

II. The Atlantic Cyclone

I ought to say immediately that the meeting did not take place, and that it was the first link in the chain that broke in the series of events on which I was counting.

Right on time, I disembarked on to the Parisian asphalt at eight-thirty. I had eaten in the restaurant car. The theaters and cinemas did not tempt me. Having deposited my baggage at the Terminus and sent a telegram to Rivier, I took a taxi and went along the boulevards to spend a couple of hours before going to bed.

In the lukewarm early September evening the crowds of pedestrians and automobiles displayed their boring film amid the civilized apotheosis of electric lights. Once again, as in all of my visits to Paris, I was astonished to find the city insouciant and cheerful, in vesperal fête, in spite of the economic distress and the pound at 460.¹ Only the newsvendors—“*Liberté... Intran!... Special editions!*”—were communicating a hint of anxiety to the flood of passers-by, with their papers hot off the press, which people were buying and scanning rapidly.

To read them, I sat down on the terrace of the Café Cardinal at the crossroads of the Boulevard Haussmann.

Stormy debate in the Chambre on the measures to prevent the devaluation of the franc... Ministerial crisis in prospect... Collision of aircraft at Villacoublay...

With regard to the tempest, the evening papers told me nothing more than the two o'clock bulletin from the Tower. As I resumed following the spectacle of the boulevard with an amused eye, however, a luminous announcement attracted my attention. In the background, on the roof of the *Paris-Projecteur* building, a sequence of characters was unfurling from tight to left.

“Tempest ravaging the Azores. Further maritime disasters... The forty-watt Phoebus Lamp is the sun at home... Loss of transatlantic liner *Zuyderzee*... Drink Kichof aperitif...”

A melancholy developed within me, born of that news, which was transposed on to the egotistical plane. I savored the Paris evening bitterly—the last, for how long? A year, perhaps two, spent in the bleak wilderness of the Antarctic...

No matter, though! I was not leaving anyone behind; I was alone in the world, since my wife and my mother had been killed in Paris in April 1918 by a shell from a Big Bertha. The irony of fate. While my hospital was at Malo, exposed to daily fire from the artillery at Dixmunde... No children, scarcely any family. A few good friends, at the most, like Jolliot and Rivier...

Good old Jean-Paul! He had a durable gratitude, that one! True, the hazards of a bathing-spot, fifteen years before, had permitted me to save his life, but how many others would have remembered, in his situation? I could ask him for a hundred thousand francs tomorrow, and he'd give them to me with a smile... In the meantime, it was to him that I owed the chance to flee my unsatisfactory existence; he was the one who had imposed me as ship's physician, at the last minute, on Commander Barcot, whose cruise he was subsidizing...

My existence...!

And I thought once again about my last nine years, as a nomad doctor, migrating from Paris to Trouville, from Trouville to Sanary, from Sanary to Boulogne, without being able to settle down or find anything else in a few brief relationships but disappointing flirtations...

I saw myself, finally resolved to shake off my old self and put on a new skin, for a regenerative exodus to the wilderness and heroic life of the Pole...

And then, as a young blonde, tall and lithe, in the same blue coat as Frédérique, passed by on the sidewalk, the image of the latter came back to me with an almost hallucinatory acuity, and I sensed once again the same disturbance that had possessed me in her presence. Her perfume—Remember!—evoked in the Parisian evening the splendor of the sun on a summer beach. I saw her smile again...

¹ In the 1920s, the pound sterling, rather than the US dollar, was the international currency by which most exchange rates were judged. 460 francs to the pound would have been regarded at the time as disastrous, but the deterioration—further assisted by World War II—eventually reached such a stage that the old franc had to be abandoned and “new francs” introduced, each worth a hundred old francs. The new franc eventually reached a level of eleven to the pound before the introduction of the euro changed the situation.

Frédérique! New light! Oh, life with you would perhaps be sweet...

But I shrugged my shoulders, irritated with myself and my crazy imagination, already enchanted by a future in which the blonde doctor would be my lifelong companion, my spiritual ally...

Go on, fool! You're leaving tomorrow for Antarctica...

Just your luck, isn't it, that windfall *in extremis*, of which you can't take advantage! I'm to see her again tomorrow, and then? A fine affair! Shall we know one another, after having had lunch together? And if our sympathy is increased, it will only poison my departure, which I still considered as a liberation this morning! And her father, the enigmatic Swiss—what does he want from me? What does he want from Rivier? If I do him this favor, will he grant me the hand of his daughter in exchange?

Then again, no! It's absurd. One can't get engaged in that fashion, after two hour-long conversations on the eve of departing for the end of the Earth...

I slept badly that night, having gone to bed too soon in my room at the Terminus-Nord. I dreamed about a cruise in the midst of shipwrecks, with Frédérique as captain and her father amusing himself by fishing with a rod and line for floating cadavers.

I had not drawn the curtains or closed the shutters. When I woke up, it was so dark that I ran to the window to check the time on the station clock. It really was eight o'clock! Rain was falling from a sky the color of antimony, rattling against my windows in furious gusts. It was the storm announced the previous day. My first lucid thought was for Frédérique, who had just boarded a train in Boulogne, in that abominable weather, which was doubtless even worse on the coast.

An initial disappointment awaited me in the Avenue de Villiers, at Jean-Paul Rivier's house, where I arrived at ten o'clock in accordance with my telegram. The banker had left the day before for Biarritz, summoned by a telegram from his wife, and would not be back for two days.

What a blow! Adieu to the hope to fulfilling my promise to Hans Kohbuler...but bah! Too bad for him! The essential thing for me was to have lunch in his company, and above all, that of his daughter...

I still had an hour to kill before the arrival of the two travelers. I spent it at the rendezvous—the Taverne Royale—reading the morning newspapers and watching the rain fall.

According to the latest news, after a whole series of disasters in the Atlantic, the cyclone had reached the French shore in Brittany at about one o'clock in the morning. Boats that had remained at sea in spite of the warnings had been sunk. Even in the ports, and here and there inland, a tidal wave had caused serious damage.

At eleven o'clock, the *Paris-Midi* brought further details, albeit summary and provisional, for the cyclone had blown down the telegraph-poles and interrupted communications with the capital. Even the wireless was only receiving messages blurred by the "static" of a magnetic storm raging over the entire northern hemisphere.

The tidal wave, several meters high, had unfurled successively over all the coasts of Western Europe: Ireland, England, France, Spain, Portugal... In the Channel it had reached Cherbourg at three a.m., Le Havre at five; and, increasing its violence in the bottleneck formed by the curve of the coast extending from the Somme to Cap Gris-Nez, it had swept over the dyke at Berck at half past six, razing several villas, and carried away the iron bridge over the Canche at Étapes.

That would have cut the main line from Calais to Paris, two hours before the passage of the express that was due to bring Frédérique and her father that morning!

By virtue of a last residue of hope—the Kohbulers might have changed their plans and taken an overnight train—I waited another hour...but no one appeared.

I had lunch alone, it did not matter where, furious at that failure, cursing the cyclone and striving to dispel the haunting memory of Frédérique.

After coffee and Benedictine, and having smoked two cigars, I observed that I still had five full hours until my departure. A kind of misanthropic perversity deterred me from making the two or three visits that I had originally planned; I sank back into my sulky melancholy, spending my last afternoon in Paris trailing from one café to another.

The capital was living with a simple sulkiness in the dreadful weather, without any apparent concern for the maritime catastrophe. The continuous procession of mechanical vehicles—buses and taxis—assumed a lugubrious and inhuman aspect beneath the cataract of rain. On the sidewalks, the

passers-by, their heads invisible beneath umbrellas clenched in both fists, were striding purposefully: mud-spattered trouser-clad legs, and feminine legs of every curvature and caliber, sheathed in silk, with high-heeled shoes, miraculously intact amid the deluge...

At four o'clock, further special editions helped me to be patient.

The disaster was extending. Mute since the day before, America finally sent its contingent of details, via Pernambuco and Dakar.

Sooner and more violently than Western Europe, the Eastern United States and Canada suffered the effects of an unprecedented tornado. A ninety foot wave—more than thirty meters!—a veritable wall of water, hurled itself upon the coasts of the two countries, initially in Newfoundland, devastating ports, lifting up ships and hurling them against skyscrapers in destructive collisions. As we go to press, the victims are already counted in tens of thousands...

An interview followed, obtained from the head of the Meteorological Office and commenting on the unprecedented anomaly of the “double tempest”—so to speak—“progressing radially in opposite directions toward America and Europe, as if from a common center of atmospheric and marine perturbation.”

The seven o'clock express bore me away toward Marseilles, beneath a belated dusk falling from an apocalyptic sky, amid a diluvian mixture of rain and hail that peppered the windows like machine-gun fire. A meal in the restaurant-car...spleenic hours in the first-class compartment, facing an English clergyman and his wife, who stubbornly kept the electric light on all the way to Lyon, in order to read...

The sun, caressing my cheek, woke me up. The flat landscape of the Crau extended away from the windows, beneath an immaculate azure, but the cypresses bordering the track were bending over beneath a furious mistral. At the exit from the Nerthe Tunnel, the Mediterranean was displayed, leaden blue in color, bristling with white crests. The tempest was here too, but it was a dry tempest, and the ships had found safe havens behind the various promontories that extended their arms between L'Estaque and Marseilles, for the transatlantic tidal wave had expired on the threshold of the Latin sea, in the straits of Gibraltar.

At eight o'clock, having disembarked at the Gare Saint-Charles, I took a taxi, with my baggage, through the sunlit streets of the ancient Phocæan city, along the picturesque and swarming Cannebière, toward the Old Port, where my ship, the *Erebus II*, was moored at the Quai des Belges.