

Prologue

I

That evening, the Hôtel Continental was exceptionally animated. A crowd of mostly young and intelligent people, vibrant with warm and generous gaiety, filled the large hall beneath the sparkling chandeliers.

“Centrales”¹ of today, yesterday and the day before yesterday, with their families and occasional chosen guests, were sharing the delicate joy of a fine expected pleasure, anticipated in total security, promised by the theater curtain masking a stage erected at the back of the hall. Laughter was prepared in advance on all lips, and hands were getting ready to applaud. That was because a comrade, the son of a great Parisian director, and a clever and zestful author, had written one of those special revues that year, Aristophanean in its liberty, in which, among the incidents of the school, reflected in the Gallic fashion, the tics of the various teachers would be wittily parodied. They would be the first to salute their young charges with their bravos, joyfully and without resentment.

A good audience! The raising of the curtain had been announced for nine o’clock, and it was half past nine, but no one was bothered by that delay. Chatting, laughing, exchanging handshakes, evoking memories, confiding successes or hopes and talking cordially about absentees, occupied the young and old comrades sufficiently to wipe out any hint of impatience.

One replete individual installed in the front row, however, did not seem to be participating in the general forbearance. Senator Dupeyroux, to whom the committee had offered the presidency of the celebration that year, was squirming incessantly in his seat, making it clearly manifest that even senatorial patience has its limits. Unable to stand it any longer, he stood up abruptly, traversed the hall, in spite of the deferential objurgations of two young Centrales bearing the badges of stewards, and went into a small reception room serving as a vestibule and controlled entrance to the hall, transformed for the occasion into a theater.

He addressed himself to the chief steward, who was busy checking the invitations of a few latecomers

“Well, he hasn’t arrived, then, your famous Mining King?”

“Monsieur Williamson is certainly a little late, Monsieur le Sénateur.”

“I’m certainly a supporter of courtesy, even exaggerated, with regard to foreigners,” affirmed the “conscript father,” in a slightly acidic tone, “but since we’re all subject here to the pleasure of that republican monarch, I’m wondering why your committee didn’t offer the presidency to him rather than me!”

Embarrassed, the steward busied himself with the classification of variously-colored pieces of cardboard.

“That’s all right,” the elect of the restricted suffrage went on. “I incline before the modern majesty of the dollar and I’ll go back inside to set an example of patience. Oh, by the way, I asked for a place to be reserved next to my seat for my new secretary. I’d be obliged to you, as soon as he arrives...he’s a tall, dark-haired young man, with the bronzed complexion of an African explorer...”

“Is Monsieur le Sénateur now involved in colonial politics?”

“It’s the best thing...”

“For the future of the country?”

“For bringing down recalcitrant ministries. My secretary, a precious fellow, very knowledgeable, is named Rolland.”

The young commissioner raised his head. “Rolland? An explorer? Claude Rolland, perhaps?” he enquired.

¹ The École Centrale in Paris, founded in 1829, is the oldest and most prestigious school of engineering in France, long renowned for its production of technological innovators and entrepreneurs.

“Do you know him?”

“He was a comrade of my older brother at the *École Centrale*.”

“Bah! He’s an engineer and didn’t say anything to me about it! It’s a pearl of knowledge and modesty that I’ve found there. Look—here he is!”

Claude Rolland had, indeed, come in, very late but with his excuse on his arm: Mademoiselle Edmée Rolland, as tall and slim as her brother; as blonde as he was dark; better than pretty, beautiful—but with a slightly grave beauty that seemed poorly adapted to the tender shade of her abundant, slightly curly and hectic hair. In particular, she had two superb large blue eyes, gentle and profound, and, at the same time bright, with a determined and energetic gleam.

Claude introduced her to his new “boss.”

“I understand,” said the latter, bowing a trifle ponderously to the young woman, “why you’ve renounced the glory of your distant expeditions for Mademoiselle your sister; she’s charming!”

“Our mother, who was our only remaining parent, having passed on, duty recalled me to Edmée...”

“Only your duty?” questioned the young woman, mildly.

“And my tender affection, Sister, as you know very well!” Claude replied, in his masculine but musical voice.

In a gallantly pretentious fashion, Dupeyroux added. “You’ll doubtless hold it against me, Mademoiselle, if I take possession of your brother in order to talk about our great report?”

“Not at all, Monsieur—the interests of the State before all!”

“Always at your orders, Monsieur le Sénateur,” said Claude. And he called: “Furet!”²

“Present, Commandant,” said a blond and thickset fellow who had come in behind the fraternal couple, and had remained respectfully to one side until summoned.

“Take charge of our coats,” the young man said to him, throwing him his overcoat, “and I confide Mademoiselle Edmée to you.”

“Have no fear, Commandant,” said the other, hastily rejoining the young woman.

Dupeyroux took his secretary by the arm.

“My dear chap, that’s the second time that fellow has called you Commandant, but...”

“I’m not. This is the explanation: Jean Guitard, nicknamed Furet, is a brave and skillful sailor, who has navigated numerous rapids on the great African rivers under my orders. That’s when he acquired the habit of calling me his Commandant, and he’s never wanted to get out of it, any more than he consented to leave me when his official service to the State ended.”

“I understand. Let’s talk briefly and to the point. Where are you up to in our work?”

“The first part, the list of accusations, is already in your in-tray.”

“Terrible, isn’t it, the charge sheet? It’s necessary that every paragraph be a stick of dynamite, in order that the whole ensemble is blown to smithereens, minister and ministry together.”

“Alas, the task is only too easy; it’s sufficient to content oneself with telling the truth.”

“So much the better!”

So much the worse, thought Claude, who, not being a politician, had the naivety of thinking of the country first and foremost.

“And the second part—the reforms? For it’s all very well to demolish, on condition that one takes responsibility for rebuilding. Everything is there, you understand!”

Claude Rolland understood only too well. It was not without a certain coldness, the mask of an honest scorn, that he replied: “My notes are organized; I’ve just begun writing them up.”

“Do a good job! When will you be finished.”

“In a week at the latest.”

“Good—the interpellation is in a fortnight; I’ll have time to work on my speech. Now...”

He was interrupted by the sudden arrival of one of the celebration’s stewards, at a run, exclaiming: “Monsieur le Sénateur, we’re only waiting for you to give the signal.”

“Your rich Yankee has arrived, then?”

² *Furet* is the French equivalent of the English “ferret.”

“A moment ago.”

“Impossible—we’d have seen him!” said the chief steward.

Laughing, the comrade who had just arrived explained: “Weren’t we told that he’s the greatest eccentric in North America? He came in through the rooms reserved for the performers. He’s flatly refused the seat that was reserved for him next to Monsieur le Sénateur and demanded two chairs for himself and his groom, a puny chap with an insolent and stuck-up manner, and has sat down in the passage leading from the wings to the reception room. That way, he can leave easily if the performance bores him. He’s an eccentric!”

“In that case,” said the chief steward, “we can’t give him an entrance?”

Dupeyroux, who was already heading back into the hall, stopped, and in a tone shot through with irritated jealousy, said: “You’d arranged an ovation for that fantasist?”

“Out of professional admiration for the foremost geologist in the world!”

“Oh!”

“It’s not saying too much, Monsieur le Sénateur. Every time that astonishing man, a prospector without equal, points his finger at the ground and says: ‘Dig a shaft there,’ they find the coal, the oil or the minerals predicted. Never a hesitation, never an error—hence his colossal fortune.”

“Legend... or bluff!” protested Dupeyroux, shrugging his senatorial shoulders. Then he went into the hall of the celebrations, followed by Claude Rolland.

Their appearance was saluted with the rhythmic salvos of an ovation, which the vanity of the parliamentarian attributed to himself, although it was actually addressed to his comrade, whose intrepid youthful glory as an explorer reflected on everyone and made the École proud.

The performance had scarcely been running for ten minutes when a person of rather rude appearance, with a long bushy beard and no moustache, wearing a long frock-coat and a vast hat, arrived on the threshold of the little control room, debating in a low voice with one of the hotel footmen. He seemed the complete type-specimen of the Yankee, as popularized by caricaturists in the Old World.

“Very close to the stage, on the right, with his groom,” the footman indicated, before making off, with an anxious expression.

The bearded man head toward the door of the hall with meter-long strides, where a steward stopped him.

“Green card? Or pink?”

“No ticket. Just off the train, no time to get one. No need, anyway. Jonathan Loeb, chief of the Knights of Labor,³ member of the general staff of the Salvation Army...” As the steward pursed his lips with courteous irony, the red-bearded man said, in a surly tone: “You still have the right to smile at Salvationists in France; you’d bow if we were in America, or even in India.”

“Unfortunately, Monsieur, we’re in Paris, where those titles don’t have the power to impose orders.”

“And this one?” said the tall, robust individual, standing up straight. He rapidly placed his open right hand, with the fingers extended and together, on his stomach, and then raised it to his forehead, made what is known in military terms as a half-turn, and immediately returned to his original position.

The commissioner looked at him, amazed and amused. “Are you in pain?” he asked.

The newcomer sketched a scornful gesture.

At that moment, a pale young man irrupted into the same vestibule. He had a curly moustache, a fur coat over his arm, and was clad in an evening suit of the very latest fashion: an accomplished specimen of the “dandy” or “snob,” one of those elegant high spirits of Parisian high society who, without any

³ The Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor, founded in 1869, was one of the largest and most powerful American labor organizations of the late 19th century, but it dwindled rapidly in the 1890s, eventually disappearing in 1939. Modeled on the Freemasons, of whose august society the newcomer is obviously also a high-ranking member, it maintained a secrecy of membership in order to prevent employers taking reprisals. It had considerable support within the Catholic Church, but was regarded with suspicion by left-wing labor unions because of its staunch Republicanism.

entitlement whatsoever, are at all the premières, welcome in almost all salons, and make up the most specialized or reputedly most exclusive social cliques.

He came in casually. Proclaiming in a serenely shrill voice: "I'm late, I'll wager? Damn it, I was in such exhilarating society..."

He stopped dead. As he turned in the direction of the great hall, after having thrown his invitation negligently on to the green baize table of the chief steward, his gaze had just alighted on the tall and singular transatlantic individual, who, looking at him fixedly, put his hand to his stomach and then to his forehead for a second time.

"Damn it!" muttered the elegant latecomer, between his teeth. "That's the first time that I've encountered..."

And, awkwardly, because he was somewhat intimidated in spite of his aplomb, he took a step toward the man with the red beard and the small, steely eyes, placing his right hand, with the fingers extended, in front of his throat, and then touching his right shoulder, before letting it fall slowly again to dangle alongside his thigh.

The hollow and rigid features of the man who had named himself Jonathan Loeb to the Centrale steward relaxed in satisfaction. "Good, an apprentice," he murmured.

With a stiff gesture he extended his hand to the pale young man, and their handshake, devoid of any warmth, was nevertheless long enough for an observer to have the sensation that they were carrying out some kind of secret ritual.

"Delighted to meet you," said the American, coldly.

"What can I do for you, Monsieur?" asked the dandy, in the same tone.

"Get me in, although I haven't had the leisure to get myself a ticket."

"Difficult..." Suddenly, he slapped his forehead. "But no, in fact," he said. "The Senator who's presiding is..." He finished the sentence whispering in the American's ear.

With an abrupt gesture, Jonathan Loeb took from his pocket an enormous worn leather wallet, and took a card out of it, on which he wrote, below his name:

Chief of the Supreme Council of New York.

And then: *Necessity to attend celebration.*

He slipped the card into a gummed envelope, sealed it and handed it to one of the young stewards, saying: "To the senator president immediately. Interest of a superior order."

The steward, with a rather poor grace, rang for a messenger, whom he charged with carrying the missive to its destination.

Loeb turned to his pale and perfumed companion and said, in a brusque and trenchant tone: "Thank you. If I can ever be useful to you in my turn..."

"Of course. I'm glad to have run into you. I'm expecting to visit the United States soon..."

"Pleasure trip?"

"No, it's a matter of establishing the death of a relative who disappeared."

"A long time ago?"

"We last had news of him, by chance, twenty-five years ago."

"Difficult. Tell me anyway."

"Permit me first to introduce myself. Grégoire de Montalpe, well known in leisured Parisian society, great hunter of stars...the terrestrial kind: an astronomy full of charm but costly. And, well, it's a good time for me to get a feel..."

"A feel?"

"That is to say, to get my hands on a certain inheritance."

"I understand. This disappearance, only dating back twenty-five years..."

"Will tie up the funds for another five years. I can't, however, wait that long."

"French, presumably, this disappeared individual?"

"No, Russian. Muscovite genealogical branch, extinct with him, I believe. Oh, if you could help me to get the death of this Lobanief certified..."

The Yankee shivered from head to toe. "What did you say?" he articulated, hoarsely.

"I said Baron Lobanief, aristocrat of Valchow."

"Him!"

"You know him?" said de Montalpé, stupefied.

"I've been looking for him for twenty years! That's the man that it's important for you to discover?"

"Not alive, you understand."

"Trust me—vengeance is a sure guide."

"Vengeance?"

"Listen! The Russia of today is almost mild, but that of old...! My father was a Jewish serf. His overlord, young Lobanief, had him exiled to Siberia, where I was born to hate. When my father died I quit the icy inferno to search for our torturer. The latter, disgraced, had left the country. I followed his trail—too old, alas!—across Europe and then the Ocean. In Chicago, one day, I found evidence that he had passed though, but then I lost the trail, and I spent my last dollar without being able to pick it up again. Then..."

"You abandoned the game?"

"Never!"

"Without money, though..."

"What need do I have of money when I have an army at my service?"

"Don't understand."

"I have the soul of a leader. I became a Knight of Labor, in order to become one. Of the Salvationists, countless all over the surface of the globe, I'm really in command, as chief of the general staff, although the Marshal and his wife reign...and collect.⁴ As a Freemason, I'm at the head of all the rites recognized in America. Strengthened by that triple occult sovereignty, the master of a million men of all nations and social classes, to convert into loyal agents, I've extended my nets."

"But you haven't found him?"

"Not yet."

"That's because Lobanief is dead."

"It's because he isn't. Tombs are loquacious; living lips know how to keep quiet. Not all, however."

"You have a clue?"

"Yes—a report from a Salvationist has identified a man who, thinking himself alone, has twice pronounced the name of the man I hate."

"And that man...?"

"Is in this hall. Nothing is as propitious as the neutral terrain of a celebration to make contact with a power who is almost unapproachable elsewhere."

"He's a prince, then?"

"He's a king—one of our American kings, sovereign by grace of the power of gold."

"The famous Williamson, perhaps?"

"The very same."

II

That conversation was interrupted by the appearance of the bellboy coming back to invite Loeb, on the senator's behalf, to take his place in the armchair next to his presidential seat.

Loeb hastened forward, followed by de Montalpé, and the spectators, disturbed in the midst of their amusement, were surprised to see that caricaturish individual cutting through the joyful crowd unceremoniously, welcomed with marks of the greatest consideration by the most auspicious of the

⁴ The Salvation Army launched in the U.S.A. in 1880 was established by Salvationist emigrants from Britain, under the command of Commissioner George Scott Railton, but it functioned thereafter independently of the British military hierarchy organized by William Booth, with its own command structure. General Booth was still alive in 1910, when this novel was written, but would not have had any effective authority in the U.S.A. The "Marshal" to whom Loeb refers is fictitious, and the organization as he imagines it bears no resemblance to the actual one.

conscript fathers. The latter were quite scandalized to see that their advances were welcomed no better than a downpour at a picnic.

That was because the unpolished Jonathan had experienced a great disappointment: the chairs that had been indicated to him as being occupied by Williamson and his groom were empty.

Did Loeb's arrival have anything to do with the sudden disappearance of the Mining King?

Not at all. Williamson was completely unaware of Jonathan. Since the curtain had gone up on the Aristophanean and truly quite witty Centrale Revue, his broad face, carefully shaven, whose colors remained almost juvenile in spite of the approach of his fortieth year and his blue eyes, devoid of any gleam, had not expressed the slightest interest and had remained phlegmatically disinterested, although the audience was crackling with increasingly enthusiastic bursts of laughter.

Suddenly, his closest neighbors had seen him stand up tranquilly and go away without the slightest gesture, accompanied by his inseparable Toby.

Loeb and de Montalpe had scarcely left the vestibule when the chief steward was surprised to see the celebrated mining industrialist come in by another door. "Our revue doesn't have the good fortune of pleasing you?" he asked, contritely.

"It bores me."

"To judge by the welcome our audience is giving it, however..."

"Too much laughing," declared the billionaire, in a plaintive voice. "It makes me feel ill. I'm as nervous as a woman."

He spotted an armchair, pushed it into the middle of the room, and made a sign to his groom, who brought forward a chair, on which Williamson put his feet, saying: "Cocktail!"

"Yes sir!" replied the stiff and starched flunkey, pivoting on his heel and disappearing through the service door.

Nonplussed, the steward thought he ought to intervene.

"Pardon me, but the hotel bar is only a few steps away, if you..."

"I'm all right here."

"It's just that...it's not really...the place, and..."

Very calmly, in a soft voice, as if wearied by the effort of making it audible, he said: "I don't mind. I have a horror of convention...like that revue at which they're laughing...leaving business behind, I have a poetic temperament...too many men in that theater hall. I like women's voices, for their charm...I'll wait here until it's finished."

"Your desires are law..."

"I know," said the billionaire, conclusively.

His eyes half-closed, Williamson remained still, and it was in silence that he absorbed, with indifferent slowness, the drink that his groom brought him.

Although the untimely arrival of Jonathan Loeb had not caused the exodus of the nonchalant billionaire, it had had the effect of forcing Claude Rolland to give up his seat next to the senator. As there was not a single free seat left, he retired to the back of the hall. Several stewards hastened to try to find him a place. He did not want the entire assembly to be disturbed on his account, however, so, offering the pretext of needing some air, he headed back to the little reception-room-cum-vestibule, where he certainly did not expect to find the other American. The chief steward informed him, as best he could, about the singular person who had forced the explorer's retreat, adding that he thought he had understood that Loeb had come with the intention of seeing Williamson.

"Pfft!" said the latter, emerging from his mutism without interrupting his absorbing occupation. "Doubtless some mendicant. Everyone in New York knows perfectly well that I never give anything."

"Rich as you are, Monsieur, I can hardly believe that," protested Claude.

Williamson looked at him sideways. "Charity," he declared, flatly, "creates paupers and ingrates, so it's acting badly. Life is a battle; so much the worse for those killed in action."

"That's a cruel theory."

"It's true. Anyway, I'm too warm-hearted to give alms."

Rolland and his comrade the steward looked at one another, legitimately surprised.

“That’s...quite a paradox,” the explorer could not help exclaiming.

“Not at all,” affirmed the billionaire, in an icy tone. “I’ve very sensitive; hearing complaints makes me feel ill.”

That was too much for Claude’s natural generosity. “You prefer,” he said, sarcastically, “to plug your ears.”

“Yes...I’m so good!” And Williamson’s voice softened with intimate emotion to add: “No one since Adam has been as good as me!”

“Theoretically!”

“Practically. I pay those I employ well and punctually. At Christmas, I even give them imperial gratifications.”

“And in case of catastrophe, unexpected misfortune, you...”

“Wait. I like regularity. Anything that troubles it makes me feel ill. This year, one of my engineers—a Frenchman—in order to save the honor of his family, he said, asked me for an advance on his salary...”

“You refused, evidently,” said Claude Rolland, with increased sarcasm.

“No. I can’t refuse—I’m too good. I just invited him to seek employment elsewhere.”

“Mining King, perhaps,” Claude whispered to the steward, indicating Williamson. “King of Egotists, for sure.”

From her place in the celebration hall, Edmée had seen her brother make his rapid exit, and as she did not know the reason for it, the incomprehensible departure had astonished her greatly. Claude was everything to her; she loved him as much as she was proud of him. Not seeing him come back in, her astonishment was transformed into anxiety, which increased with all the customary rapidity of the feminine imagination. No longer able to contain herself, she left in her turn, followed by the faithful matelot, in search of news.

“Oh, there you are! I was afraid you were ill,” she said to the explorer, emotional but reassured.

Williamson had turned his head negligently. “Is this your wife?” he asked.

“Who is this gentleman?” Edmée asked.

“Williamson, the rich Yankee,” he relied, in a low voice. To the American, he said: “Mademoiselle is my sister.”

“Good! Charming! How much?”

Claude started, and his face went red with anger. “Monsieur!” he said, menacingly.

“Oh, don’t get upset...it’s just habit...I was joking.”

“In a singular fashion!” The young man took his younger sister’s arm, and headed back toward the hall.

“Hey!” said Williamson. “You interest me. Come here!”

“Me?”

“With your sister.”

“Not in this life, damn it!”

A sullen veil covered the clean-shaven features of the Mining King. “You’re annoying me,” he said. “In that case, I’m leaving.”

The chief steward ran to Claude, his expression pleading. The latter stopped.

“All right,” he said. “Out of regard for my young comrades.” With a rather ill grace, he sat Edmée down, and asked the Yankee: “What do you want with us?”

“To know who you are.”

“Claude Rolland, civil engineer,” the young man announced, dryly.

“And the explorer that all Paris is talking about at the moment,” the young woman added. Like her brother, she had a warm, musical and captivating voice.

“You have a delightful tone of voice, Mademoiselle,” Williamson remarked. Addressing Claude, he said: “Explorer? Yes, I’ve heard mention of you. To get yourself massacred for the profit of others is very brave, but very stupid. Would you like to be the director of one of my mines? How much?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re refusing?”

“I came back to France to devote myself to my sister.”

“Mademoiselle will accompany you.”

“Your behavior just now would forbid me to take her.”

“You’re not very flattering?”

“I’m not trying to be.”

An expression of blissful satisfaction illuminated Williamson’s face. In a brisk tone that contrasted with his previous phlegmatic morosity, he said: “Well, so much the better; that makes a change. Your European princes see spines curbing before them; with me, it’s consciences. It flattered me for a time; now I’m blasé. I’ve run around the old continent after America, and it seems to me that I always have the same shop-window in front of me, by dint of always being pursued by the same offers of sale. I have four hundred million dollars; I’m tired of buying things...and people... too easily. Life obsesses me...your attitude is new to me, and I haven’t been bored for the last five minutes.”

Edmée looked at him with a pensive ingenuousness. “You’re suffering from being too rich,” she said.

“One is never rich enough. Gold gives one everything one can desire.”

“Except for what it can’t buy.”

“And what is it that it can’t buy, down here?”

“Disinterested sentiments, of course.”

“They don’t exist. No one does anything for nothing.”

“Unless,” Claude put in, “the motive is honor, or duty, or glory?”

“There’s no other motive in human actions but money,” the billionaire declared, almost brutally, becoming cold again. “Honor, duty and glory are masks that disguise the true goal.”

“Monsieur,” said Claude, “just now your words made me indignant. I was wrong, Now, I feel sorry for you.”

Williamson opened his eyes wide, looked the young explorer up and down, and then emitted a formidable burst of laughter. “Feel sorry for me—me, whom everyone envies! Ha ha ha—that’s funny. Is that your opinion too, Mademoiselle?”

“Sincerely, Monsieur, yes.”

“Perfect! Oh, what fun I’m having! I’m indebted to you both for that pleasure. Williamson never leaves debts unpaid. Since you don’t want to run one of my mines, I’ll find some other way to acquit myself.” He tipped back his armchair, shaken by inextinguishable laughter. “Someone feels sorry for me! Oh, I’ll laugh about that for a long time!”

The racket of a storm of applause and cheers next door cut his hilarity short.

“That’s the end of the final sketch in the revue,” said the steward.

“Oh, already!” said Williamson, regretfully, his features resuming their expression of froideur and ennui.

Edmée stood up and drew her brother aside. “That man is very famous and very rich, Claude,” she said, “but I don’t think he’s happy. Really, I pity him.”

A flood of spectators irrupted into the reception room; among the first were Dupeyroux, who, followed by Loeb, headed straight for the Mining King, his heart in his mouth.

The latter stopped the first spectator who came to hand and, pointing at the conscript father, demanded laconically: “Who’s he?”

“Monsieur le Sénateur, the president of the celebration,” was the reply.

“A politician,” murmured the billionaire, with a scornful grimace.

Dupeyroux bowed to him ostentatiously, but did not have time to open his mouth.

“Oh, no speeches,” said Williamson. “They bore me. You want to thank me for having come? Well, shake my hand and let that be the end of it.”

Nonplussed and vexed, the senator replied: “You’ll permit me, at least, to introduce you to one of your compatriots, who asked me to do so? Monsieur Loeb, chief...”

A rude tap on the arm cut off the speech again. “Thanks—I’ll take it from here,” Jonathan declared.

“What boors these Yankees are!” muttered Dupeyroux.

Loeb and Williamson were staring at one another coldly and stiffly, at close range.

“You are...?” the latter demanded, through pursed lips.

“Your equal,” said the other. “You’ve elevated yourself above men by gold, I by domination. You buy, I command.”

“Loeb? Good. I remember...I know. What do you want?”

“To talk.”

“Between eight and nine, at my hotel.”

“Same time at mine.”

There was a glacial silence between those two gigantic prides, without any movement, without the slightest play of the physiognomy. From the first moment of contact they had been measuring one another with a superb calmness.

Dupeyroux, in whom long parliamentary habits had killed all sterile self-respect, pulled himself together urgently. “I have a hunt, an hour from Paris, in which fur and feather abound. If, tomorrow, for example, Monsieur Williamson would like to do a little shooting, I hope that Monsieur Loeb wouldn’t refuse to join him?”

“Neutral ground,” said Jonathan, without ceasing to stare at his compatriot, who maintained his silence.

“You’d have complete independence, Messieurs,” Dupeyroux added. “I’ll be there on my own to receive you, with my secretary, Monsieur Rolland.”

“Monsieur Rolland is your secretary?” articulated Williamson, who appeared to unfreeze. “He interests me, that young man. I’ll come to kill a few of your beasts tomorrow.”

“Bravo!”

“Unless....” He shouted: “Toby! The New York *Herald*, quickly!”

Like a flash of lightning, the groom opened a path through the increasingly dense crowd of engineers and Centrales that were almost filling the reception room, where the Mining King was a powerful magnet for curiosity.

“What!” exclaimed the senator. “You need to consult the New York *Herald* to know...?”

“Whether it’s permissible for me to be your guest? Yes. You’re astonished that I, who disposes at my whim of the work and time of others, don’t have complete liberty in my own actions? That’s the case, however; every day, for fifteen years, I’ve been waiting for an item of information to which death alone will prevent me from responding.”

The reception room had suddenly immobilized. People scented a mystery, and all ears had become curiously attentive, none more so than those of Loeb and his interested satellite, Grégoire de Montalpe.

The Mining King had the distinct impression that the general movement was sympathetic to him, and, submissive to a kind of subconscious impulse, since he had thus attracted an interest that his fortune of which his fortune could not, in all sincerity, furnish him a complete aliment, he raised his voice slightly, and addressed the whole room.

“Messieurs,” he said, “the prestige of an exceptional wealth is sufficient for me, and I don’t want, before men of science, to usurp that of scientific genius. Fifteen years ago, when I was a poor reporter, I pulled an old man out of the Hudson whom I cared for in my home. Having recovered consciousness, he began by cursing me for having thwarted his suicide. Suddenly, however, after having looked at me as if he were searching the utmost depths of my soul, he asked me to tell him my story.

“It didn’t take long. A foundling, picked up half-dead by English soldiers at Fort William—hence my name—I’d been brought up by them on that Canadian territory, until the day I ran away to the United States to attempt to make my living freely. Of my early childhood I had but one memory: a heart-rending cry and the ground opening up ahead of me.

“When I’d finished talking, the old man closed his eyes for a long time, and then he said to me: ‘Williamson, you were well-inspired to save me. I’ll make you the richest man in the world. You only have to dig the ground where I tell you to do so in order to extract mineral treasures. Now, Old Sinker doesn’t lie’”

At that name, gravely pronounced, Jonathan Loeb shivered. "Old Sinker," he murmured. "The old well-digger. What a flash of light, perhaps!"

"Who's Old Sinker?" de Montalpé asked Loeb, in a whisper.

The other replied, in a troubled voice: "A singular monomaniac who, it's said, spends his life fathoming the depths of the earth, without any apparent objective."

Meanwhile, Williamson continued: "I never saw him again. I've never known where in the world he was drawing breath. But for fifteen years, without asking anything from me in return, he's indicated to me the precious deposits that have made my fame and fortune. I've often repeated that story, before this evening, in all humility, but no one wants to oppose the legend; they prefer not to believe me."

"Then...he writes to you?" asked Loeb.

"Old Sinker has never written to me."

"You see him in revelatory dreams, then?" Dupeyroux joked, ponderously.

"I receive, without any indication of provenance, a fragment of a map of the designated country, with the initial of the nature of the deposit and a red dot. That's it! I give the map to an engineer, whom I make responsible for the exploitation, and once the land is bought, I'm the master of one more superb mine. It's perfectly simple."

"So simple," observed the senator, "that any practical joker could send you to the ends of the earth to waste your efforts."

Williamson smiled. "Impossible! There's a 'sign.' For, in telling you that the man has not demanded anything of me, I was only talking about money. He imposed a tattoo on me—oh, something trivial, hardly visible—and an oath to come without delay in response to his summons when...he judged the moment had come, he said, to give me the means to be the master of the world."

"How?" demanded Loeb.

"That's his secret."

"It's the height of fantasy...or mild madness," declared the future minister, laughing. Then, on seeing Jonathan's somber face he added: "You're not laughing, Monsieur Loeb? Such pretension doesn't merit anything else, though."

"How do you know?" retorted the occult dominator, violently. "Nothing is impossible...in America."

The orator of the Luxembourg shrugged his shoulders.

The groom reappeared, carrying the great transatlantic paper, of which his master took possession unhurriedly, and unfolded it, saying: "It's purely to acquit my conscience. It would be very extraordinary if, after fifteen years of waiting, this very evening..."

Suddenly, he shuddered, in spite of all his phlegm. His finger on the newspaper, his voice rendered uncertain by an emotion stronger than his will, he articulated: "He's summoning me!"

Loeb, who had rapidly slipped behind Williamson, uttered a hoarse cry and exclaimed: "The sign! And the two letters: L. F. That's all I wanted to know: Old Sinker is Lobanief!"

That name was repeated in a triple echo, by de Montalpé—for reasons we know—but also, simultaneously, by Claude Rolland and Edmée, whose brother squeezed her wrist and whispered in her ear: "Shut up!"

De Montalpé ran to Loeb, heart-broken. "He's alive then?" he said.

"What does it matter, if I'm now sure of finding him? How much money do you have left?"

"A hundred thousand."

"Dollars?"

"Francs."

"It's enough. You'll have your inheritance and I'll have my revenge."

Transported by such a firm assurance, the elegant Grégoire seized Jonathan's powerful and bony hand: "Oh, it's my lucky star that caused me to run into you. Thanks to you, the cousins are sunk! To the lucky de Montalpé, the hoard!"

Someone touched him on the shoulder. It was Claude, with Edmée on his arm, who looked him in the eye and said, ironically: "Evil designs rarely succeed, Monsieur de Montalpé."

"Pardon me, but...?"

“Why am I interfering, no? What do you expect—I’m interested in those poor cousins.”

“Bah! Petty paupers that I’ve never seen, and who’ll never know anything.”

“It would have been necessary, for that, not to inform them.”

“What?”

“Our maternal grandmother—my sister and I—was named...Lobanief.”

“Like mine! Damn it! They’re the cousins! What a gaffe, my emperor!”

“Chatterbox!” whispered Jonathan, in his ear. “Don’t worry—I’ll take care of them ...as well as *him*.” He indicated Williamson with a glance.

At Loeb’s exclamation, the Mining King had bitten his lip, but he had immediately expelled any expression of annoyance, and traced a few figures in his notebook. He tore it out and handed it to his groom. “That dispatch to Camper and Nicholson at Gosport, to send me the steamer *Astrea*.” Then he went straight to Loeb. “You’ve discovered my secret. You can’t have any interest in it?”

“Yes—that of catching up with your Lobanief.”

“You won’t reach him.”

“We’ll reach him!” proclaimed de Montalpé, incorrigibly loquacious, adopting the attitude and tone of a braggart.

Williamson looked at the reckless snob disdainfully and called out: “Monsieur Rolland!”

The latter came forward, with Edmée.

“I heard just now, while writing in my notebook,” the billionaire said to them, “that you have an interest in your relative Lobanief.”

“It’s of little consequence to me,” said Claude, “but for the benefit of my sister, certainly. Unfortunately, our means...”

“I’ve told you that I’m indebted to the two of you. I’ll offer you a voyage.”

“Us?” said the two young people, looking at one another.

“Unless your prejudices against me...”

“The frankness of your story has dispelled them,” said Claude.

“So?”

After a brief hesitation, Edmée nodded her head, gravely. Without the slightest reticence, the young explorer said: “We accept, Monsieur.”

Bowled over, Senator Dupeyroux hastened toward his secretary. “What? You’re leaving? What about my interpellation? And your unfinished work, which is the lynch-pin? Such a defection is impossible! It would mean disaster for me...and ridicule...and....” He dared not add: *and my portfolio up in flames!*

“That’s true,” Claude sighed. “I’ve promised...”

Williamson intervened. “Can you not, Monsieur Rolland, do the work during the journey?”

“But what about the time it will take to reach me!” protested Dupeyroux. “The interpellation is fixed for a fortnight hence.”

“Good. You’ll have plenty of time. I’ll have it cabled from New York.”

“But that will cost...”

“A bagatelle. Come on, it’s agreed. You two, rendezvous tomorrow at the Le Havre express, eight twenty-five. Toby, hat and overcoat...”

While the groom ran to fetch his master’s hat and coat, the latter felt Jonathan Loeb take hold of his arm and draw him to one side.

“Do you know how that infernal Lobanief intends to make you master of the world?”

“What does it matter to you whether I know or not?”

“I’ve had strange reports regarding Old Sinker. That accursed demon is capable of anything, perhaps even stealing some frightful secret from God. Whatever infernal power he’s conquered, he won’t transmit it to you.”

“Because?”

“I don’t want that.”

“I’m not afraid of you.”

“While I’m alive, you won’t go to meet that man!”

“I shall.”

“Be careful—I’m powerful!”

“It’s war, then.”

“You’ll have brought it on, and you’ll see what I can do!”

Phlegmatically, Williamson put on his overcoat, which the groom was holding out to him, took his hat and replied: “As you please.”

As he left, he darted a cold glance at Jonathan Loeb, who was standing with his arms folded and his lips pursed in a satanic rictus, gazing at him with hatred and defiance.