

PART ONE: THE PETROLEUM WAR

I

That afternoon in December, at the moment of the communiqué, certain individuals notorious in Parisian society, gathered in the spacious cellar of the novelist Leparfait, were talking sympathetically about the arrival in Marseille of a first Polynesian contingent.

It was in 1949, during the fourth year of the great petroleum war, abruptly declared, which had quickly degenerated into a worldwide conflict.

To tell the truth, for a long time already, the political atmosphere had been manifestly saturated by storms. But the recent consolidation of the financial hegemony of England in the petroleum market had definitively exasperated America, where stock speculation had become the sole national sport and where gigantic and successive Stock Exchange crashes had taken on the allure and regularity of seasonal epidemics.

So, after three years of relative peace—or, rather, small localized wars—Germany, recently fallen into dictatorship and allied with the United States, declared war. She had seized as a pretext an outrage committed on the Polish frontier and had opened hostilities with her habitual abruptness, deafening with the unexpected din of huge cannons the few old diplomats solemnly assembled at The Hague to discuss the prolongation of the pact of the United States of Europe, uneasily concluded six years before.

Then the Latins and the British who, naturally, were not ready for the opening of hostilities, commenced to prepare, without much order but with an admirable abnegation. The war spread like a patch of oil. One after another, the nations of the Orient and those of the Occident joined in the conflict. The totality of the Latins, united with the Anglo-Saxons and the Japanese, opposed the Germans and the Slavs, allies of America. England, Italy and France mobilized their colonies hastily, and then, still being short of men, decided to imitate America by arming the most savage peoples: those of Africa, the Far East and Oceania; the Touaregs, the Abyssinians, the Papuans and the Malays.

As science had progressed in the thirty years that had separated the two conflicts, the improvements relative to mass destruction were multiplied.

A smile of pity came to the lips of old generals when they recalled the primitive methods of 1914. Immense steel machines, governed at a distance by Hertzian waves, running over water and land and through the sky, surged forth everywhere, arrived from all directions, and occupied all the elements, projecting bullets, vaporizing toxins and disengaging asphyxiants. A French engineer had discovered the means of abruptly dissociating the molecules of metals, and German industry, utilizing that neglected invention, had been the first to set its sights on the construction of engines minuscule in their dimensions but which nevertheless provoked cataclysms comparable, as regards the majesty of destruction, to tornadoes and cyclones.

Thus, death was everywhere. It mingled with the respirable air, it descended like a dart from the sky, it ran over the waters. It reared up at every step.

The elements were dislocated, metals exploded and, having gone to ground like moles in subterranean fortresses, the combatants, mobilized *en masse*, launched bombs with frenzy, giving and receiving death blindly. They did not see it coming, like the warriors of old, so surprise was combined with fear in their march and in their actions.

The cities, moreover, suffered no less.

On New Year's Day, exactly a week after the declaration of war, and almost at the same hour, the Parthenon, Brunelleschi's cupola, the Alcazar and Notre Dame were bombarded and destroyed. From then on, living among terrifying explosions, the great centers were progressively buried under rubble, and all was alerts and screams of death in the daily collapse.

Now on that afternoon in December, in Leparfait's cellar, adapted into a drawing room, they were discussing the events. The celebrated novelist, after having papered the subterranean walls of his house in haste, had channeled the electricity and then ornamented the improvised refuge with wood paneling and severe decorations. He received his friends there with delight. For, although he accepted all the other privations of the war, Leparfait could not resign himself to not seeing familiar faces.

"It appears that the English are counting a great deal on their Polynesian troops," said Baronne Lehmann, well-informed on the subject thanks to her amorous relations with her war-godson, Sir John Macperson of the English GHQ—amorous relations that resuscitated the good old days of chivalry and attracted, in these stricken times, the sympathy of everyone.

John Macperson was, in fact, so ugly and disgraceful that could only attribute the Baronne's bizarre infatuation to patriotism and martial enthusiasm. She was "serving" in her manner, said her friends, admiring her for flexing her heart to the interests of alliances, and pardoning her without difficulty for a conquest that excited no envy.

"The Polynesians are incomparable, above all, for mass attacks," replied Colonel Machefer, recently discharged, who had become one of the most influential Occidental press critics. "Their mordancy is admirable. They believe firmly in immortality, and as they have the conviction of fighting for the spirit of Motono—their national god, whom the English show them being persecuted by the Russo-Germans—it's a fête for them to go to death. All they ask is a pipe of opium before the attack. Then, with peacock feathers erected on the pointed edifice of their hair, half their body colored vermilion and the other ceruse, they hurl themselves into combat, invoking their ancestors.

"They must be superb!" cried Madame de Fleurus enthusiastically, who was reputed to love all beautiful bodies indistinctly. Being pious, however, she added: "The only thing that spoils them for me is having read in the newspapers that they depict their god Motono under the aspect of an ostrich. But perhaps it's not true."

"It is, on the contrary, entirely exact," replied André Martigny, who was following the conversation with interest. "It's exact, but of no importance. Representing one's god under the form of an ostrich or that of an old man with a white beard appears to me to be equally arbitrary and gratuitous. The essential thing is to create one with fervor."

Rich and glorious, Martigny, a film director and universally known scenarist, brought a judgment full of common sense to bear upon all things. He had started out as a philosopher but, confronted by the increasing disfavor that had enveloped all speculations outside financial ones, he had redirected himself toward cinematography. There, imagining, designing and performing his own scenarios, he had surpassed the popularity of the most brilliant stars of the old world. But he had not stripped himself of the intelligence or the common sense that had originally borne him toward reflection. Loving life with an immeasurable appetite, he took pleasure in the varied spectacle of the universe.

"I would never have thought that the imperialists of Germany, the communists of Russia, the modernized Turkish pachas and the American bankers would unite to declare war at a moment when we're so unprepared!" exclaimed Jules Léry, an old man with fine and emaciated features. Having not spoken until then, he wanted to make his contribution to the conversation.

"That you'd never thought that anyone would declare war on us again appears quite natural to me," replied Martigny, who had been his friend since childhood. "Your métier as a paleographer, although it doesn't give you much help in living, at least isolates you from the present. What I can't understand is that the governments of the Anglo-Latin entente, knowing about the financial crashes in America and the formidable preparations of the Germans and the Russians, were able to think like you and remain tranquil. They were not sufficiently suspicious of the petroleum that inflames nations. They're not unaware, however, that in 1914 Austria had already unleashed a terrible war whose initial cause was the covetousness of Serbia's oil wells."

"The immediate fault of this new war," said Colonel Machefer, "is incumbent on our fathers, who laid down their arms before having destroyed Germany completely. Having seen it constituted as a republic, they believed its sincerity. And now its brutal force, enfevered by an ambitious dictatorship, is taking us once again to the brink of the abyss. Imperialism causes the rebirth of militarism."

In a conciliatory fashion, Martigny replied that the war would have broken out anyway.

“The production of gold,” he went on, “wasn’t sufficient for the appetites of an increasingly costly civilization and its demand for wellbeing. The precious metal is disputed, and from time to time a great quantity of it is burned in explosives in order to snatch what remains to others, or at least to make all of it circulate more rapidly from hand to hand.”

But Machefer, who was discontented to have been discharged by the government, started explaining obligingly the weakness of the socialist republics of England and France.

“With doesn’t alter the fact,” Leparfait objected, “that after the initial buckling, the Anglo-Latins are in the process of winning.”

“There’s a great deal to say about that, Leparfait,” Martigny remarked. “If the Anglo-Latins are on the road to victory after four years of war it’s precisely because, at the beginning of hostilities, while apparently retaining the same regime, they virilized it and orientated it toward a sage absolutism, with a military police, a state of siege and censorship, especially with a government that, in the admirable expression of President Fargot ‘mounted guard on the Allies’ morale.’ Naturally courageous and intelligent, easily mastering events when they put their mind to it, the Latins understands that the time for antimilitarist and communist pleasantries ceased on the day of mobilization. That is why you see that, following the example of England, not republican for very long and governed, like us, by socialists, the old continent allowed itself to be led energetically, knowing that that was the price of success.”

“You’re right,” Leparfait agreed. “In times of war, whatever color the republics are, they scarcely differ from monarchies.”

“Although I’m not complaining about that, I must, however, affirm that they’re unfortunately a little different, by virtue of their lack of prestige,” Martigny replied. “The republican regime in general presupposes a solidly established civilization and, by virtue of that very fact, a sincere, immutable peace. It hates inequality and stands up jealously against elites. It loves to break aureoles. Essentially insubordinate, it mocks the great and even envelops them in ridicule. Moreover, that works marvelously during the calm—but when the tempest shakes the nations, people recognize with consternation that it’s personal prestige, the religion of respect and the supremacy of heroism or genius that are the true sinews of any war.

“Whether they’re fighting for God, for the fatherland or for petroleum, men like to believe that they’re being led by someone who surpasses them. They demanded to be fanaticized, to experience respect, to have the illusion that wings beat on the shoulders of leaders. You’ve read in the newspapers recently that our Japanese allies, in order to honor the nominal birthday of their Mikado worthily, captured the city of San Francisco on the day of the anniversary, to which they had been laying siege in vain for four months, sacrificing themselves in thousands. That’s because the Mikado continues to be the sacred symbol of the consciousness and grandeur of Japan. He’s the object of a cult, his origins are celestial. The names of his ancestors are mingled with all the splendors of the country. So, to die for the Mikado is a religious and patriotic act, and the Nipponese don’t spare their blood in order to offer him a city on the day of his anniversary. Do you think that our troops would have the superstitious desire to do as much on Saint Sylvester’s Day, the nominal fête of Sylvestre Dusol, the President of our Republic—who, personally, is worth far more than the Mikado?”

“Would you like to change the regime, then?” Léry interrogated.

“May God preserve me from that! My spine would support a dictatorship poorly, and I believe that one can never pay too much for divine liberty, whatever price is put on it. But I’d like the republic always to be, as it becomes in time of war, a republic conscious of its continuity, respectful of an ideal, a governed republic, if possible.”

“My God! When will this frightful war end?” cried the Comtesse de Fleurus, looking at Martigny with supplicant eyes.

“Oh, the indispensable, liturgical, naïve question,” Martigny replied. “For four years we’ve been addressing it to our contemporaries a thousand times a day. But don’t interrogate me on that subject, Madame. Rather interrogate our friend Leparfait, who gladly draws up horoscopes and who can respond to you by means of his occult illumination. What can I say to you, with the aid of my poor logic, which

sees no further than the tip of its nose? To tell the truth, I can't imagine the end of this slaughter. In the 1914 war, the New World disembarked among us to terminate the war and arrange for us, to the ruination of everyone, a haggard and starveling peace. Now, the conflagration no longer has limits, and it will be necessary for half the world to be destroyed before ceding to the other half. Nevertheless, we'll see..."

Everyone got up. A few guests took their antitoxic masks from their pockets and placed them over their faces. Others, bolder, got ready to confront the street without protection, trusting in the anti-asphyxiant kiosks set up at the intersections, ready to give shelter to the public in case of an alert.

Accompanied by his friend Léry, Martigny climbed the stairs and went outside, under the sky traversed in all directions, as if obscured, by airships.

II

Martigny went to a little café near the Gare de l'Est where his son-in-law, Brigadier Maurice Planet, who was on leave, had arranged to meet him. Since his departure for the war, it was the first time that Planet had returned to Paris—for, having need of men, soldiers were rarely allowed to leave the front.

Maurice had spent with Antoinette, his wife, two weeks that had seemed shorter than two days. Now he was about to go back out, where further attacks were in preparation and where Death was deploying its wings more broadly than ever.

Martigny had difficulty finding the young man in the midst of the tobacco smoke and exhalations of leather and indecency that clouded the crowded hall. When he finally perceived him in a corner he had once again the same sentiment of obscure alarm that his son-in-law had caused him two weeks before on his arrival. It was the expression on the soldier's face that frightened Martigny and filled his heart with anguish.

However, scarcely eighteen months had gone by since the call-up of his class had snatched Maurice from his newlywed's bed. The young man, still beardless, had departed with enthusiasm, like all those of his age. The approach of danger seemed to have excited all that was proudest and noblest in him.

Martigny remembered that, in spite of the dolorous separation from his wife—married shortly before that departure, the coronation of a long and reciprocal juvenile amour—there had been something resembling a radiation, a fresh outburst of living force, in Maurice's eyes.

What a difference with his face now that war had fashioned it: a face hastily matured, from which all trace of youth had been effaced, a thin, obscured face whose hollows were full of darkness.

"Sit down, Father," said the soldier, in his voice, grave henceforth, moving sideways to make room for Martigny. Then, darting a glance around the noisy room overflowing with uniforms, whose atmosphere was unbreathable, he changed his mind. "Let's go up to the first floor. My train doesn't leave for two hours. I'd like to talk for a while, and one can't make oneself heard in here."

After they were installed in the almost deserted room on the first floor, Maurice fixed his eyes on his father-in-law with a haggard tenderness.

"If you knew what a foolish pleasure I experience in seeing you again!"

His voice was soft, impregnated with affection and suffering. Martigny was moved by it. He was aware of the admiration doubled with fervor that Maurice had always nurtured in his regard. He responded to it, loving him as much as if he had been the son of his blood.

"You didn't want to steal anything from us, from Antoinette and me," the young man went on. "You doubtless said to yourself that the days we had to spend together were meanly counted, and you disappeared discreetly, without thinking that I love you too. I love you and revere you even more than my parents, whom I've lost. I even think that it's admiration for you, born first in my heart, that subsequently became love for Antoinette. Knowing that she was your daughter made me cherish her as soon as I saw her; and what I love most in her is what resembles you."

Gazing at Martigny with a somber sadness, he drew closer to him. "I've just left her, Papa, and soon I'll be leaving you. Before her I was able to hold firm and not show my distress. That broke me. With you, thank God, it's different. There's no necessity to pretend. One can say everything, since you can understand everything."

And, in a low, strangled, whispering voice, the voice of a child, the soldier added: "It's finished. I won't come back again from out there. I'm seeing both of you for the last time, and my heart is breaking when I think about everything that Antoinette has suffered and will still suffer. I've been her misfortune, me, who wanted to consecrate my life to her. Now, it's finished...finished!"

Upset, Martigny seized the soldier's hands and squeezed them.

"Why are you saying such horrible things, Maurice? Don't you know that you *have to* come back, or Antoinette will die as well. I would never have thought that the madness out there would discourage you to the point of making you doubt your chances and veiling yourself in advance with the mourning of a future you don't know. Rather imitate me, who hasn't lost confidence. I'm sure that you'll come back. It's

necessary for this Hell to finish, and it will finish. On the day when you rediscover your hearth and your happiness, these horrible ordeals will be forgotten, like a bad dream.

Maurice allowed Martigny to talk. Then, when the latter fell silent, he looked him sadly in the eyes and said to him: "Why, Father, are you trying to console me, and encourage me? Of course I don't know the future and I don't care to make prophecies. One day, as you say, the war will end, and there will be some who come back..."

He interrupted himself momentarily, and then went on in a resolute, rapid, decisive voice: "Such as I've become, I can't recover my happiness. That's why I'm telling you that I'll remain out there. I've decided to get myself killed in order not to return."

Martigny's hands trembled, and clutched the soldier's more spasmodically. Then the latter, seeing that the old man was about to protest again, rebelled: "No, Papa," he said, "let me speak. It's necessary that I open my heart to someone. Instead of making reproaches, look at me. What's the point, though? At the first glance you cast at me the other day, I divined that the sight of me frightened you. You didn't recognize me. Tell yourself, however, that the alteration in my features is nothing compared to what has become of my poor mind, my unfortunate conscience. Certainly, I continue to call myself Maurice Planet, as on the day I left. But nothing remains in me of the man I was. My past, my dignity and my pride have all been expelled by another, by a beast that now inhabits my body."

He stopped, and wiped away the sweat that was pearling on his brow.

"And it's even worse than that. If I'd become a beast I'd have been able to continue living, living a new animal life. Unfortunately, the old man is incessantly knocking on the door of the dwelling from which he's been cast out. The former man, banished, wandering, unappeased, and who remembers, is still there. And that's frightful."

"I know, I fought in the other war myself, and I went through that," said Martigny, gripping the young man's hand, which he was holding in his own, ardently. Then, looking at him tenderly: "But believe me, one forgets quickly. Soon, a new life will commence for you..."

"A life? What life?" exclaimed the soldier, bitterly. "Before the war, if one lived, it was because of an ideal, or at least the remains of an ideal. Then, people were animated by an omnipotent religious ferment or a civic ferment. It fortified their moral armor, became the light of their conscience, their pivot, their root and their guide. One lived on that which enables life: personal dignity, the sacred respect for another, an effort of goodwill, of humanity.

"The war has swept all that away. I don't know whether it's particular to me or whether the same thing happens to all the others, but in any case, I no longer have anything, and I despise myself for being dispossessed like that, without any illusion about myself, devoid of faith, devoid of hope—as much as to say devoid of a soul."

And while Martigny listened fearfully, reviving his own memories, Maurice went on: "The impetus that enabled me to depart with joy, I've lost. I believed that the war was an exaltation and a glory. It must have been, once. Now, it's no longer anything but a human debasement. We're killing too much, we're doing abominable work out there, and furthermore, it's no one's fault. How can one do otherwise? There's so much enemy flesh that it's necessary to kill, and to keep killing, if one wants it ever to end. The other ferocious beasts on the opposite side throw asphyxiants into our trenches, sowing microbes and poisons as if for mice or other vermin. We repay them in the same coin.

"And if you knew how young we are, on both sides, and how difficult it is for us all to die! It's an atrocious task, to finish off these who are on their way out. In the ardor of battle, while you're defending yourself and hurling grenades, it goes on and on. You fight, you massacre, in a fever. But it's the agony of the dying that's frightful, that last breath that doesn't escape before having become fraternal. At a given moment, the one who's dying ceases to be German, Russian or French. Before being reduced to something unnamable, he's a child without a fatherland, without a race—he's yourself, the man you've killed!

"And every one of them, it's said, carries away something of your humanity as he goes. When, after having done that, from morning until evening, one comes back, nothing remains in the human being but

instinct. One would think that centuries of history and progress, everything that our forefathers have done, is lying on the ground with the dying, and will putrefy with the cadavers.”

Then, drawing Martigny toward him spasmodically, the soldier started speaking in an anguished voice, in a nightmare.

“But the most horrible thing is the bestial rage that the fine work, once accomplished, ends up by vomiting over us as if to punish us. Know this, Father, after two years in the trenches, we’re no longer anything out there but hunger and fear. Having become wild beasts again, we begin to dread the loss of that miserable life, even though it horrifies us. Yes, we’re all shaken by the abject dance of the entrails, the continual little death that the terror of dying gives you. That must appear impossible and monstrous to you others, who live a long way from the front. You don’t suspect that the greatest death of this war has been that of courage. It’s finished, the fine intoxication that once impelled the brave in battles and made the intrepid warrior lift his head up high, who, once having consented mentally to the sacrifice of his life, flies toward death and bullets, defying the enemy.

“It was upright, dominating the earth, on their chargers, respiring the powder, that they were courageous, the old combatants—and perhaps you too, in the 1914 was. We were the same in our first attacks, leaping out of the trenches, going to bestride the bayonets and, launching grenades and defying the enemy to his face.

“But eventually, our joyful courage drowned in the excremental mud of the trenches, gradually undermined by the rain, gnawed by the rats, corroded by hunger, and then it abruptly sank, one day or another, under the apocalyptic vomit of a thousand craters that, in a crash of cymbals, a demonic jazz, shook the entrails of the planet and projected into the heavens, in a single firework, clods of earth, tree-trunks, dismembered cadavers, croaks of agony and cries of ‘Maman!’”

The soldier seized a glass of alcohol placed before him, swallowed the contents, and then went on:

“I can remember clearly what I lived through, my first fit of cowardly terror, at the beginning of last winter, at Soissons, after a bayonet charge in which I plied my weapon until I felt cramps in my arms. Without having had time to take a moment’s rest, still soaked in blood, we were buried in the trenches again.

“Like so many other times before, attackers as we were, we were about to be attacked. From one day to the next the offensive changed camps. It was obvious that the enemy was planning something rude and unexpected, and against which it was no longer a matter of holding firm.

“How can I describe to you what I experienced then?”

“It was the end of November. For three days the rain had been falling uninterruptedly, and it was worse than the extraordinary interrogation of the Middle Ages, that demoralizing water torture, in the trenches.

“Against that, there was no remedy, and no refuge. Slow and invasive, mingling patiently with the soil, thinning it, causing it to subside, it turned it into mud, and of us, our clothes and our boots, it made a single fugitive, plastic, cold substance in which we lived, ate and defecated.

“The filthiness of the soil, the stink of the corpses and the glue of the decomposed leaves seemed gradually to pass into the circulation of that soft mixture, the insipid odor of which we were wallowing, into which we sank at every footfall as if into a trap, and where one often left one’s footwear as one marched. All our efforts tended to protect our heads, but the water oozed, and poured, finding the means to attain the depths of the soil, tracking us like a cunning beast, sliding like a snake into the tunnels, which it infested, into the immense network of putrefaction, of the exhalations of the dead and the living, in which one felt oneself dissolving.

“So long as some resistance remained to us, that could still go on; but, malnourished, broken by the cold and privations, where could strength be found henceforth? The time came when the moral dyke gave way. That which had mounted opposition on the first day became bleak resignation on the second. One wearied of living in garments soaked by mud, in the fetid moisture that penetrated our bread, which infiltrated our pores, paralyzed our gestures, muddied our thoughts.

“Progressively, a heavy indolence overwhelmed us. We hesitated to change position, since there was the same streaming everywhere, the same ochre paste, as ductile as disintegrated rubber, the same

impossibility of remaining oneself, of insulating oneself, of not being an integral part of that viscous universe. Then, reinforcements came to join the water to break our morale definitively. That was the rats; they had already visited us, but suddenly, with the installation of the rain, they pullulated. Their muzzles, their thin feet, shadowed and animated the liquid surfaces, and in order to escape the more terrible threat of the water, they hurled themselves madly against the humans.

“Oh, the supreme disgust experienced for the frictions, the nibblings, which spared neither nourishment nor vestments, which prevented our sleep and of which, nevertheless, we dreamed. How many nightmares I had about rats, because of the omnipresence of that frightful animal, rendered malevolent by hunger, which I was forced to kill in order to free myself! The crushed heads of rats, bellies opened upon thin, vividly pink intestines, those infimal hideous and squealing deaths in which pain was nevertheless nested, how all of that beats time to my memories of Hell!

“And it’s in those circumstances and among those demoralizing scourges that the bombardment was unleashed. It certainly wasn’t the first time that I heard the explosion of airborne shells and the thunder of supercannons. I knew already to beware of projectiles, distinguishing the drone of large, distant artillery, the dull sound of mines, the splashing burst of gas-shells, and then the perpetual slicing of seconds by the terrible scythes coming from the air, crawling over the ground, laboring everywhere with their rhythmic tick-tock.

“But that evening, after the sinister sprinkling and the range-finding of rockets that had been suspended, multicolored, over the horizon, an orgy of destruction commenced of which I could never have imagined the extent or the grandeur.

“A double explosion of mines, of which we were the umbilicus, opened the horror, and I suddenly saw, after a kind of immense crack that knocked me down, the sky spitting trees, fragments of earth, the debris of walls, while ear-splitting, gut-wrenching screams rose up everywhere. Then, suddenly, in a kind of transformation of being, everything that was not fear left me, and I was no more than a hunted beast, maddened by panic.

“A tremor of all the limbs took possession of me, and since then, every attack brings it back to me, the fear of dying, the mad anguish that inhibits all movement in me at times, which turns my skin blue and demolished my consciousness, Hating life and dreading death, I stay there, panic-stricken, shitting myself, governed in spite of everything by animal fear by that bitch of a life, which sounds the tocsin and clings to my fibers.”

The young man wiped his brow again. He was utterly pale, and there was a kind of savage flame dancing strangely in his pupils.

Martigny pulled away from the frenetic grip that was clutching his wrist, so emotional was he himself. Memories and visions analogous to those Maurice was evoking terrorized him, surging forth like phantoms from the depths of his own past. His own war, the old war, came back to haunt him.

“But you’re making progress now, though,” he stammered, in order to break the nightmare. “You’re in the process of winning.”

“Yes, we have the upper hand—which means that, for the moment, we’re exploding more mines than them and they’re more exhausted than we are. As for a victory, there is none, in this war, or at least, one doesn’t have the sensation that there is. One changes position, like the pawns on a chessboard. That’s all.”

After which, closing his eyes, he went on: “Forgive my weakness, Papa. It was absolutely necessary for me to confess all that to someone, that I say what humankind is becoming, what disaster is swallowing humans up by means of war as it’s practiced today. I needed to show the horrible ulcer that’s gnawing my soul. It’s also necessary that you know the truth when, tomorrow, you learn that I died a hero.”

“No, Maurice!” cried Martigny. “It’s necessary not to repeat that you’re going to get yourself killed! Suffer for Antoinette, if you no longer have the strength to suffer for yourself.”

“Do you want me, then, to bring back to her the pretty memory of all that I’ve accomplished?” the soldier interrogated, grimacing a bitter smile. “Do you want me to lie beside her with the bloody burden that weighs upon me? And what if I make her a child, Papa, if my seed of Cain grows within her? Do you

think that I have the right to put into the world a being that will perpetuate what was born in my consciousness eighteen months ago?"

The soldier got up, and then slumped back.

"After all, who knows? Perhaps I'm wrong. Why, after all, should there be a difference between men and wolves? You lived, you others, after the 1914 war, and had children. We'll imitate you. And in any case, perhaps it's by virtue of a last boastful cowardice that I affirm that I'll have the courage to take the ten steps that separate me from the opposite trench in order to receive a grenade. Rather tell Antoinette to send me the alcohol she promised me. That will help me to forget, a little, to brutalize myself and to come back. But then, what horror, Papa, what horror!"