

THE VIRGIN ORIENT

He will dream everywhere of the warmth of the breast.
Vigny.¹

Book One: The Forces

I. The Solemn Gathering

That evening, toward the darkness accumulated in the high corner of the architraves, with the flames of candelabras, the ardent and devouring voice rose up of the dictator, simply clad in black.

And above the silent legates, the bellicose words collided and clashed violently, like golden swords.

“...The depository of a heavy grandeur of centuries on the shores of occidental seas, a strange body vivified by all bloods, a profound soul in which all souls are purified, Europe, Messieurs, seems only to exhaust destinies in order to awaken new ones. A tradition of beauty visits its summits, and that giant and complex being, with its meditative or violent forms, signifies in its very configuration a vivacity and an inexhaustible nativity. Corteges of dreams still surge forth infinitely from that continent, toward which rears up, from the depths of the Pole, the great emblematic lion of Scandinavia; and, over and above the necessities of everyday diplomacy, the whole of politics is adding to those dreams a new subject of amazement for future generations.

“I attest, Messieurs, to the force that wells up from those countries of the Germano-Latin race, finally united, of which your presence here summarizes the mission and the history: the sublimity of politics is to lead States through events and indispensable and immediate precautions toward a new legend! It has required enormous periods of time for so-called dreams to become the essential goal of applied intelligences, the final desire of manipulators of ideas; for science, once considering them with inimity, finally to have a sufficiently high intuition of its true role to grasp them, to legitimate them, and to renew them by means of its own conquests, to dissolve them in itself and to dissolve itself within them, to utilize for one unique knowledge the precious and exalting power that is born from the gift of illusion! It required centuries of metaphysics devoid of foundation and positivist science devoid of a general idea, hollow dreams and equally detestable receipts, for humanity to arrive at no longer separating its material efforts from its meditations, and mingling them together in a single logical harmony.

“Previously, people seemed to consider the imagination and dreams as pernicious sensualities; they had recourse to them secretly after having labored, but they would have blushed to mingle them with their labor, they did not admit that one could ever employ oneself in fortifying dreams; and they did not enjoy anything perfectly, their morality being timid and restricted. But when, instead of disavowing their ideal by experience, they supported one by the other, people united science and consciousness, they became great living and perpetual poems, and thus rendered poets—which is to say, the only individuals that intelligence had previously been unable to declare futile by virtue setting before humankind the concentrated and purified effects of its own genius—useful.

“Those august recorders of human effort, those revealers of the true mental world, those embalmers of the soul of crowds in elixirs of imperishable beauty, artists, no longer had a social role on the day when the liberated individual could be his own confessor and poet, and had no need of anyone to show him the promised land, because he had already entered it. On that day, the experimental age of science,

¹ The quotation is from Alfred de Vigny’s “La Colère de Samson,” from Dalila’s monologue proudly explaining her role as a *femme fatale*.

psychology and politics gave way to an age of results; on that day, and on that day only, civilization commenced on earth.

“You are the children of those who saw that unusual evolution, and already it seems to you that it is as eternal as the logic of climates and stars, and that everything before was merely murky barbarism, traversed by lightning-flashes of presentiments. The modern genius is the free and total exercise of the faculties; with the feudalism of the mind fell one of the great despairs of souls, and everything was raised up for humankind. That elevation of humans to the envisaging of their own results drew all morality with it.

“Messieurs, it will have been our recent honor, that of people of the year 2000, to have understood and permitted that supremacy of the dream, to have made it no longer the inane abandonment of the soul in the vague and inexact, but the comforting and lucid sentiment of the unity of all knowledge before the individual mind. We have made the dream the goal of the experimental sciences that once oppressed it: obstinate in despising or hating it, even though they sensed themselves incapable of contenting the heart after the mind, they wandered in the immensity of intellectual realms like blind queens, colliding, impotent and furious, with the impenetrable door behind which imagination was sleeping as peacefully as a baby!

“In the end, the threshold opened, and the extinct and closed eyes were touched by an equal and just light. The science of dream was created, everything was concerted to produce more happiness, and the old threats of the prophets, which predicted with the increase of knowledge a parallel increase in sorrow no longer signified anything and died with primitive errors. We have finally conceived that the labor of all the scientists and the exaltation of all the poets were only made to ornament a constant harmony in the mind of the free individual, no longer to differ but to unite that that result.

“That blossoming, we have seen! Its renaissance is so close to us that I need not remind you of it any further. It is becoming merely history, and it would not be necessary to dig deeply into the soil of our capitals for the deplorable blood that it cost to appear. Those who did not understand opposed it, and disappeared in the surge of the revolution. It was necessary, and it is good.

“The progress of the social creature toward true humanity amid cadavers has led us all, the heirs of the centuries of authoritarianism and lucre, to this great, this unaccustomed political and moral notion of the identification of dream and knowledge, of the fusion of the logical sciences and expansive sensibility. It is on that philosophical idea that our confederation will live; it is therein that the divorce of ideology and analysis of which the age-old actuality presently seems so deformed, so absurd, has been reconciled, to open the new era of the reign of the individual, whose isolated consciousness is the generative image of worlds.

“I can, therefore, no longer astonish, in speaking here about these abstract and simple things, ordered like everything that participates in logic and the abstract, those among you who, whether as legislators or diplomats, study with curiosity the speeches of that abolished period when Parliaments existed, and when ‘the eloquence of numbers,’ as the people of that poor era cynically put it, was in honor, along with the strange ‘sobriety of images,’ in which our lyrical vision no longer sees anything but paltriness and platitude.

“I cannot renounce a certain irony in thinking about the scandal my words would cause if eventuality had placed me among them, and if I had stood up to say, as I am saying to you, to those stupid and base assemblies of technicians and speculators: ‘Having reflected on the supreme goal of politics, I believe, Messieurs, that with the means at my disposal, I can propose to our State that authentic luxury, *the realization of a dream*!’”

The grandmaster of the Germano-Latin Confederation fell silent momentarily, and leaned over the crowd. The bouquets of immobile flames were radiant; the shadow of the solemn pulpit descended toward the raised faces. A rumor filed the halls, weapons clinked. The scintillation of embroideries undulated and sparkled against the backcloth of scarlet drapes. Groups of Alliance ministers, clad in black, were massed in the embrasures of the colonnades. Hands and faces tensed by expectation emerged from fabrics and bright spots. The rumor of the night over the city was born at the threshold of the vestibules.

Silence fell again; the tall form of the orator straightened, and his prestigious voice rang out again.

“To be sure, those sterile people of a wretched extinct epoch would not have failed to laugh on hearing me pronounce, in their coarsely immediate debates, those words of meditation and dream, of which their skepticism and their abject elegance could not admit anything but the sounds.

“Today, we find it natural to satisfy our consciences with what was neglected by those unfortunate parliamentarians, those bastardized advocates of democracy, who perished without confessing the force of the ideas with which we live! It is a dream that bears us; and if I have come to speak to you this evening, having consulted the generals and the ministers, having spent months revising my project with the collaboration of their technical expertise, it is a dream that I want to expose to you urgently. It is a new legend that I want to propose to you, to feature in future memoirs!

“Messieurs,² ancient Europe, I repeat, has not yet accomplished all of her destinies. She has survived the strangest political cataclysms; her fecund earth is robust with bloody sap. After having killed the barbaric world, it was necessary for her to kill the Roman world. Feudalism died thereafter, and after that it was necessary to kill the kings. And we, after the kings, have killed the bourgeois, who had confiscated revolt to their profit, and soiled life with a putrescence of egalitarianism, mediocrity and stupidity veritably more hateful than everything else! Civilizations have agglomerated and overheated on this extreme continent, art has taken refuge here, and all the sciences of idea. Metaphysics has sanctified the territory where the tyrannical Germany of militant emperors was. The balance of forces has been displaced, the state of armed peace that paralyzed everything has ceased.

“The concert of European efforts was assured, after the last Franco-German conflict, by the socialist alliance of the German and Latin races. Under their combined action, the Anarchistic revolution has triumphed over the parliamentary Republic in France, the Italian royalty in fief to Prussia and Austria; the individualist English constitution was unified with ours after the exile of the last prince. The Russian Empire, installed in Constantinople, having turned almost exclusively toward Asia and becoming semi-Oriental, has ceased to have direct communications with us, and if our evolutions of thought have not influenced its secular authority or suppressed there the ancient error of divine right, at least it has disinterested itself in our transformations in order to occupy itself entirely with its eastward expansion. Those of you who are grouped around me, therefore, represent a rejuvenated and free Europe, occidental guardian of the supreme conquests of the human mind!

“Here we are, Confederates of Central Europe, grandchildren of Carlyle, individualists before the single cult of Superhumanity, aristocratic Anarchists. I, the dictator of the Occident, have just sketchily summarized our recent birth, our spiritual awakening, after the indescribable volcanic convulsion that, from Berlin to London and Paris to Rome, crushed the capitalist assemblies and monarchies in an unprecedented shedding of blood. Well, Messieurs, that destiny, finally edified, the course of events is compromising by the hour. Something formidable is born, which might ruin that which impassions us! In opposition to the unified Occident, the Orient is rising!

“The Orient! It is preparing an obscure and terrible vengeance, and its brutish black peoples are trailing immense and oscillating machineries toward us over their anthills.

“For a long time, the pretended slumber of those enervated races has no longer deceived me. While we were constructing our work and edifying our era, the people out there were slowly stirring as well. But it was an obscure agitation of subterranean beasts, the babbling of embryonic consciousnesses, an indistinct and formless rumor, the stretching of a pug-faced ignorance couched against the topics. We were too absorbed in our own thoughts to pay any heed to those distant symptoms. They have been germinating there for years.

“In its sands and its woods, depressed Tartary began to think; on his reed boat, the Chinaman raised a barely human head; the Indian fisherman ceased to roast in the sun unconsciously; the puny Annamite

² In the 1920 edition this is the second paragraph in the text, all the interim text having been cut. The deleted material is, in fact, inconsistent with the eventual argument of the story, which assumes that the synthesis to which the dictator refers is still far from achievement. Further cuts are made to the remainder of the speech to make it terser and most focused. The occasional deletions in subsequent chapters are much more sparing, usually only removing short phrases.

acquired cunning again. A bizarre birth of who knows what reprisals! The continent of fatalism dreamed of action. Everything changed on the day when, profiting for the revolutions of Europe, the alert Japanese race, having adopted our weapons and tactics, pushed its victorious armies into the depths of the Celestial Empire and commenced the civilization of its stagnant hordes. In their wake came the spirit of precise organization and the classification of forces.

“By means of the omnipotence of method, Japan appropriated Asia with a single surge of its devouring genius, and the danger began to concentrate against us. The successive annexation of all the countries of the Far Eastern littoral, the expulsion of the English hordes from India, the revolts in Burma and Annam, the treaties of the Rajah with the Yellows, and a hundred events of that genre were welcomed here with inattention. They were scarcely mentioned. It was the epoch when the capitals of Europe were burning, when bombs were annihilating in a single agreed night the parliaments of Paris and Berlin, when disarmament threw the rebel hosts out of their barracks, when civil war hurled the provinces against the functionaries, the salaried against the employer, the vagabond against the gendarme, the free man against the magistrate, all the independencies against all the authorities! The Orient was so far away!

“Now, the work is complete. That immense marriage has coagulated.

“Facing us, Messieurs, a unified society is standing up, and it is impossible for us to coexist. An eternal instinct of hatred stiffens against us those masses of men, and suspends above our continent an abominable invasion. The pullulation of those beings is terrible. Superstition, fatalism and somnolence have changed their face; the presentiment of our resources has haunted the Orientals, needs have been born therefrom; they are imminent on our frontiers, and tomorrow, a Timur or a Genghis Khan might arise again and hurl innumerable cavalries upon us. But the scourge will be a thousand times worse! Their armament is already almost ours; the numbers have learned tactics, the locust mentality is no longer sufficient for them.

“No one can imagine what that lugubrious cataract of men with brutal faces upon our provinces and our capitals would be like. The ancient world, fragmented into a hundred nations, no longer admits any but two reigns, two incompatible souls. That cannot last much longer. The Occident in heaped up against the Atlantic, its back braced, its face turned toward the Orient, ready to pounce. One of the two will die.

“You know that the first symptoms have already become manifest. The cables inform us that consuls have been seized and killed in Indo-China and Benares, simultaneously. Every demand for explanation or reparation has been rejected insolently; just now, the latest dispatches have confirmed that those troubles and others are suspected.

“There can be no question of remedying the evil once again within the precise limits of its extent, of limiting ourselves to an envoy of troops, to some partial colonial war that will ignite at a hundred successive points. What is necessary is a simultaneous action; it is to take up arms, before that enormous mass of humans has taken complete cognizance of what it might dare.

“What is necessary, Messieurs, let us say it, is a unanimous rising of Confederated Europe before the yellow peril!

“We can do that. I have thought of it; everything has been anticipated, and it is necessary that it takes place without any delay, that we anticipate the cyclone by cutting the very base of its turbulence with a lightning suddenness. Every hour lost aggravates the concentration of those hordes. The accursed spirit of Asia is agglutinating repulsive masses of armed slaves in camps and on the oriental plateaux. Neither conciliation nor pity can be anticipated. The situation is clear.

“So, this evening my speech must create a decisive resolution in you. The dream that I have come to propose that you render real is the one that pushed Europeans for centuries toward the Far Eastern seas; it is the one that took Napoléon to Egypt; it is the backlash of the civilized against the afflux of Barbarians, the revulsion of the West against the East: something more than a conquest, Messieurs; the affirmation of a law of salvation! But it is necessary for us to go further than Napoléon and all the colonizers; it is necessary for us to depart for a total subjugation, a methodical destruction of every attempt at yellow civilization.

“This is no longer a political war, it is a war of ideas. We can sustain it; everything has been anticipated. America, occupied with its extension and its struggles against the insurrectionists of the

South, leaves us every initiative this side of its commercial neutrality. The Russian Empire is reserving for itself an action in Mongolia. Although no veritable sympathy links us to that autocratic empire, its situation makes it the advance guard of the civilized against the barbarian peril; it understands that, and its interests cause it to acquiesce to the will of Central Europe. All diplomatic measures have been taken to assure it the benefits of Asia in exchange for its neutrality in Europe.

“We can therefore act freely, in confederation; and if the Germano-Latin soul, in the presence of the Russian oligarchy, African obscurantism and American indifference, remains alone in condensing and fortifying itself, if it rejects the old threat of the end in order to get a grip on itself, once supreme, if I have come here to tell you that I have prepared everything in order that the immense effort should not be wasted, at least it is necessary for us to succeed in dissociating that which we have allowed to combine, in throwing these recently-armed troops back into a definitive barbarism. Otherwise, the day will come of filthy and ferocious inundations of men!

“It is a matter now of violently turning the face of destiny around: a mission of intellectual enlightenment is incumbent upon us, in the name of the arts, of the philosophical mind, of the plastic or abstract thought that was born here a long time ago. The intellectual nullity of the Orient is the condition of the Occident’s existence!”

The dictator fell silent, abruptly. His arms raised, his eyes bright and fixed, he seemed to be raising over the breathless congress the visible image of war. Everyone bristled, but no one budged. The moment seemed vertiginous.

And suddenly, the master’s arms fell, and in the clear voice of a logician, he pronounced:

“I, Claude Laigle, man of the people, become by the advent of Anarchism the responsible dictator of the Confederation of Central Europe, propose to the legates, as a glorious, unparalleled and immediate necessity, the declaration of a merciless war against the yellow race!”

The silence broke in a flash. A clamor burst forth; black-clad ministers ran toward the tribune,

“War! War! It’s accepted!”

The undulation of the crowd pressed against the walls, beneath the electric chandeliers. The sentiment of a supreme and extraordinary decision seized the throats of hundreds of men.

“War! War!”

The terrible word, with a raucous rip, sprang outside souls like a shiny blade, before a living being, bounded among the colonnades toward the stairways, toward the street, toward the world; pale faces became crimson, mouths remained open in the cry, a convulsion shook the palace, and in the flux of the crowd the grim proclamation went forth.

Near the dictator, descended from the steps and surrounded by generals, feverish gazes shone, adieux and cheers sounded, and suddenly an appeal burst forth:

“Vive l’Aigle! Vive Claude l’Aigle!”

The favorite nickname with which the people, deforming at pleasure a predestined name, saluted the master, ran over the lips like a fanfare.

“Vive l’Aigle!”

Calmly, he saluted with his hand, and slowly went out, svelte in his black garments. The stormy assembly broke up; the doors filled with busy men rushing toward the city; bells rang; ushers hurried; the last members of the audience disappeared, and under the vaults, along the ramps, the decisive word—“War! War!”—resounded over their footsteps and accompanied them to the threshold. It was prolonged for a long time yet in the silence of the great gallery, solemn and deserted.

And then the lights of the chandeliers went out, one by one; the last palpitated and died, and the echo of the murderous word remained, face to face with silence and darkness...

By means of a door opening to the gardens, a man, Claude Laigle went out and headed for the boulevards. The street-lamps were blue-tinted by the mist of a recent shower of rain. It was a little after midnight. Luminous posters poured multicolored joyful gleams into the fog; masses of people were emerging from the dazzling exits of theaters, the terraces were overflowing, flowers were heaped up in peddlers’ trays, diamond-clad women were iridescent on silks and furs, the steam of vehicles filled the

streets. A great tumult of laughter and confused words rose toward the pale green metallic crowns of aligned trees, where fiery oranges and quivering letters designed their unreal specters.

The dictator allowed himself to be carried along by the human current. He liked annihilating himself thus and seeking solitude in the very din of life, passing unperceived and devoid of prestige, because no one looked at him. He followed the vast avenues, his soul of a logician and an ideologue delighting in feeling itself free and immense in a body protected by its very evidence against any inconvenient curiosity. The sentiment of only being a man of narrow form, a banal and fugitive unit between backs and breasts, in the jostle of a boulevard, delighted him. He bore his soul like an interior fire, which no order of precious stones, no embroidered torsade, no visible sign at all, had any need to symbolize externally.

The cold air touched his forehead deliciously, the formidable odor of life teased his entire being. Within himself, the decision of omnipotence that he had just announced bounded like a magical secret; his lips, previously open to the flow of his great sovereign voice, were now closed upon *the word*, but his mind was growling. "War! War!" it murmured, as he brushed past laughing women and elegant groups, and the sentiment of everything that that single word could do made his heart expand gloriously.

He walked firmly, without anyone paying any heed to him. He glanced mechanically at his hands, and the idea that those two white patches, similar in that night to a hundred thousand other white patches, would set a world in motion tomorrow, penetrated him with obscure thoughts about the nullity of the body before the moral will. He sensed that he was very much a modern man, living only by the brain and renouncing any decorative gesture, any uselessly theatrical custom, the black intercessor of the destinies of a crowd that his gaze alone was sufficient to dazzle.

At one moment, he experienced the need to communicate even more closely with those existences that the force of circumstance confided to him, and, in a corner of the noisiest terrace he could discover, he sat down calmly, and ordered a drink. Without him paying any attention to them, his fingers sketched a map of Asia on the table, and he could not help smiling at that image, studied so many times for months. Those few hasty lineaments were the writing of the entire future. He thought about the new race, about himself, absorbed.

Suddenly, though, an immense rumor caused him to raise his head. Shrill clamors rose up, men brandishing telegrams and newspapers with enormous headlines, still damp, were running along the boulevards. Everyone stood up, jostling one another.

"War against the Orient!"

"Vote of the great Federal Council!"

"The dictator's speech!"

"War!"

"The yellow peril!"

The cries succeeded one another frenetically, from one end of the street to the other the conflagration radiated in outbursts of howls and appeals. Clusters of men climbed on to tables, multicolored pieces of paper flew over heads at the end of gripping hands. Women in ball dresses threw themselves into the middle of the crowd in order to find out more, asking questions at the top of their voice in the tumult.

The storm of anxieties swirled in the illuminated night.

"War declared!"

"The Council has voted!"

Passengers leapt out of vehicles; the bearers of news struggled in seething groups, songs burst forth, soon broken off by the exasperated clamor of a furious human tide, which disgorged thousand of haggard faces everywhere.

Claude Laigle stood up, threw down a coin at random, slipped into obscurity and reached less populous streets. But the mad and delirious acclamation echoed in his ears: "War! War!"

"Yes, yes, war" he repeated to himself. "It's necessary; they know everything; I've finally unleashed everything."

The flamboyance of pride and resolution invaded his thoughts, which he had wanted to be calm. He turned up the collar of his coat, and lowered his head, fearing that he might be recognized, and marched toward the quais, where a relative solitude reigned. He leaned over the parapets to consider the long trails

of blood, lunar steel and gold with which the reflections of street lights broke the black water—and it appeared to him that everything was ornamented by glory and sumptuousness beneath the enigmatic face of the nocturnal sky.

Behind him, however, the cry was running like a fantastic wild beast, devouring the city.

“War! War!”

Tomorrow, the monster would devour convulsed Europe, would raise its glittering cry over the entire world.

“Yes, war,” the dictator repeated, pensively. He pronounced the word very quietly, against the placid trees. And, a thin, indistinct silhouette, the little shadows of which vacillated on the ground behind him, he came back along the quais toward the bleak Palais, and rang the bell at a secret door. And the dry click of the batten closing behind the master leapt into his thoughts with the echo of the eternal cry of death.