

## BAAL, OR THE PASSIONATE SORCERESS

### I. TSADÉ<sup>1</sup>

No! No one has ever seen, and perhaps ever will see, the prodigious metapsychical, hyperphysical and panpsychical experiments that I have been able to witness, and in which I have participated. On several occasions, they have given me a thrill that no human event, even if it were as vast as a continent, as disastrous as a war, as tragic as...but any comparison would be vain. What I have seen, mark my words, is beyond all...

I have been in contact with beings from worlds transcending ours. The realities that have overcome me do not originate from any terrestrial logic or reasoning. They were...they were...

I was then the secretary of the beautiful and strange seeress who called herself Madame Palmyre. She lived near the Étoile in Paris, in a huge apartment extended through three buildings, on two floors of each of them.

One day, when I was in the personal service of Tony Dreyse, the banker, I had expressed my boredom with his invoices, his bonds, his share prices, his brokerage, and, above all, the invincible stupidity of his clientele, to whom I had to feed financial claptrap on daily basis. Dreyse said to me: "Well then, I'll use Marthe Knoberg, whom you've trained so admirably—I say that without any malice—and you'll be able to try another profession. Here!—Palmyre needs a secretary. Go to her!"

I knew Palmyre—a personal friend of Tony Dreyse's—and I went to see her.

She was an extraordinary woman, not easily comprehensible, full of secrets and strange vices. She knew the entire planet, had bewildering physical and psychic powers at her disposal, and concealed imperial ambitions—and she was beautiful too, proudly wearing a Greek mask, svelte, firm, despotic and endowed with a fascinating ubiquity.

She ruled, with a rod of iron, a clientele of politicians, bankers, writers, ponderous and skeptical men, who buckled before her like reeds. All the women of the theater, wealth and fashionable society had had recourse to Palmyre, once or a hundred times over. She had abused them and treated them harshly, but even the most spiteful nevertheless spoke of her tenderly—and the men even more so.

She predicted the most mysterious futures, brought the most hostile lovers together, and *magnetized*, for various and preposterous reasons, pens, pajamas, bracelets, nightshirts, writing-paper, love-poems, armchair or objects too delicate to name...

She taught heirs to cast spells from a distance on relatives overly attached to life, caused people to win on horses or at baccarat, sold love-potions, potions to increase will-power and potions to wreak vengeance, performed black masses and malefic ceremonies of every sort; in sum, she had resuscitated all of medieval magic.

She made a lot of money, demanding ten thousand francs for a five-minute consultation and veritable fortunes for all the amorous sorceries in which she excelled. No one ever refused them.

I did not believe in any of the secrets of occultism in which Palmyre traded. All that nonsense delighted me nevertheless, as evidence of public credulity. I only admitted that the witch's correspondence was very flavorsome. A psychologist would have discovered treasures therein; for a sorceress's male and female clients never lie. All the same, I was often astonished that Palmyre's predictions were so accurate. Hazard is not so exact...

Also, I marveled at the fact that she was able to achieve everything she attempted. She reunited separated lovers, ensured vengeance, brought complex projects to a conclusion—in sum, seemed as skillful and as much a mistress of her activity *as if were really true*.

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<sup>1</sup> I have retained Dunan's idiosyncratic spellings of her four section-headings, all of which are letters of various Semitic alphabets, whose alternative spellings vary considerably from one language to another, and in different reference-books. Tsadé is the eighteenth letter of the alphabets in question, Iod the tenth, Samech the fifteenth and Beth the second; they correspond approximately to the letters Z, I, S and B. They are presumably employed here in order to imply some Kabbalistic significance, perhaps to represent the four levels of engagement described in the *Zo'har* (direct, allegorical, inquisitive and mystery), although the four letters conventionally used to designate those modes are P, R, D and S.

One day, shortly after noon, we were conversing in one of the private rooms. I gathered that she was not feeling well, and her obsidian eyes seemed to be resorbing the light. Her thin red mouth was smiling with a kind of malignity.

“Renée,” she said to me, “we’re in danger.”

I looked at her, with a powerful urge to laugh. “Of course. The whole world is in danger of earthquakes, like the one in Japan.”

She shook her head slowly. “I’m not talking about natural hazards, Renée—I mean that there’s an external, unknown will that is directed against me, and which might do a great deal of harm.”

I assumed an ingenuous expression. “You have too much business sense not to have taken precautions.”

“Precautions! What precautions?”

“Against danger, naturally. I don’t see that the gentlemen of the Lady with the Scales...”

She looked at me in astonishment. “What are you talking about, child?”

“The Pointed Tower,<sup>2</sup> of course.”

“Oh! You were able to think that I was worried about those individuals. In truth, Renée, you think like a child. What do judges and jurists matter to me? They’re in the palm of my hand—like this!”

She made a fist, extending her thumb and little finger, and laughed.

“I don’t understand the danger, then.”

“You haven’t been targeted, Renée—at least, I don’t think so—but I...”

“Targeted by whom, pray? It’s as if we were speaking two different languages.”

She got up, took three indolent steps across the room, and threw up her bare arms and slender hands toward the ceiling. I saw the swollen hollows of her shaved armpits, and the creases of the long black satin sheath-dress she was wearing were accentuated all the way to the groin.

She came back to me. “There’s a force, Renée, an Occult Force, perhaps familiar, that has become hostile to me...very!”

“An occult force? My word! I must tell you that I don’t know about that. Since I’ve been here, I’ve seen many things, but occult forces...”

“Come on, Renée—did you think that I don’t know anything about the profession I practice?”

“All things considered, I consider the profession as an astonishing farce...that you have, however, brought to a prodigious degree of perfection.”

“But it exists, my child!”

“What exists?”

“What I say and do...”

“No, I pray you, don’t take me for a potential client for cartomancy. When you asked Lucette de Lantz, the dancer, for three thousand francs to magnetize the writing-paper on which she wrote to the lover she wanted to get rid of, you expected me to swallow...the writing-pad in question was one I bought in a sale at the Louvre. Come on!”

Palmyre laughed. She sat down and crossed her legs, then slowly lit a cigarette. I could see her thin ankles and the plane of the tibia, to which her black silk stockings were clinging.

Finally, she said. You’ve calmed me down by reminding me about Lantz. Yes, that’s a trick, the business with the magnetic paper...”

“And the talisman on virgin parchment that you sold for twelve hundred francs to the senator, Paul Maysonnés?”

“Oh! That, Renée, is another matter...”

“And the dagger—or stiletto, rather—to kill Giovan Balassio, the rich Sicilian merchant by plunging it into the heart of a wax statuette?”

“But you know perfectly well, child, that it worked.”

“Oh, he was undoubtedly ill. He died. Agreed—but the stiletto had nothing to do with it.”

Palmyre stood up again and went to root about in a cup for a sort of curved triangular needle.

“Put your hand on your knee, Renée.”

She sat down a short distance away, holding the needle between her thumb and middle finger, point down.

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<sup>2</sup> *La Tour pointue*, nickname of the *Police Judiciaire*, located at 36 Quai des Orfèvres in Paris.

“Well?”

“Your hand is four meters from the needle, isn’t it, Renée?”

“Approximately. Do we need to measure?”

“Shut up, or I’ll...look! As I lower the needle, it will pass through your hand. Do you feel it?”

“My word—yes!”

“And what else?”

“Why, it’s bleeding!”

“And?”

“Oh—but that’s really hurting!”

“Good! Would you like me take hold of you by the nose without coming any closer?”

“No thanks!”

“Are you convinced?”

“Hmm!”

“Oh, you’re a stubborn denier. If I were malicious, I’d convince you well enough. Do you see that incense-burner with the birds?”

It was a block of carved hollow bronze, extraordinarily beautiful. Palmyre raised both her middle fingers, simultaneously, toward the incense-burner.

The heavy bronze rose up from the sideboard and floated in mid-air.

“I’ll put it on your head!”

It came to rest against my forehead.

“I’ll send it outside...”

The door opened then, with a brutal click, and the incense-burner went out, floating a meter above the ground. I sat there, horrified.

“Oh! Right!”

“You’re beginning to marvel, my child. Come on to the balcony; I’ll do something remarkable to teach you...”

We went through the fencing studio filled with Japanese sabers, and the print studio, where admirable occult designs and the prodigious canvases of Odilon Redon were on display.

In the third room, which was almost bare, with only an ebony chair in the middle, there was a vast bay instead of a window, which Palmyre opened. We were at the corner of the Avenue Victor Hugo.

“Do you want us to make that woman who’s doing what we’re doing, over there, fall from her balcony?” Palmyre said to me.

“Make her fall from her balcony? I don’t understand.”

“Look, Renée,” she said—and suddenly began addressing me in the familiar mode, “you’re going to understand. Stand aside—and look down there!”

I moved to the right after seeing Palmyre sit down on the ebony chair, from which she could see the minuscule form of a woman in pink occupied in watching the passers-by. We were at least a hundred and fifty meters away. I could no longer see the witch, but my heart suddenly leapt in my breast, and an unknown emotion shook me from head to toe.

Within two seconds, without anything to indicate how it had happened, I saw the decorative wrought iron of the distant balcony crumble like plaster. The woman in pink seemed to vanish, but I suddenly rediscovered her whirling downwards, falling...falling...

I thought I could hear within me the imperceptible impact of that human body crashing into the ground. And almost immediately, as I was leaning against the wall, Palmyre’s balcony, less than a meter in front of me, cracked.

The echo resounded like a hammer-blow among the metal ornaments. At the same instant, Palmyre emerged and took me by the arm.

“Come!”

I went back into the room with the ebony chair. We went back through the studios, and, two minutes later, we were in the armchairs where the conversation had begun. Palmyre was incredibly pale.

“Do you believe, Renée?” She always used the intimate form of address in moments of excitement.

“Believe! What?”

“That I have powers at my disposal...mighty ones.”

"It seems to me, indeed..."

"Well, I told you at the outset that there's a contrary force targeting me."

"Human?"

"I hope so—but I don't know yet."

"What does this force want with you? Are there conscious forces outside the world, then?"

"I don't know whether they're conscious, but yes, they act as if they have our kind of consciousness."

"There are, according to you, several types of consciousness?"

"Of course! Consciousness is the perception of a difference between object and subject, between perceived matter and the observer. There are as many consciousnesses as there are possible relationships between being and non-being, which might itself be the being of a sub-non-being, as the absolute is the perfection of a mode of relativity..."

"You're a metaphysician worthy of that Hedwige, who once shut Casanova's trap in Geneva,<sup>3</sup> even though he was an expert debater—which is to say, an Italian."

She laughed ambiguously. "It's impossible for you to be serious, Renée!"

"Listen, I already know you as a prodigious businesswoman. You suddenly reveal yourself to be a philosopher, a female fakir, a sorceress—that bewilders me, and as Père Hugo said, in bewilderment, there's laughter..."

"You shouldn't joke, Renée. There's an unknown force against me. It's not very active, but it's dangerous, and you might fall victim to it—for, participating in the life of the beyond by virtue of all my operations, I'm within range of the mysterious enemy, and you live so close to the sun..."

"Really?"

"But you've just seen it. My action, in breaking the guard-rail of the woman in pink's balcony over there, was immediately followed by a reaction that broke mine. If you had been leaning on it, you would have plunged down, six floors. Mere pulp, my poor Renée!"

"You want me to believe that at the moment when you murdered the woman in pink..."

She isn't dead, and won't die."

"You know that?"

"Yes. She fell on to the awning of a café."

"You want me I believe that, at that exact moment, someone tried to play the same trick on us? That's like something from a feuilleton novel..."

"Child! I'm the one who destroyed my own balcony. That's how enemies in the occult world operate. They reflect dangerous influences back on the person who sends them. With a certain degree of mental leverage on another mind, one can even contrive that malign wishes, evil intentions and ungenerous desires fall back on the person who gave birth to them. Thus, she tortures herself by wishing ill upon others."

"That doesn't seem to me to be unjust..."

"Oh, Renée, 'justice' is something that demands precautions before the word's pronunciation..."

"But in any case, a person who only has good wishes for all around her does not run into the danger that is threatening you?"

"Good! *Good!* Who knows what that is? There may be evil moralized, but good, never. It engenders pride, and pride is perhaps the worst of all moral evils. Pride tends to become action—which is to say, domination; which is to say, calamity. It is the most beautiful, the heaviest and the most colorful part of good that is evil."

"Evil is good, then?" I murmured.

"Sometimes, Renée. In evil, there is a saving humility. Villon is very righteous, and Baudelaire is a saint!"

I mulled over that Manichean doctrine confusedly. Palmyre, her head tilted back, sphinx-like and voluptuous, watched me through half-closed eyelids. Her mouth curled into an unidentifiable expression: a smile, a threat, an appeal, an invocation or a curse.

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<sup>3</sup> Casanova's memoirs record that in 1762 he had a brief affair with Hedwige, the daughter of a Protestant minister, while he was posing as an occultist in order to extract money from Madame d'Urfé—a scheme that allegedly went awry because his confederate, Marianne Corticelli, sold him out, forcing him to leave Geneva in a hurry.

I left that ethical terrain replete with potholes. “What about your enemy?”

“I don’t think he hopes to moralize me by threats, for I’m not at all docile.”

“What, then?”

“There will be a fight. I have my moments of weakness, but you’ve reinvigorated me. Nevertheless you ought not to be unaware of the danger.”

“I believe that I’ve proved—again—that fear and I never share the same bed.”

“You talk well! We’ll give the finger to the hostile entity. If it’s another sorcerer, let him beware! If it’s a being or a force from beyond, I’ll devise traps—and the Triple Hecate”—she laughed—“will serve me.”<sup>4</sup>

“The famous female toad of the Eleusinians?”

“Oh, you know that, Yes, she’s the Astarte of the initiates of old, the daughter and enemy of Baal.”

The doorbell of the apartment sounded its discordant and fluid notes.

“Let’s not lose sight of the clientele, Renée. Come with me, and always remain to the visitor’s left.”

It was a gracious woman, young and irrational, who had come to seek Palmyre’s help. Her lover, after having shown her unequivocal signs of love for three months, had already shown slight signs of coldness; now he was utterly icy. She wanted a talisman to bring him back and to ensure that he would never leave her.

Palmyre listened patiently to the young woman’s tangled explanations. In a voice that appeared to disconcert her clients, so cold and indifferent was it, she said: “Give me your hand.”

The woman extended her right hand.

“The left!”

Palmyre affected scorn. She darted a malevolent glance at the interlacing lines covering the smooth and perfumed palm; then, extending her arm nonchalantly to reach behind her, she picked up a little triangular dagger, extremely slender with a needle-sharp point. She followed the lines with the point.

“Parallelism here, rupture there, the two lines confused. An accident here, two or three months...”

The young woman, whose hand was trembling under the contact of the sharpened steel manipulated by the witch, seemingly inattentively, started in approving astonishment. “An automobile accident.”

Sharply, Palmyre commanded: “Keep your hand still, I beg you. This dagger is poisoned, and you’ll hurt yourself.”

Petrified, the client turned the color of old wax, her nostrils fluttering.

Then Palmyre got up, threw the dagger forwards, over the head of the terrified young woman, and when it fixed itself in a block of wood with a biting sound, she said, authoritatively: “Two thousand francs. Within five days he’ll be your lover again. Four thousand, and I’ll assure you four years of love, during which he’ll be impotent with any other woman than you.” She signaled to me to come with her. “In two minutes, Madame, a servant will come to bring you to the laboratory, where we shall do what is necessary.”

We went out. As soon as we were outside, Palmyre burst out laughing. “What a hold one has over them, eh, the clients? She’ll go ahead, and we’ll perform a little mechanical magic. You’ll see things you haven’t seen before, Renée.”

We waited for three minutes in what Palmyre called “the laboratory.” It was pentagonal, oak-paneled all the way to the ceiling, with five chairs made of different woods and various strange objects

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<sup>4</sup> The phrase “triple Hecate,” popularized by Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, recognizes that the original Thracian deity—who probably was featured in various mystic rites, though not as a toad—was fused with other Greco-Roman goddesses, becoming identified with the earthy Artemis/Diana, the lunar Selene/Phoebe and the Queen of the Underworld, Persephone/Proserpine. Hesiod identifies her as a daughter of Zeus and benevolent goddess, but her name became associated with witchcraft in Greek and Roman literature, perhaps by virtue of confusion with another mythical individual of the same name, the daughter of Perses, who was a notorious magician and poisoner. Shakespeare (who might, unlike Palmyre, have been able to distinguish the two) refers to the other Hecate as “pale Hecate” in *Macbeth*, representing her as the patroness of sorceresses.

that might have been a physicist's machines. The servant bought the four thousand francs, which Palmyre put into her pocket, and the client was introduced.

The witch made a sign bidding her to sit on a rosewood chair, then looked her in the face as she drew nearer to her, with a kind of fascinator authority.

"Do you want to see your friend?"

"Yes." She spoke with a fearful and sensual timidity.

"Look!"

Palmyre's hand—closed, save for the raised index finger, which bore a ring with a black pearl—described a rapid gesture in the air. It was a closed elliptical curve, inclined at forty-five degrees to the floor. The gaze of the amorous young woman plunged directly into it.

Suddenly, to my infinite amazement, the oval seemed to fill with darkness. The air within it condensed into a dense opaque mass; one might have thought that it was a liquid dancing in a shaken vase. At first, the liquid was dark in color; it brightened, becoming paler, and seemed to solidify under a strange silver light and finally settled into immobility, flat and profound.

It was a mirror.

Forms were born in the mirror: a bachelor apartment, with hunting prints on the walls, divans laden with cushions in pastel colors, and feminine lingerie thrown negligently over a blue footstool.

A man came in, tall, slim and smiling. He was clad to the waist in pink pajama trousers, with a naked torso. He sat down and lit a cigarette.

"It's him," said the young woman, with a lascivious terror. One might have thought that she was about to throw herself at the man with the bare torso, who settled down comfortably among the cushions.

But the scene took on a new aspect. Clad only in flesh-colored stockings, ardent blonde hair and a pearl necklace with three strands, a pretty girl appeared, nimble and benevolent, with a glass in her hand. She drank a dark red liquid, quickly set the glass down, and came to lie down on the divan that was already occupied...

At first, the two lovers played innocent games; then...

The deceived lover was spluttering with fury. She was still immobilized by superstitious dread, but I saw her shaking like a tree in a storm. Doubtless, no woman had ever seen and contemplated the frolics of her own lover with another in that fashion. Thirty seconds passed, slowly; then, becoming incapable of resisting her wrath, the deceived lover got to her feet and rushed at the magic mirror. She plunged her hands into it wildly, as if she intended to avenge herself upon the interlaced couple...

Palmyre stood up, with a cry. Too late! Caught by the mysterious surface that her hands had suddenly disturbed, the young woman seemed to sink into the evocative oval and disappear into it.

What an extraordinary sensation, absurd and yet real, was recorded by my brain, without credence, while my retinas received that testimony. A meter in front of me, an individual quietly vanished. I saw the body disappear; then there as the head, which turned terrified eyes toward me. Eventually, everything evaporated!

Shocked by horror, I perceived, without any doubt, that Palmyre's client had exited our world, our three-dimensional space, our knowable domain...

The mysterious oval, luminescent and agitated, congealed then, and became a bright white color. Nothing any longer survived of the young woman, who had been alive in my presence twenty seconds before.

I looked up. Backed up against the partition wall, Palmyre, arms extended, had a forehead gashed by two vertical wrinkles. I sensed that she was as tense as a bowstring. In a hissing whisper, she said: "Don't move, Renée. Don't move!"

I remained motionless, curious and frightened.

Suddenly, I distinctly saw the face of the visitor reappear in the oval, with enormous round eyes—the eyes of a nocturnal bird of prey. Then it disappeared again, after which a kind of hideous form was generated at the center of the mirror. It stretched itself out there, underwent violent contortions, and then materialized, in five seconds, and fell on to the floor. The mirror had vanished.

I recoiled against the wall, nauseated by terror.

What was there, in front of me? It was impossible to describe precisely. One might have thought that it was a cephalopod; a sort of round and convex body, to which tentacles were attached.

Two reddish eyes with large green corneas were visible in the middle of the body. The tentacles were innumerable. They seemed to be generating and vanishing incessantly. From the center of the body to the periphery the degree of reality tended toward zero. A spindle-shaped gleam was emitted along a line dividing “the thing,” passing between the eyes. One might have thought that a regular spasmodic contraction was tormenting the object, the beast, the being, the body—what name could one give it? At equal intervals, the light faded and then intensified, passing from an unknown color to a degraded and liquid violet, then to a dull and effervescent red. Beneath the form, the carpet began to burn.

In a soft voice, Palmyre said: “Get out, Renée. Go as quickly as you can to the poison room”—that was a room in which one saw, quite frankly, a painting representing Brinvilliers<sup>5</sup> preparing her death-philters—“pick up the glass flask marked *omega* and bring it here...”

The door was to my left. I went out like lightning and ran to get the *omega* flask.

My mind was in a bizarre state. A curious and slightly fearful anxiety was mingled within me with a need to deny everything that I had just seen. To deny in advance, without reflection, in order subsequently to be at ease in an eventual discussion...

I was, however, accustomed to exact studies. If I had chosen to be a witch’s secretary, rather than do something completely different, it is because I love the unexpected and the picturesque. Abel Levystar had often asked me to work for him. The experience I had already had with Dreyse was sufficient for me. Men of finance seem, at a distance, to be practicing an almost metaphysical profession, but fundamentally, it’s grocery. A witch—that’s someone who can add spice to quotidian labor! But with my collection of degrees, in letters, sciences, oriental languages, and so on, I could do anything I pleased. All the same, no matter how accustomed one is only to reasoning, out of respect for one’s own intelligence, according to narrowly realistic principles, must one therefore deny the authentic testimony of the senses if it is too distressing? For those extravagant things, I had seen, seen, seen...

I found the flask. It was half-full of a golden yellow liquid. I grasped its rounded form and returned at a run...

I opened the door...

Where was Palmyre?

A strange scene appeared to me. At the place where the sorceress had been flattened against that wall two minutes earlier, there was no longer anything but a bright violet “aura” outlining the witch’s silhouette. That aura was pulsating like a fearful heart. Violently projected into the middle of the location where Palmyre had been—where perhaps she still was—I saw three tentacles curved in opposite directions, bluish grey in color, departing from the body of the being, the beast, the form born of the mirror, the eyes of which had disappeared.

The tentacles occupied the summits of an inverted isosceles triangle, the base of which was the line connecting the breasts.

I gazed at it stupidly. The carpet was burning with short flames curved toward the door; the form, gathered together and incomprehensible, now resembled a grey-blue spindle whose limiting curves extended beyond the apartment by courtesy of the illegibility of the immediate space.

It was impossible for me to separate the real from the imaginary in the spectacle that I had before me—but was there anything real there, and what imagination was making me see that the beast was *holding* Palmyre?

I took a step forward. My foot extinguished a tongue of fire, and I felt the heat of the slowly-burning carpet rising up beneath my skirt.

I raised the flask. My hand lunged to the vessel by means of a violent inward effort. I lowered my arm. The neck of the flask collided with a pentagonal mahogany table, at the center of which a hypnotic sphere was shining. The neck broke and the liquid spilled out in two spurts, which reminded

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<sup>5</sup> Marie d’Aubray, Marquise de Brinvilliers (1630-1676) was convicted of poisoning her father and two brothers, in association with her lover, in order to obtain their inheritance. The affair caused a flutter of panic that grew into a storm when the fortune-tellers of Paris were rounded up and put to the torture, one of them obliging her tormentors with a highly fanciful tale of murder and black magic, which implicated numerous courtiers, including one of the King’s mistresses, and generated one of the great scandals of the era. Several literary and dramatic works were based on the case, including one by Alexandre Dumas.

me, cruelly, of two jets of blood escaping from the carotid arteries of a decapitated individual. The yellow liquid turned red as it spurted...and suddenly volatilized, expanding in nimbuses of rutilant vapor, with the same odor as nitric acid vapor.

I leapt backwards, sneezing. Nothing in the room had changed, and yet an instinct—a kind of knowledge emanating from the secret crypts of my conscience—told me that that something mysterious was happening in front of me.

The nitrogenous, or seemingly-nitrogenous, vapors flowed in two currents that I could see clearly, one curving inwards, coming from the ground, the other horizontal, coming from straight ahead, in which I could no longer make out the wall, the aura or the tentacles.

Brutally, like the blow of a fist, I heard something heavy and soft fall, a meter away from me; then the vapors melted into the air, dissolving with incredible rapidity, and...

I perceived Palmyre, still pressed against the wall, eyes closed, with one arm upraised and the other twisted at the height of her groin. Her face expressed a tragic dolor.

And in front of me, lying on the floor, was the young client who had melted into the magic mirror a short while before.

The monster had evaporated.

All that bewildered me to an extent surpassing what one might call, even in the fullest sense, astonishment. Before certain spectacles, the brain records without belief, and one remains stunned before the testimony of the most certain of the five senses. That was my situation.

Meanwhile, I ran to Palmyre. The client, lying on the floor, attracted neither pity nor curiosity, but the witch, her face twisted, moved me prodigiously.

I took her by the hands. She was rigid and cold. I pulled her away from the wall, and her leg moved forward of its own accord. She retained a sense of normal progression. I guided her to the door, making sure not to trip over the foot of the supine woman.

I led Palmyre to her private studio. There I sat her down. I observed then that from the breasts down her black silk dress was burned in a star shape—a burn similar to those on the carpet over which “the beast” had been crawling a little while ago.

I knew where to find a cordial that Palmyre had told me to use in her times of depression. I searched for it, took it in hand, and filled a glass, which I brought to the witch’s lips. She drank, with difficulty, and then opened her eyes. I recognized that she had returned to normality, or nearly so. The contortion in her pain-stricken mouth eased.

“Renée,” she said to me, “go and lock all the doors to the corridors leading to the room back there.”

I went to do that without waiting for any further instruction. It was evidently necessary to prevent the servants from entering the pentagon in which the client was lying.

When I came back, Palmyre, naked save for white crepe underwear, was putting on a new dress similar to the one that she had been wearing before. I saw that her breasts were scored with white-tipped scratches.

Without hiding my astonishment, I said: “That needs some liniment...”

She nodded affirmatively and murmured: “Bring me the little pharmaceutical box in black wood. The small one—the one in the large laboratory.”

I brought the box. Palmyre took out an unguent and some cotton wool. She dressed her wounds.

“It’s nothing! Five days at the most. If you’d been two minutes later, mind...”

I had twenty, fifty, a hundred questions on my lips. I did not know how to start, and gazed at her with loving curiosity.

“Will you get me another glass of cordial?”

I did as she asked.

“Drink some yourself.”

I drank.

“There! We’ll be able to talk about what you’ve seen. You’re frightened, aren’t you?”

I formed a half-smile of agreement, then said: “What about her, back there?”

Palmyre raised an index-finger and shook her head. “Finished!”

“But...”

“Don’t worry, Renée. She can no longer truly resume a durable and ordinary existence, but there’s still enough life in her for me to send her away on her own, like a thinking being. The street, the carriages, the tramway...she won’t die here...”

An icy cold descended from the top of my head to my temples, and from there to my jaws and shoulders. The manner in which Palmyre spoke seemed to me so atrociously criminal that I lowered my eyes, for fear that she would read my sentiment therein. She breathed in slowly, smiled at some unknown idea, and then turned to the window where dusk was falling. Out there, near the gable of a building, a massive moon was visible, with the hue of pale flesh. Palmyre pointed at it. “My protectress!”

There was a brief silence.

Softly, she said: “Baal! Baal!” To that name she added unknown words that sounded like a prayer. Then she reverted to comprehensible speech. “Renée, have you ever seen or imagined that a being from a plane other than ours, our world of three-dimensions, folded by time...have you ever imagined that an occult, magical, extraterrestrial being might love a mortal?”

I made no reply.

“Well, as the Bible says—and all other religions too—it happens. You’ve just seen a monster from beyond attempt to...yes, Renée, you saved me! I don’t know what would have happened without you. I can’t know. We’re entering here into a domain in which my mode of comprehension ceases to be valid. That...love...still remains a mystery to me. That’s what explains the occult hatred that is following me. In this matter, though, what one explains remains inexplicable.

“What is this being? What is it doing here? What does it want from me? Is it even a being? Is it a product of the Earth or is it returning thereto? So many questions. That’s what is multiplying these serial echoes of my will that initiates call repercussions. But why? How did I come to be known and indentified by it...or him?”

“It took advantage of the magic mirror to act on our plane. That’s evidence of a sort of intelligence equal to ours...except that no other being—so far as I know—has found, by inverse operation, a means of passing into our world from the world of the superior dimension.”

“But what does the mirror do, here?” I said.

“The mirror is a reality, Renée—a reality that emerges from the normal dimensions. Do you understand? It participates in two worlds—a looking-glass into the beyond.”

“I don’t know whether I understand...”

“Listen. If you cut a line, the section of the line is a point; if you cut a plane, the section is a line; if you cut a volume, the section is a surface; if you cut...a four-dimensional reality...the section is a volume, but a volume with two of our dimensions and one of the beyond. If you place that volume in the time axis, you have the magic mirror. It’s sufficient that it be polarized according to the secret thought of the person to whom you offer it for you to be able to see...in space and time...”

“How can I picture a volume that creates a section of a superior space in the time axis? It’s obscure!”

“But Renée, outside of the three dimensions, it’s thought alone that is action and reality. Placing it in the time axis is simply giving it the movement of thought...”

I remained mute. The explanation seemed deceptive its simplicity.

Palmyre went on: “Imagine that the volume which is the section of a plane by a four-dimensional surface is, in human terms, a plane—which is the mirror—and at the same time a volume, which is to say, a fragment of space limited by the imaginative extension of a human thought obedient to duration. Its third dimension isn’t terrestrial.”

“But what is our seducer—the other-worldly individual who wants to take you as a man might—doing? How can the notion of love extend unchanged beyond conceivable reality?”

“You’re accumulating too many questions, Renée. The individual, as you put it, appears to belong to a dimension of space superior to ours, and must also live in time, but I know nothing about it. Perhaps it’s transversal to time...”

“Then Einstein, and his equations in which  $t$  is the fourth dimension...?”

“Don’t digress, Renée! I’m far from knowing everything, and perhaps the word *know* signifies nothing in this respect. In any case, the magic mirror gave the entity you call my ‘seducer’ a means of passing from its own world to ours. It took advantage of it.”

“How?”

“By virtue of the imbecility of the little woman who threw herself at her lover, at the actual image of her lover. The being captured the poor woman’s vital force—her existence, her life—in the intermediary space and immediately manifested itself, as it was able to do, in the form, the aspect and the elements that it was able to extract from that human reality, momentarily dissolved and transported between two worlds, which it recreated in its own fashion.”

“Then it’s not that sort of octopus, as we saw it, in its life outside the world?”

“No—the octopus was, in a sense, the three-dimensional section of that life-form from an external dimension. In sum, that cephalopod with a hundred tentacles, real as it was—and I’m fully aware of its reality, since it...the octopus in question is a sort of symbol, a concept. Over and above three dimensions, the reality that lives beyond can only be, materially, an idea, if I might put it that way. A nominal reality...the words are lacking, Renée...”

“But which can make love—sexual love—in a matter more abstract, in spite of its concrete verity, than the most transcendental mathematics?”

“Oh, Renée, that’s what I don’t know. There are many hypotheses—if that word can even be employed here—but the two most acceptable are, firstly, that the creatures of the hypercosmos have already participated in human life and retained violent passions by virtue of having known them—which is explicable in terms of metempsychosis, or the alternative supposition that the ‘beast’ has desires and the power to satisfy them, tragically—and secondly, that sexuality might be conceived as a phenomenon so absolute, so philosophical, that the entities of the superior worlds participate in it...and all its consequences. It’s difficult to admit, but...”

“Sexuality isn’t love. Besides, Freud has clearly established the origin of the sexual in the genital. Amorous pleasure is linked to the organism; it’s inconceivable that without the *ad hoc* organs...”

“Yes. But what can I say? Each of our actions undoubtedly has cosmic repercussions, especially the act that humans repeat indefatigably without wearying of it—the act of love. Perhaps, therefore, our sexual enjoyment corresponds to a creation, or to a formation in unknown worlds in which it echoes. Who knows its essence? Who has penetrated its mystery? No one! Thus I might imagine that there is always a sensual vibrato in the beyond, a subtle, effervescent and profound burning sensation that is perhaps not unconnected with the universal activity of things, to atomic feverishness, to that incomprehensible Brownian motion, to radioactivity, to...where does it end, Renée? Perhaps a hectic lover, flexing in the grip and delirium of joy in her fever, is setting fire to distant suns and causing them to rotate.”

“What folly! Moving from possibility to possibility, one ends up with formulae whose reasoned connection is ungraspable...”

“Everything and nothing is ungraspable, Renée. Love, which so many imbeciles—generations of imbeciles—have tried to localize and hide, in the body as in the mind, is undoubtedly the sole reality that dominates the real, which explains it, and which emerges from the life of absurdity founded on fabricated antinomies. Besides, I’ve always believed that intelligence is a sexual phenomenon, a form of the joy that closes the act...”

“Perhaps there’s nothing else, fundamentally, in our world and beyond. Like the shadows in Plato’s cave, everything would then be a moving, formless, changing reflection of love—not of the idea of love, which is nothing, but of the act of love, of contacts that give birth to the extenuating folly around which, in spite of the social lie, all societies live, and which persists after the death of individuals.”

“Tell me, then, is the cult of Priapus the only one that humans have conceived in conformity with the absolute?” I smiled—but Palmyre remained serious.

“Renée, I don’t seek explanations in religion. *Everyone worships Priapus*, without intending to, spontaneously. But I’m trying, by means of observations whose fragility is as apparent to me as to you, to verbalize an outline of things—an outline is conformity with what I know better than others, which takes account of what I have seen, and what I imagine as I gaze through the mysterious portals that I almost passed through a little while ago...”

“We’re both accumulating—for I’m following you closely in these crazy ideas—and piling up what rational people call contradictory ideas. Aren’t we making a sort of mythology? I’d like to be able to explain what just happened without trampling all reason, all logic and all causal connection.”

Palmyre got to her feet. In her white face, the lips were a passionate and luminescent red. She sat down on a table, her legs dangling and swinging.

“So, Renée, you, who are an educated woman, continue to accept the vain prejudices that have been baptized as reason? You believe that human logic is an entity, not a game, like the rules of poker?”

I picked out the word *prejudices*. “All the same, the principle of identity isn’t a prejudice, wouldn’t you say?”

She laughed, applying her hands to her burned breasts. She was beautiful, attractive and demonic. A kind of lasciviousness emanated from all the gestures with which she emphasized the most abstract formulae. Ideas fell from her supple mouth like kisses.

“Oh, Renée, you’re fit for whipping, for burning alive—but everything in the mind is prejudice! What? The idea has never occurred to you, while reading *The Critique of Pure Reason*, that the famous categories of understanding, of space and time, can’t be homogeneous...but if space and time aren’t homogeneous—and they certainly aren’t—what becomes of knowledge of the world? And is the world itself definable?”

“Look, suppose that the world is a sphere in which time, duration, follows the law of extension—of surfaces or volumes, or anything you please—and that duration follows a law of reduction of activity like that of Newtonian universal attraction. What would a spherical world thus realized by like? It would disconcert all laws. You see, if you take two points, A and B, on a radius of that sphere, the distance measured in duration would not be the same from A to B as from B to A. Please note here the disappearance of your cherished principle of identity. Note too that from the center, where duration is fixed, to the periphery, where duration is infinite, one ought to conceive of the radius as a circular symbol, for infinite duration is equal to zero duration. In consequence, the radius of my sphere is a curve. How many dimensions would a being living on that sphere have? Three, four, six?”

She laughed joyfully, and I saw her abdomen oscillate along with the relaxations of her diaphragm.

“Do you think, Renée, that it’s sufficient to find a rational application of the rather bold concepts of metaphysical mathematics to kill all the old so-called scientific prejudices? Oh, the heterogeneity of time and space—what curious things! And the notion of continuity too, when attacked, makes people despair. And yet, the notion of continuity and that of homogeneity, if one reduces them, abolish all geometry, the science that is, in a sense, the very criterion of evidence. No, Renée, today’s science is not a science. It is to that of the future what ours was twenty thousand years ago. Personally, I anticipate that it will soon be necessary to introduce the notion of quality into that of space, which is nothing but quantity by definition, according to the stupid: the notions of degree and order are necessary in space and time, and that of displacement, or of groups in duration. Then, the absurdities of magic, stripped in advance of their anthropomorphism, will become normal, and no one will any longer laugh at the possibility of a living and passionate being issuing from transcendental spaces and appearing to us here, just as no one today laughs at the most paradoxical laws of optics or hydrostatics.”

Suddenly, though, her laughter froze. She stood up.

“I need to get rid of the late client. Stay here, Renée. It will take me twenty minutes—it’s a terrible and dangerous business. I’d rather you didn’t see it.”

She went out, tranquil and indolent. Immediately, I caught sight of the satin sheath-dress with the triangular burns. The irregular stars of the burns were quite clear. They were slightly red on the underside; a little blood had leaked out beneath them.

I sat down to reflect. Discussion with Palmyre could not lead to any conclusion for, entrenched in the undergrowth of transcendences, she could defy all assaults. But I did not have her facility in dealing with the Chinese puzzles of metaphysics, and preferred to restrict myself to what I had seen. It was necessary to accommodate all of it within the customary framework of my reason.

Had I actually seen those things? Yes! There was no possible hesitation. I had seen; I had not had a hallucination, nor had I been plunged into one of those “secondary states” that remove all value from testimony.

Suddenly—without, I presume, anyone touching the door through which Palmyre had gone out—I saw the heavy panel open, as if powerfully pushed. A gust of air surrounded me with a cold contact. My blood experienced the flight from the skin toward the heart produced by a cold shower, and with an indescribable emotion, of an overwhelming violence, I came to my feet...

A sort of icy cascade descended along my spine. On my head I felt exactly what the word “horripilation” signifies, and a girdle tightened about my waist, rising upwards.

At the door, an apparition became manifest: a sort of pale and transparent shadow that was—that had to be—Palmyre. The electric light went out at the same time, and silence fell: a new silence, an otherworldly silence, which covered up the anterior human silence.

No matter how self-controlled one is, there are spectacles that give one gooseflesh. I stood there panting, in front of the open doorway, blocked by the phantom, which stood out against the faint glare of the corridor, itself illuminated by the light of a transverse corridor in which two lamps were hanging from the ceiling in front of two neighboring doors to the right and the left. Then, in the corridor, emerging from the invisible part, and clearly illuminated. I saw Palmyre’s “client” leaving...

Horrified, I tucked in my elbows and my knees, as a sort of contractile terror gripped me, during which, with an automatic tread, the young dead woman disappeared again into the corridor that intersected the one facing me at right angles. I had, however, had the time to read on her face, forever mute, that the thinking being, the life—the secret and mysterious thing that animates all earthly existence, in sum—had disappeared from the body that a demonic power maintained upright and in motion, as if...

Behind the marching body, Palmyre appeared—a Palmyre that I had never seen before, clad in a sort of clinging white coat of mail, with a luminous emanation at the ends of her arms, extended toward the woman’s back.

Palmyre did not look at me. She disappeared immediately into the transverse corridor—but a luminous wake followed her. I thought I could detect the profile of the mysterious monster: the cephalopod with the obscure eyes; the strange being that had come from the other world to possess the frightening and satanic witch. Was it still following her?

That idea made me retreat to the closed window. I opened it with a reflexive gesture, to get out of that crazed atmosphere...

The air came in, gentle and fluid. I breathed it in voluptuously.

Then, in the bitumen sky effaced by cloud, the moon appeared. It was red, bloated and heavy. It seemed to me to be an obscene and malevolent idol.

In the avenue, launching its wild and quavering cry at the moon, a dog began to howl...