

MELUSINE; OR, THE SECRET OF SOLITUDE

THE GREAT BOOK OF GOD

It was written...

When they look back on life, many people say: "It was written!" But written where? No one knows exactly, for men are ignorant. But I have ended up knowing that all things are written in the great book of God.

That is a great prodigious book with letters of all colors and illuminations on every page. The binding is in orichalcum with a golden lock whose key is magical. For God utilizes magic, white magic and black magic, and also a certain magic blue in color, which is occupied neither with good nor evil but is only concerned with the subtle essence with which souls are created.

As for the characters of the text, perhaps they do not correspond to any human language. They are simultaneously akin to Hebrew and Sanskrit, and might well have been Devangari, the language that the beings called Devas once spoke, who were half-human and half-divine.

It is impossible to say on what occasion it was given to me to cast a rapid glance over the great book of God—oh, very rapid, in truth, and only the page concerning me.

Naturally, I did not understand the text, because of my ignorance of divine things; but I have seen little illustrations that are in the margin, sketches and portraits that seem swiftly designed, with a superior negligence. And at the very top there was my mother's face, with the tranquil beauty of her immutable love. I did not linger over gazing at the illustrations of my youth, and the subsequent years of my life. Was I wrong? It is a matter of knowing the measure I which remorse is mingled with memory.

Because of the force of the present, I only looked at the designs that dealt with my journey to the mysterious land. And there was an insignificant little house with a cypress standing beside it, like a friend. In spite of the absence of detail, one could see that the door of the house was only pushed to, and that a light phantom was holding it with a transparent hand. In fact, was it a phantom, or the memory of a woman, thus represented?

A little lower down there was a young woman with a pony-tail, a straw hat and the face of a moon, wonderstruck because it was rising in a blue sky. Then a crow, then a tortoise, and then an hourglass. And I noticed that there was an unfinished silhouette of a traveler with a staff, which might become, with a few strokes more, a windmill or a family gathering by the fireside.

Marvelous uncertainty! Similarly, there were blank lines in the text. Certain modifications were possible, then! Thus, it was possible, by a personal decision, to add a pleasant adventure, or remove a cause of chagrin. One could introduce the word reverie or the word happiness. Yes, assuredly, it was possible to modify the great book of God. But only if one had a profound knowledge of Devangari.

THE LETTING AGENT AND DESTINY

It was written that I would go to the most mysterious place on earth.

How did all that happen? Can anyone tell me why I rented the house, took the train, bought a hat of slightly conical form with a Tyrolean plume on the right side, in order to have the external appearance of a traveler? How can one know the enchantment of causes and effects and know whether there is, at the origin, the suggestion of an invisible protective spirit?

Perhaps I was insane to rent a house without seeing it. Perhaps no protective spirit acted, and the first link in the chain of events was in the determination of the letting agent who rented the house. Perhaps that agent had no determination and was simply in a hurry, that morning, to get rid of me.

“A very small house for one person, in a solitary place where there are no factory chimneys, no Sunday fair, nor an inn with a gramophone, nor a blaring casino—that’s difficult to find. Oh, you want a forest all around? That increases the difficulty. And the sea a short distance away? That complicates thing further. You’d prefer a monastery in the vicinity, and bells don’t bother you. Damn! That’s a matter of a very exceptional location. And yet, I can sort you out. I have to hand the very small house you need. It’s exactly suitable. It’s a long time since it’s been let, which is inexplicable, in view of the charm of the location. And by a curious coincidence, everyone’s fighting over it.”

The letting agent had got up, had gone to his office door, opened it for a moment and came back to me with the shining eyes and bright smile of someone about to tell an unimportant lie.

“You’ve heard all those rings of the doorbell that have just succeeded one another. They’re clients that have made me offers for the house. Perhaps they’re thinking about some overbid on the price, which is very minimal. They’re numerous and they’re waiting. But I’d like to give you the preference, because one isn’t the master of one’s sympathy. You have only to sign here, putting *read and approved*.”

I knew that I had just accomplished an irrevocable action. It would be an insensate prodigality to rent a house, only to change one’s mind thereafter and not live in it. I had engaged an entire year of existence on the spur of the moment—and I experienced an interior thrill at the audacity of running a risk.

“Can you tell me why this house, so desired by a crowd that is murmuring in your antechamber, has remained untenanted for such a long time?”

The letting agent’s face became suddenly impenetrable. Then as he put the lease bearing my signature in a file, he said: “Unknown...rumors run around...a solitary house...you’ll see...”

THE ARRIVAL IN THE MYSTERIOUS LAND

It is a former domain of pines and mimosas where houses were once born. In the middle is a large château. Not far away there is a railway, which has frayed a path through the pines, a village of people, stony expanses and hills full of silence—and then the rest of the world.

Anyone arriving at sunset receives a warning that comes from an infinite distance. And I knew, as soon as the first evening and the first minute, that there was a great mystery in that place.

In truth, mystery is universally widespread. Is there a place on earth where everything is not incomprehensible? The laws, the powerful divine laws, are only half-immutable. Nothing obeys reason exactly, and the more reasonable people seem to be, the more they deviate from reason.

The little station gives the impression of only being there by chance, and as soon as the train has drawn away with a great smoky sigh, one would think that it shrinks, and disappears among the trees that enclose it. The guard has pushed the barrier. A carriage moves off. A star lights up in the distance.

“You only have to go straight ahead, and then turn left.”

Perhaps that mass in the distance is the monastery. How high and dense the trees are! The solitude will be greater than I thought. But night lends itself to the illusions of solitude. It's necessary to go uphill, and then down again. That blue in the distance must be the sea. There is a big house at the end of a driveway. Over there I can see a small one.

“Bonjour, Monsieur; doubtless you're the tenant,” said an old man carrying a rake, who emerged from a mimosa.

New tenants must be recognizable by their suitcase, their overcoat and their appearance of having come from far away.

“I'll go fetch the keys.”

I considered the house. It belonged to the same architectural family as all the houses to let in that maritime area, but with something particular. If it could walk, it would have limped. But it was motionless, and stood with a slight slant, with an overly large coiffure that resembled an archbishop's miter. And as it was surrounded by bougainvilleas covered in violet flowers, it was reminiscent of an archbishop of small stature who gave the impression of keeping a secret.

I had put down my suitcase and I was waiting in the garden for the old man who had gone in quest of the keys. It was then that I seemed to perceive furtive footsteps inside the locked house, which were slightly sad, if a sound of footsteps can possess sadness.

I advanced toward the silent door of the house in order to make sure of the reality of the sun, so light that it might have been produced by a shadow, and shadows produce very few. I was about to put my ear to the lock when, having looked first, I distinguished the movement of a living creature there. And I recognized an insect with two hooks, the same one that a familial legend, a lesson useful for the fourth year, gives as the normal inhabitant of old locks: the earwig, with which I had often been threatened, at the time when my head was precisely at the level of locks and when I did not have to bend down in order to listen clandestinely.

Since my childhood I had calculated that there must be many more earwigs than locks, and that many families belonging to that genre of insects must find themselves devoid of lodgings. But pity has so many other subjects of exercise! I was in the presence of a favored earwig that had spent the entire winter in a profound lock. Had I been in any danger? Did that insect merit the name that it bore, and did it have the habit of plunging into human ears and depositing the seeds of thousands of little earwigs there?

I did not have time to meditate those problems, nor the new problems posed by the remark I heard. For I heard a remark. It was very quiet, or seemed to be. And perhaps it was not perceived by the organ of hearing but by some mysterious interior faculty enabling insects to communicate with humans—a faculty long lost, if it existed. The remark that the earwig made was: “It's her who is walking. It's necessary not to disturb the spirit of the one who is dead.”

THE LANGUAGE OF INSECTS

I took a few steps back, and my first thought was one of wonderment. An astonishing phenomenon had just been produced. An insect had spoken to me and I had understood what it said.

But in that case, I understood the language of insects! That was a prodigious faculty that I had often dreamed of having. It is true that I had been obliged to renounce the ambition. But now I had just received a special confidence, which I had understood very clearly. I lent an ear to the sounds of the nature around me, and it would not have taken much for me to be obliged to start running in order to calm the agitation into which I had suddenly been thrown.

In reviving by means of memory my arrival at the house, it is impossible for me to evaluate the time that that inconceivable comprehension lasted—perhaps only a few seconds. During those few seconds—or those few minutes, I don't know—I had the perception not only of the speech of insects but of all animals.

It was not exactly words of which they made use. They expressed simple and complex sentiments by means of prolonged rhythms. Only sometimes, personal relationships motivated exclamations that had the value of words. I was struck by the extreme coarseness of what can be called a language. A dog, in the distance, was repeating insults addressed to another dog that were equivalent to our most base vocabulary, which were a sort of evocation of filth. A donkey was proclaiming a resigned malediction regarding its miserable life, in terms that were almost repulsive, by virtue of the stupid disgust they expressed.

On the other hand, a bird on a branch was warning a sleeping family about an owl that had taken off but was still distant, and there was a certain amicable grace in what it said. Not far away from me, in an unkempt garden plot, a cricket was repeating untiringly, in a continuous fashion, its joy in learning, the development of its knowledge of the world. I was so surprised that I advanced toward it, which immediately caused it to fall silent. On leaning over, I distinguished little tremors in the grass, which corresponded to sentiments of fear. That fear was the dominant note of all the sounds.

I heard an interrogation that was addressed to me personally, and which came from a bird. Was it the same one that had announced the advent of the owl or another? It had turned toward me and it said, approximately, with extreme rapidity: "Who are you? Where do you come from? Why are you here?"

And then everything ceased. The marvelous perception was interrupted. There was no longer anything but a chirping in the branches. The donkey and the dog had fallen silent. The cricket resumed a monotonous chirping in which it was impossible to distinguish the joy of knowledge.

"Excuse me," said the old man, "but I couldn't find the keys."

And he showed me over the house. The rooms did not have the dead character of long-uninhabited rooms. A certain life was expanded there, which was manifest in the quality of the folds of the curtains, and in the manner in which the mirrors reflected images. A woman must once have presided over the arrangement of that small house.

I was struck by the sight of a large clock in the ground floor room. The old man saw my gaze.

"It's necessary to warn you that it marks time as it pleases. It doesn't go fast or slow, but without anyone being able to explain why, every time it's midnight, it chimes thirteen times."

THE FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH ROSELINE

The first time I encountered Roseline it was in a place that was half street and half road: a street because of the presence of a house, a grocery that was also a café and a tobacconist of sorts; and a road because there were hedges of rosemary and mimosas to the right and the left.

She was supposed to be talking to a semi-venerable lady, to whom a certain scatterbrained quality removed a little of the gravity. The conversation had just stopped abruptly and Roseline was staring obstinately at my hat, in such a way that her gaze, the color of flowing water, glided over my head like a silent blue arrow.

The beauty of young women! One can promise oneself not longer to pay any attention to it, but one is surprised by its appearance, as if by the movement of a star that, interrupting the order of celestial attractions, has started to make zigzags in the sky, giving all the signs of its liberty.

I had renounced it some time ago. When I gazed at myself in a mirror, I could only distinguish the two white patches that my hair made at my temples. Those patches were, moreover, augmenting with surprising rapidity, and a curious phenomenon was localized there. Every time that I met the gaze of a woman in which there was a subtle transmission of sympathy, I immediately felt a slight pressure on my blanched temples, as if the hands of wisdom were reminding me of the reality of time. That pressure was so real that I put my hand involuntarily to my forehead with the confused hope, or perhaps the apprehension, of seizing a mysterious, icy, inhuman hand in its merciless solicitude.

Roseline's beauty came, above all, from a faculty of astonishment that radiated from her. It was not only my hat that astonished her but the color and perfume of rosemary, the quality of the morning air, and the light beat of her pulse. One sensed that she could not accustom herself to being alive without being astonished by it. She was holding her arms along her body, as if, suddenly freed from the laws of gravity, she were about to rise up toward the sky by virtue of a spontaneous elevation.

She was perfectly ravishing and tastefully dressed, but, without it being possible to discern why, there was something slightly ridiculous about her. Oh, very slight, which was only manifest in a fleeting fashion. It did not come from the silk of her neckerchief, nor the color of the flowers in her hat, but perhaps from the exaggeration of sentiments, the vehemence of sincerity.

My hat must remind that young woman of something, I thought, during the few seconds I took to arrive level with her.

And I saw her features covered over by a light mask that only the soul is able to fabricate, a mask woven with surprise, simulated reverie and observant inattention.

I had gone past and was continuing my route when I heard a burst of laughter. As I turned round, I saw that Roseline was still looking at my hat, and laughing. Was the form of the hat so amusing, and could it motivate such hilarity?

And as I tried to put a certain severity into my gaze with regard to the impropriety of the laughter, I saw that her eyes had the particular gleam that the sunlight brings to the mist of tears. Could a hat of slightly conical form provoke laughter and tears simultaneously?

And at the same time I heard a remark made in a low voice, a remark as mysterious to me as a legend: "Isn't that the new tenant of the House of the Crow?"