

THE OLOTELEPAN

I

Naturalists tell us that the eyes of certain animals, particularly ruminants, possess a vision that magnifies things considerably.

It is that perception, on a multiple scale, that earns humankind its sovereignty. That reign by optics is one of the most admirable foresights of the harmonist of worlds. It is also that visual exaggeration that cattle must enjoy, to the point of the total stupefaction, in watching trains go past, magnified for them to the measure of enormous mountains in motion.

Similarly, but evidently for different reasons, railways exercise an irresistible attraction upon rustics. For country folk, the railway station is the geographical point at which worldly vitality increases in inverse proportion to its ferrovial importance. Watching an arrival or departure at a small station is a kind of travel without opening a purse and with no risk of accidents—a double advantage infinitely appreciated by provincials, who are glad to live for a long time, subordinating their needs without weakness to means that they are reluctant to augment by any excess of activity, or by putting into practice methods whose modernism would risk disturbing the serenity of the hours.

The platforms of small stations dispute with the church and funeral processions the birth and development of defamatory comments; on their gravel, local affairs of money and the heart are willingly treated. Nevertheless, a man who wants to give himself the illusion of being popular must arrange to disembark in the afternoon, for in the morning—save for Sundays and feast days—one finds no one in small stations except the station-master, the porter and the dispatch-carrier, a trio sometimes augmented by rare passengers and people who have come to welcome someone disembarking.

On one already-warm morning of the present summer, a few minutes before seven o'clock, on one of the two platforms of the minuscule station of Brugnolles-en-Périgord, the habitual trio was awaiting the Paris train.

The station-master, Monsieur Bignoudel, buttoned up in his black frock-coat ornamented with the same gold as his cap, was holding under his arm the red flag of his pacific command. The porter, Ernest, was afloat in his short jacket, while Babolard, his dispatch-bag thrown over his shoulder like an empty water-skin, proclaimed the sumptuary independence of his functions by the slovenliness of his costume.

“Look! Monsieur Gigolus is coming down from Le Sardinas,” revealed Ernest, aiming his service papers, rolled up like a telescope, at the hill that loomed up in a steep slope facing the station.

“Yes, that’s Monsieur Gigolus,” approved Bignoudel. “Go tell him to hurry, Ernest...he’s going to miss the train.”

“When will the Companies decide to put olootelepan in the stations and on the trains?” Babolard exclaimed, with a shrug of the shoulders that caused his dispatch-bag to slip down over his short sleeve.

“You don’t think we have enough with the telegraph and the telephone!” said Bignoudel indignantly. “With the olootelepan we’d have inspectors on our back night and day!”

“But you’d never have accidents!” added Babolard.

“Accidents! Accidents!” muttered Bignoudel, scornfully. “Have you ever seen one?”

“No, but...,” Babolard exclaimed

“Me neither! And I was born on an express between Orléans and Paris, in a third-class compartment.” As if making a grave decision, he went on: “Listen to me, Babolard: when you read the story in a newspaper of an accident on a French railway, you can rub your hands...”

“Rub my hands? Why?” queried Babolard.

“Because dollars will flow—dollars, which is to say, gold, and best of all, American gold. I’ll wager, Babolard, that you’ve never wondered how the Americans resemble the French. Well, it’s because, like

us, they cling enormously to their habits. You know—or, if you don't know, you ought to know—that there aren't as many Americans in France as there are in America. There are, however, a certain number, and what's even better, of both sexes—all billionaires, of course. After a certain time resident among us, the Americans are gripped by a kind of homesickness, and they set about traveling night and day in our trains. They travel thousands and thousands of our kilometers. You can guess why, can't you, Babolard?"

"No," Babolard replied, without shame.

"It's quite simple; it's as disagreeable to an American, who is used to having accidents, not to have any, as it is to us, who are used to not having any, to have one."

"You think that Americans like railway accidents then?"

"They're crazy about hem! For them it's a need, like alcohol, amour and tobacco. Can you imagine that in America, a journey without an accident is an event, reported in the newspapers? There's a club in New York whose members have to have suffered at least one derailment or telescopage."

All the same, Monsieur Bignoudel, you're not going to tell me that accidents happen in France to please Americans!" Babolard exclaimed.

"Yes, I am telling you that, Babolard. I'm telling you that because it's the truth, and a truth that isn't spoken isn't the truth. The government, which holds the pans of the economic balance, doesn't take stupidity so far as not to do its best to conserve its rich clientele in France. That clientele likes railway accidents, so it gives them accidents. That's it. It costs a few dead and wounded, and some material damage, but what's that by comparison with the dollars that the Americans send here?"

"You're asking me to believe that the Companies make accidents happen deliberately? You're exaggerating!" said Babolard, hoisting his bag back on to his shoulder.

"No, I'm not exaggerating! The accident bureau is an organization that functions at the headquarters of every Company without the public suspecting it. The public knows nothing. Nor do you. Fortunately, our superiors are enlightened patriots. They know that the public good is the outcome of annoyances and sacrifices suffered by individuals. So I, who am speaking to you, was nearly sacked fifteen years ago for having involuntarily foiled, near Limoges, an accident that the United States ambassador had obtained from the Ministry at the request of the fountain pen king of Chicago.

"Progress has been made since then! Thus, I learned a few days ago that a project is on the drawing-board that will transform one in three pleasure trains into an accident train. It's a good idea, but I fear that our engineers might not be able to bring it to fruition. Obviously they lack the means to bring about the several catastrophes per day standard in the United States, where everything is disproportionately grandiose: distance in proportion to speed, the length of trains in proportion to that of platforms, the load on works of art in proportion to their solidity, the audacity of slopes, the unexpectedness of bends, etc., etc. It's only the democratic liberty of signals and points that maintains us in a state of pitiful inferiority. But the Americans are reasonable people who don't demand the impossible. With three or four accidents per day per network, I think we can render the territory of the Republic almost habitable for them, for a determined time."

"But here's Monsieur Gigolus," said Babolard, adding, in a vexed tone: "He knows more than you, even about railway accidents."

At the very end of the platform, Ernest reappeared, in company with Monsieur Gigolus, to whom he had run on his superior's orders; but as the train was not yet in sight, the two men were advancing unhurriedly.

Imitated by Babolard, Bignoudel took a few steps and, saluting with his flag, uttered a deferential "Bonjour, Monsieur Gigolus!" which Babolard repeated, shifting his bag from one shoulder to the other.

The newcomer responded with a "Bonjour, Messieurs!" full of cordiality, which he followed up with questions to which Bignoudel replied with apologies.

"You're right, Monsieur Gigolus; the Paris train always arrives late—it comes from so far away! It's necessary not to put too much faith that, however—the day when one least expects it, it arrives on time, and then one misses it. But since you're not taking it and have simply come to meet a passenger, you're not taking any risk..."

“Thank you, all the same, for sending Ernest to meet me,” Monsieur Gigolus replied, adding for the benefit of his three interlocutors: “You’re going to see someone getting off the train that you don’t know: Horace Gourdebec!”

“The new Maréchal?” Ernest put in, pale with emotion.

“In person! My old comrade Horace Gourdebec,” Monsieur Gigolus added.

“His picture is in the papers!” Ernest exclaimed, unfolding a newspaper taken from one of his jacket pockets. And he pointed proudly to a picture on the first page of a man, with a four-line caption:

*A Great Frenchman
Horace Gourdebec
Maréchal de France, Inspector General
of Military Health Services in France and Abroad*

“It’s a good resemblance,” Monsieur Gigolus conceded. “A little old, but he’s been in Morocco for fifteen years...!”

“And a prisoner!” added Ernest.

Bignouel described whirls of honor with his flag and said, in a changed voice: “Light the lanterns, Ernest—all of them, quickly!”

“But it’s day-time, chief!” Ernest protested.

“If it were night-time, the lanterns wouldn’t have any honorific value. Haven’t you ever been to a great burial? And you’re not disputing my orders at a time like this?”

“Oh, no chief! On the contrary,” Ernest stammered.

“In the name of Horace Gourdebec, and my own, I thank you, Monsieur Bignouel, but believe me, there’s no need—no need at all,” Gigolus intervened. “Horace Gourdebec is coming here incognito, as a friend. You’ll embarrass him, I assure you.”

“You’re right, Monsieur Gigolus” said Babolard, supportively, delighted to contradict Bignouel, whom he teased: “What color would the crepes of your lanterns have been?”

Joyous whistles announced the train, which was grinding to a halt with a screech of abruptly-applied brakes.

Bignouel uttered a stifled cry, waving his flag above his head.

“Ernest! The disk! The disk!”

“It’s open, chief! Look, it’s open!”

A hundred meters away, the locomotive launched lugubrious appeals with its siren.

“What’s happening?” said Bignouel, anxiously. “Ernest, go and see.”

“Perhaps it’s an accident,” observed Babolard, maliciously. “It’s necessary to please the Americans.”

Ernest came back from his mission at a run and explained that the driver had mistaken the disorderly movements of Bignouel’s flag as an imperative signal so stop instantly.

“The imbecile!” muttered the latter, giving the train the order to proceed by waving his cap.

Protocol has its necessities. Service has its own. In haste, Bignouel handed the train conductor the route papers, Ernest took charge of a parcel, and Babolard, with a single movement, exchanged his empty bag for a full one at the post-wagon—after which all three ran, bare-headed, to surround the Maréchal and Gigolus, who were embracing in accordance with the rites of old friendship.

“He isn’t in uniform!” observed Ernest, pulling a face.

“Monsieur le Maréchal,” Bignouel pronounced, slowly, “I have the honor...”

“Me too!” added Babolard, obsequiously.

Gigolus introduced them: “My friends, Messieurs Bignouel, Ernest and Babolard.”

“Delighted, Messieurs,” said Gourdebec, bowing and extending his hand to the three individuals in order of their introduction.

“Chief, the train...” whispered Ernest, pulling the tail of Bignouel’s frock-coat.

“What train?”

“The Paris train...there isn’t any other,” Ernest pointed out.

“Oh yes!” Bignoudel exploded, running toward the conductor, who was leaning out of his wagon toward the spectacle before his eyes. “Do you want to sleep here? What are you waiting for?”

“The whistle!” the conductor replied.

“Didn’t you hear it?”

“No, since you haven’t blown it,” the conductor riposted, placidly.

“I whistled, I tell you!” Then, after searching his pockets: “Ernest, go fetch my whistle—it must be on the table in my office.”

“Don’t bother. Since you tell me I can go, I’ll blow.”

The conductor drew from his trumpet the screech for which the driver was waiting before setting the train in motion, and Bignoudel rejoined the friendly group formed by Horace Gourdebec, Gigolus, Ernest and Babolard.

“Excuse me, Monsieur le Maréchal; that train’s capable of staying here all day...”

“If it will you give you pleasure!” granted Horace Gourdebec, smiling.

“I’ll take your case up to Le Sardinas,” Babolard offered.

“You don’t have a wheelbarrow,” Ernest objected.

“The Company wheelbarrow is at Monsieur le Maréchal’s disposal,” Bignoudel put in. “Ernest and Babolard can push it, and I’ll escort you as far as Le Sardinas. What a pity we weren’t notified in advance; we could have set up the little triumphal arch used for Company centenaries, and the whole population would be at the station.”

“Thank you with all my heart, but I’ve simply come as Monsieur Gigolus’ friend. As for my suitcase, it’s very light; I’ll carry it myself. It’s good for my health, you know. Thank you and *au revoir*, Messieurs.”

And side by side, Gigolus and Horace Gourdebec left the trio on the platform, watching them draw away.

II

As soon as Gigolus estimated that the distance they had covered was sufficient not to be overheard, he said the Gourdebec: “Now you can tell me how a painter like you has become Maréchal of military medicine.”

“You haven’t been reading the newspapers recently?”

“Oh, yes. All of them, since they’ve been talking about you.”

“Well, you know as much as I do. Fifteen years ago last week, I was captured, paintbrush in hand, by the celebrated Moroccan chief Mohammed. I never found out why Mohammed thought that I was a doctor. At any rate, that idea saved me from having my head cut off, as was done to all the officers, sergeants, corporals and soldiers composing the column I’d followed into the foothills of the Atlas for love of painting on location. Mohammed enjoined me to take charge of his health, while he had me kept under close guard. For fifteen years my success was as unexpected as it was complete with regard to that client, whose constitution was beyond compare; then, a month ago, he fell ill. My medical science was caught very short, as you can imagine, so I persuaded Mohammed that only the surgeons of Paris could save him. I convinced him to surrender. But why is your watch chiming all the time?”

“It’s some tiresome person. Go on!”

“He sent me to Rabat to negotiate the terms. It was soon settled. I went back to fetch Mohammed in the airplane that transported us to Paris last week. After multiple and solemn consultations, my Moroccan had to submit, from yesterday onwards, to a series of operations constraining him to remain in absolute isolation at the Val-de-Grâce, which permitted me to come to see you without any drums and trumpets. Your watch is still chiming, Félix...”

“Don’t worry about it. Go on!”

“Mohammed was quite content with his surrender. The French government, being even more so, decided to grant the old chief anything he asked for. Mohammed took it into his head to demand on my behalf the creation of a rank that made me superior to all the French military physicians, fortunately only

those abroad. I've tried to make Mohammed understand that, as a painter, a place at the Beaux-Arts would suit me better, but he only ever wanted to believe that, having cared for him efficaciously for fifteen years, I was not only a doctor, but the greatest doctor on Earth. His thoroughly Moroccan stubbornness—you're not unaware that Morocco is the Brittany of Africa—overcame all resistance. And that's how your old comrade Horace Gourdebec, landscape painter, became a Maréchal de France. I'll tell you about my incredible adventure in more detail when you've told me how you, the Parisian novelist *par excellence*, have become a country-dweller. Félix, your watch is still chiming."

"My novels have never been as Parisian since I started to write them here!" said Gigolus, joyfully, taking his watch out of his fob pocket—a seemingly ordinary gold watch—and, holding it in his left hand, said in an impatient tone: "What do you want, Dame Marthe?"

A dialogue was engaged between that interlocutrice, invisible to Gourdebec, who could only hear Gigolus' replies.

"Yes, he's arrived!... Tea?... Chocolate?... A bath?... Wait."

He turned to Gourdebec. "My housekeeper wants to know whether you want to take a bath, with tea or chocolate?"

"A bath with tea, if it's no trouble!" Gourdebec opined.

"Absolutely none!" Gigolus affirmed, resuming his dialogue: "A bath with tea... Perfect... Yes... No! And now, Dame Marthe, leave me in peace!"

Gigolus put the watch back in his pocket.

"Wireless telephones have made progress!" said Horace Gourdebec, admiringly.

"Oh, my dear chap, it's far from being a telephone, with or without wires. There's as much difference between the airplane and a camel as there is between the telephone and the olotelepan..."

"I heard that word for the first time yesterday morning. The President of the Republic mentioned it to me as he handed me the short baton encrusted with gold and jewels, along with the sash of the Légion d'honneur and the military medal—the olotelepan of great dignitaries. I thought that was what the maréchal's baton was called. I put it under my arm, and then in my case, so that you could admire it."

"Oh, that's droll, my brave Horace. Fifteen years ago there were no olotelepan, or new Maréchals. How far behind the times you are!"

"Captivity doesn't form youth. But what is an olotelepan?"

"It's an apparatus that instantaneously transports the senses to indefinite distances, without any wires. You heard it ring several times; you thought it was my watch, but it was my olotelepan. It's the latest model!" Gigolus took from his pocket the object that he had held in his hand during his conversation with Dame Marthe. "Nothing bears a closer resemblance to a watch, but it's not a watch; it's an olotelepan. I can't explain the scientific theory, because I'm not very good at physics, but I can tell you how to make use of it. The first condition is to be in contact..."

Gigolus put the olotelepan into Gourdebec's free hand.

"Put down your suitcase. Each of these buttons that stick out round the rim is marked with a number between one to ten, by means of which one can compose the numbers that one checks on this display, as large as you like. It's sufficient to press with the fingertips, as if it were a keyboard. There's no need to have learned to play the piano or to type. Look, I have the number 0-95-136-842. Here!"

Gigolus squeezed the olotelepan, which rested on Gourdebec's open palm, with his fingertips. The latter was greeted with a reverential "Monsieur le Maréchal" by a stout brunette woman of precanonical appearance, supervising the equilibrium of a teapot and its accessories installed on the edge of a tray that she was holding in both hands.

"Mademoiselle Marthe Vipère, my general housekeeper," Gigolus introduced her, keeping a finger on the olotelepan.

"Mademoiselle!" replied Gourdebec, taking off his hat.

"Monsieur le Maréchal's bath is ready," Marthe added, placing the tray on a little lacquer table in harmony with the whiteness of a bathtub from which vapor was rising, testifying to the warmth of its contents.

“Thank you, Mademoiselle, thank you,” stammered Gourdebec, collapsing on to his suitcase in surprise.

“And now to Le Sardinas!” cried Gigolus, putting his olotelepan back in his pocket and picking up Gourdebec’s suitcase, after helping him to stand up again. “If you’d had an olotelepan in your Atlas, we wouldn’t have been separated for a minute...”

“That’s extraordinary! Extraordinary!” Gourdebec repeated, putting his finger to his eyes and then his ears, to convince himself of the persistence of their real existence.

“No, old chap, it’s not extraordinary. It’s a matter of getting used to it. You’ll get the hang of it very quickly. I can assure you that it’s no meager pleasure to be able to live in several places at the same time. The olotelepan has given people the gift of ubiquity mistakenly reserved to God, like many other exclusivities. Oh yes, the Earth would rapidly reach its goal, which is to fuse with Paradise, if humankind would consent not to want to devote the best of its efforts to Hell! Let’s leave it there...my house is behind those trees...” Gigolus indicated the direction, and turned into a path carpeted with moss.

Two or three hundred meters away, in a sub-bathed clearing, a two-story house appeared, seemingly carved out of the ivy that inhabited the walls all the way to the red-tiled roof.

Dame Marthe came out to receive Horace Gourdebec’s suitcase from her master’s hands.