accent of the Parisian slum-dweller. It amused us enormously.

“You’re laughing, Messieurs,” the contrite pastry-cook went on. “You’re mocking me. Well, for sure, it’s not chemistry as I’d like to learn it, true chemistry with bases, acids, metalloids, so-called organic substances...chemistry as this book explains it.” With a resentful gesture he indicated the book left open on the kitchen table. Then, ceding to the insouciant and cheerful philosophy that seems to be integral to the Parisian poor, he added: “Anyway, what do I care? I know it’s not for me, the fine things one learns in lycées, and all the tricks I see through the windows of the Sorbonne when I pass by with my basket on my head. One isn’t a prince!”

Livry seemed prodigiously interested.

“Would you like to learn chemistry, then—real chemistry?” he asked, in a soft voice.

“Oh, M’sieur...”

The apprentice pastry-cook put his hands together, as if in adoration of a distant and fugitive dream.

“Do you want to come with me?” said Roger. “You can help in my laboratory.”

“A laboratory like the one in the Sorbonne, with retorts and test-tubes and electric machines and microscopes?”

“Yes,” said Roger, smiling. “A laboratory even better equipped than the one at the Sorbonne.”

The gamin looked my friend straight in the eyes. “No! You’re poking fun at a poor kid!”

“I’m perfectly serious.”

I judged it appropriate to intervene. “But it will be necessary to consult your family, won’t it, young man?”

A shadow of sadness veiled the boy’s gaze. “My family! Well, Monsieur, unless I call the macadam Papa and the railings of the market in the Place Maubert, I can’t name them for you, my family.”

“You’re a foundling?” I said, compassionately.

“Yes, since it’s the custom to call children like that ‘lost’.”

He was decidedly interesting, that gamin, with his intelligent expression and his street-urchin repartee.

“By the way, what’s your name?”

“Étienne Tourte, M’sieur...Étienne after the statue of the man in the square where they picked me up—you know, Étienne Dolet, who was put to death, back in the day, to teach him to live.³ Tourte

³ Étienne Dolet (1509-1546) was a French scholar and printer burned in the Place Maubert, along with his books, on the orders of the theological faculty of the Sorbonne, on a trumped-up charge of atheism.

because that's the name, or the nickname, of the worthy woman who picked me up: Mère Tourte, well-known in the neighborhood—she sold fries at the Maubert market.”

“Good! The good lady serves as your adoptive mother?”

“She served, M'sieur, but not anymore. She died last year—died of grief because her eldest, Gustave, died in the war. A strapping fellow Gustave—he was a roofer; he taught me to run over the roofs. Those were good times—you could breathe the air, not like here in the ovens. The Boches killed him; that changed my life, and to console myself, I took up science.”

With the back of his sleeve, he wiped away a tear that was running down his cheek. Poor kid!

“What about your employer?”

“My boss? He's one who won't keep me back. I work in his house during the week.”

Two days later, Étienne Tourte arrived in Fontenay. With an indescribable joy, he traded the white hat and smock of a pastry-maker for the grey smock of a laboratory assistant.

Today, without false shame, he declared himself ready to resume his place among the saucepans.

Roger was delighted with that solution. “That way we won't waste our time eating out, and we'll have no need to introduce strangers here. We'll be able to work in peace.” Then, encouraging Tourte with an amicable tap: “Agreed, my lad; make us truffle sauces and champagne-style kidneys if it amuses you...”

“And desserts, of course!”

“Thumbs up for the desserts. In a few days, you'll be able to serve us *bombes glacées*, I can sure you of that.”

The last words vibrated like a threat. The allusion to bombs plunged me into an anguish compounded from amazement and fear. What chemical work did he intend to do in this similar place?”

That same evening, Roger permitted me to glimpse the stupefying path into which his delirious brain was urging him.