

XIV. Harry Madge's Speech

There was a momentary silence between Olivier Coronal and his father-in-law. It was William Boltyn who broke it.

"I've come to have a serious talk with you," he said. "I have something important to tell you."

"Go on," Olivier Coronal said, simply.

Without allowing himself to be disconcerted by this laconism, the billionaire went on: "I have no intention of lavishing futile praise upon you. You're a man of considerable worth, I know."

"What are you getting at?" Olivier asked, attentively.

"I'll get straight to the point. You know about my projects. You've been clever enough to discover them." His tone was bitter. "You also know about the disappointment I've recently suffered. The engineer Hattison is dead. I've come simply to propose to you that you take his place in the direction of my war laboratories."

"Monsieur!" said Olivier, standing up straight, facing the billionaire with his arms folded, in an attitude of defiance.

The latter continued, coldly: "My proposition was bound to surprise you, but before you get angry, wait for me to explain my thinking completely."

"Whatever it is, I shall not welcome it."

"Wait, I tell you. I've told you that I have a high opinion of your talent. I hold your character in equally high esteem. I won't insult you by offering you a sum of money, however considerable, to abandon your convictions. Your European education, unaccustomed to estimate things pragmatically at their true value, would cause you to see your action as a betrayal. I want, on the contrary, to serve your projects."

"Serve my projects!" Olivier Coronal echoed, utterly bewildered.

"Yes, Monsieur. If I'm not mistaken, you've already distinguished yourself by means of several military inventions of the highest value—your terrestrial torpedo, among others—and you have only done that, it appears, with the objective of achieving, thanks to the exaggerated power of technology, the complete suppression of war among humankind."

"That's correct," said the engineer, increasingly astonished.

"Well, Monsieur, I've simply come to propose to you that you continue here the work that you began in Europe. You'll have billions, and laboratories, at your disposal. You'll be able to realize your wildest imaginations, your most daring projects—to discover engines so murderous, machines so redoubtable, that even America will not dare to make use of them, in the fear of bringing about a general destruction of nations. Like all great men, you ought to neglect the detail in order only to see the whole, you ought to have a vision sufficiently broad to prefer the salvation of future generations to that of the present generation. What does it matter to you whether it is America or Europe that renders, by your means, the next war impossible? Your own country will never furnish you with the possibility of realizing your conceptions. You can do it here in total security, and if my reasoning is correct, your own conscience will order you to do it. Accept my proposition. It offers you an opportunity—perhaps unique—to realize your dearest projects."

Olivier reflected for a few moments.

"Monsieur," he said, "your proposition touches me. I did not believe that you would ever come to consider things in the same way as us—Europeans, inferior people, since we love humanity. In spite of everything, however, it's impossible for me to accept your offer."

"What!" the billionaire exclaimed. "Why, if you please?"

"When I invented the terrestrial torpedo, I almost caused a European war," Olivier said, "and if it has not taken place, it is only because all the nations are working so relentlessly to discover new engines of destruction, new weapons, that they are almost all at the same point."

"Perhaps that isn't the reason for your refusal," said William Boltyn, fixing Olivier with his hard, steely gaze.

"I do, indeed have another," the inventor replied, coldly. "Let's admit that if I make an important discovery, you might change your mind and get rid of me. I would then be leaving my homeland defenseless against the murderous inventions that I would have put in your hands. I confess to you that

I have too much experience of American mores to put much credence in your generosity and your disinterest.”

“As you please, Monsieur,” said Boltyn, furious that the other had seen through him. “I was wrong to descend so far as to make concessions to you, to the point of entering into your ideas. I ought to have divined your character accurately enough to have spared myself the step that I have just taken.”

And William Boltyn left, slamming the drawing room door behind him.

As he went across the avenue, he checked the time on his electric chronometer—operated by a minuscule pile that was recharged every three months—and perceived that he was just in time to go home and take care of his correspondence.

For a long time now, the billionaire’s anger had not relented.

Thus, his associates would meet, and he did not have a man to propose to them.

He was all the more vexed because the spiritualist Harry Madge, his adversary in many matters, had, unusually, given notice that he would attend the following day’s meeting.

Aurora, who came to see her father, was greeted almost harshly, and the billionaire did not hide the new grievances that he had against Olivier.

“That man has defied me,” he said. “I attempted to conceal and deny the ideas that are dear to me, to enter into his insensate projects for universal peace, to lay my billions at his feet along with my convictions, and he coldly refused my offer, with the stupid vanity of men of his race. Truly, it’s a great misfortune that you have married that man. If you want us to remain friends, make sure I never find myself in his presence.”

Aurora attempted timidly to defend her husband, but her father cut her off.

“I’ve told you that I don’t want to see that man again. I don’t want to hear any further mention of him. He ought to be less proud and to remember that he owes his life to me. Oh, if only I had not shown him mercy, because of you, after his attempted espionage, I would not have had the humiliation today of being defied by my daughter’s husband, and being obliged to tolerate his presence.”

Aurora did not persist. Privately, she thought that Olivier was in the wrong. She thought his conduct unjust, and criticized him secretly for not having given in to her father, since the latter had made the first move.

She went home later than usual, in order to make Olivier aware of the extent of her ill humor.

After a few attempts at reconciliation were badly received, the young man decided to remain silent, and the two spouses had an utterly miserable evening. Henceforth, discord would reign in the household.

William Boltyn did not sleep that night. He tossed and turned in his sumptuous bed—which was decorated, as if by the irony of fate, with marvelous bas-reliefs representing fauns and bacchantes fighting over bunches of grapes.

The following morning, he received more bad news. The soundings carried out in the bay at Startown, in order to try to recover one of the submarines, had only led to the discovery of pieces of steel reduced to shreds and twisted as if by the action of a formidable explosive. A few metallic masses had also been found that he recognized, from the description given, as the heads of some of the famous iron men.

How did they come to be there? A mystery!

A scrupulous exploration of the rubble had not produced any better results. Only a few steam engines, a few dynamos and a part of the foundry equipment remained almost intact.

The plans for which he had paid Horst so dearly had occasioned him a further disappointment. They only contained preliminary drafts of the first submersible constructed by Ned Hattison at the commencement of the enterprise.

In spite of the energy of his character, William Boltyn spent the whole day in a disappointment that was close to discouragement. What was he going to say to his colleagues that evening?

After mature reflection, he decided only to tell them about the plans relating to the installation of workshops on an isolated island defended by a ring of torpedoes. He would postpone until later the choice of a director capable of replacing old Hattison.

At eight o’clock, in the huge gilded hall containing columns ornamented by gigantic bovine heads, the meeting was complete. Harry Madge had arrived, in a singular carriage with crystal walls, which he claimed to be moved solely by will-power.

That carriage attracted every gaze. The billionaire spiritualist seemed even thinner and stiffer than usual. His body, as shriveled as that of a mummy, floated free within an ample coat that came down to his feet, and whose extravagant cut was more reminiscent of a magician's robe than an honest overcoat fabricated by a Yankee tailor. His baldness, so pronounced that the sutures of his cranium were distinguishable through skin as dry as a layer of fish-skin; his hooked nose, which almost made contact with his chin beyond a mouth as thin as a piece of thread; and his large eyes speckled with golden gleams, which seemed phosphorescent in dim light, all contributed to Harry Madge's strange and startling appearance. His long and rigid earlobes were ornamented with tufts of white hair, and his bony fingers, like the claws of a bird of prey, projected with feverish movements, covered with a vast number of rings.

As soon as the meeting began, the spiritualist asked to speak. His voice, devoid of timbre, as if effaced, seemed to be coming from some very distant location.

That voice, deprived of all impulse and force, commanded attention, conveyed the impression of a special organ that had only been created to express matters of pure logic.

A profound silence fell, as if the billionaires sensed that they were confronted by a superior power.

"Gentlemen," said Harry Madge, "in spite of my frequent absences from your meetings, I am not uninterested in them, as you might have believed. From the depths of the retreat to which my studies of the invisible have confined me, I have followed all your efforts attentively. I have been sorry to see that, because you did not want to follow my advice, you have incurred several checks. By virtue of a chain of circumstances that it was easy to foresee, the powerful organization of material force that you created has perished.

"It will be the same every time you attempt to triumph over your enemies in such defective conditions.

"To vanquish one's enemies, in fact, it is necessary not to follow the same path as them. By means of cannon, explosives, submarines and engines of war of all kinds, we cannot hope to get ahead of our enemies on the old continent and take them by surprise. France, Germany, England and Russia possess thousands of engineers. There is a perennial competition between them to discover and improve engines of destruction.

"If we were to obtain an initial success, by virtue of the unexpectedness of our attack not the unanticipated nature of one of our discoveries, the chances would rapidly be equalized in a second conflict. After a long and ruinous war, we would probably find ourselves in the same situation..."

During this preamble the billionaires' expressions had darkened. More than anyone else, William Boltyn, his brows furrowed, felt wounded in his pride. He was meditating a thunderous response. So, Harry Madge had just coldly pronounced the impotence of America, the futility of the billionaires' gigantic enterprise!

Harry Madge, whose eyes were sparkling, as if they were emitting electric sparks, continued his speech unemotionally, as if he had read his interlocutors' thoughts:

"I said that, in the struggle between America and Europe, our chances would be equal. I did not say that the outcome would be unfavorable to us. But that is not enough. It's necessary to triumph completely and inevitably. I have come here to offer you the means of doing that."

"And what are they?" exclaimed William Boltyn, shrugging his shoulders, incapable of holding back any longer. "Spirits, no doubt?"

"Before you mock me," Harry Madge replied severely, bringing his magnetic pupils to rest on those of the canned-gods manufacturer, "do you know what spiritualism is? A man plunged in matter, do you have the slightest idea of the mysterious forces circulating around us, that rub shoulders with us, that take hold of us and direct our actions most of the time, whether we like it or not?"

Everyone seemed to be wondering where the orator was headed. They were all greatly impressed.

"Gentlemen," the spiritualist billionaire continued, without appearing to notice the effect produced by his words, "I ask your permission to narrate at this point a few anecdotes, whose exact truth I can certify. Know the marvels that will and meditation can produce.

"About fifty years ago, in the English possessions in India, a man had himself buried alive. For an entire month, he remained six feet underground in his coffin. Then he came back to life, without seeming to have experienced any inconvenience. That is a result which it is impossible to obtain with dollars."

As William Boltyn smiled, Harry Madge added: "The fact I'm quoting is absolutely accurate. It is certified by a sworn statement drawn up by a magistrate and countersigned by thirty honorable officers of the English army, whose testimony is above suspicion.

"Moreover, to remove from your minds any suspicion of charlatanry, permit me to give you the details of that marvelous inhumation. A few days before the date fixed for the experiment, the subject—a fakir—shut himself in a hut with one of his disciples. They spent several days fasting, praying and inhaling perfumes. At the appointed hour, in the presence of the magistrate who was to draw up the sworn statement and the thirty officers, the fakir, whose immobility was already almost absolute, instructed that his tongue should be turned back, in such a way that it blocked the opening of the larynx.

"When that first operation had been carried out, his eyes were closed, his nose and ears were sealed with wax, and a gag was placed over his mouth. When all these procedures were completed, the fakir was placed in a leather sack, which was closed and sealed with lead in the presence of witnesses. He was then placed in a coffin equipped with a lock, which was closed, one of the witnesses taking the key—after which the coffin was finally lowered into a ditch lined with stone, whose walls were half a meter thick.

"Every precaution had been taken to ensure that no one could get close to the buried fakir. The grave was two meters deep. The coffin was covered with earth, and, to complete the precautions, the soil over the grave and the neighboring ground was sown with barley. The field was surrounded by a fence, and for a month, three sentinels mounted guard day and night.

"Is it possible, in those conditions, that a deception could have been perpetrated? Evidently not. Well, gentleman, the fakir did not die.

"When the thirty days had elapsed, the magistrate and the thirty officers went into the field, accompanied by workmen and physicians. In their presence, the coffin was removed from the grave. With the key, which they had always kept, they opened it. The lead seals on the leather sack were intact. Immobile, his body as cold as that of a reptile, the fakir appeared to their gaze. His ears and nostrils were still blocked by wax. The gag over his mouth was removed, and his lips parted. The tongue was still in the same position, turned back and blocking the opening of the larynx.

"People set about rubbing the body. After a few hours, the fakir gave slight signs of life. Finally, his heart resumed beating."

In spite of their confirmed materialistic convictions and the disdain they had always professed for these kinds of things, Harry Madge's speech caused a frisson to pass through the billionaires' inner being.

That was also because their spiritualist colleague, with his head like a bird of prey, in which his phosphorescent and seemingly mica-flecked eyes were shining, with his soulless voice that seemed to be emerging from nowhere, with his manner of speaking, devoid of gestures, would have impressed the most hardened and incredulous individual.

He only darted occasional glances at his audience. The rest of the time, his eyes upraised, he seemed to be following some internal dream.

Seeing that all the billionaires—including William Boltyn—were open-mouthed, unable to find a word in response, he went on.

"The occurrence that I have just related to you," he continued, letting his words fall slowly, one by one, "is not the only one produced in India. Phenomena of levitation are not rare there. By means of nothing but the power of their will, fakirs can rise into the air to a height of several meters, and maintain themselves there for several seconds. Given that, gentlemen, was it implausible about the same agent—the will—powering a vehicle?

"Some fakirs, after years of study and meditation, have even reached a superior state that permit them to separate themselves from their bodies—or if you prefer, to isolate their souls. On the side of a mountain, in a crack in the rock, they abandon their terrestrial envelopes and their souls set forth to roam other cycles in the ethereal regions. In the meantime, their bodies remain immobile and insensible in an attitude of prayer, their arms raised as if in evocation. Their nails grow immeasurably, penetrating their flesh; their eyes remain wide open; and the birds of the plain come to nest in their hair.

"Are those not marvelous results? Have the material sciences really produced anything comparable? Can the most brilliant chemist or the most subtle physicist reproduce them?"

The billionaires' astonishment was increasing by the minute. There were a few seconds of poignant silence before Harry Madge continued.

"It is not only in India that such results have been obtained," the spiritualist went on, having placed on his bald head a leather cap surmounted by a metal ball. "In Europe, in the Middle Ages, one of the most terrible and widespread practices was that of spell-casting. Nothing, gentlemen, is comparable to that terrifying practice. It is the apotheosis of the will. This is how one proceeds.

"One procures a few objects with which the person chosen as a victim has been in close contact—preferably nail-clippings or locks of hair—which one mixes and kneads with wax. With that wax one shapes a little statuette; it is the image of the person one wishes to cause to perish.

"One takes a long steel needle and plunges into the location of the heart, simultaneously concentrating one's will-power, whose effluvia one projects in such a way as, so to speak, to saturate the statuette.

"The person must die!

"Every day, one repeats the operation, plunging the needle in more deeply, and pronouncing certain formulae of incantation, covering the statuette with curses.

"Even if he is a thousand leagues away, the bewitched individual begins to perish the moment the steel needle penetrates the wax. His condition worsens as the metal point implacably pursues its course, day by day. And when the point has reached the location of the heart, no remedy can prevent the victim from dying."

The muscles of Harry Madge's face did not betray any sign of emotion.

"These practices have not disappeared in modern times. A European scientist has revived spell-casting. This is how he proceeds.

"He takes a photograph of a medium, and for a few moments he submits the photographic image to the latter's gaze, asking him to concentrate all his will-power and project it forcefully at the print. When that is done the medium is taken away and placed in another room, along with people charged with keeping watch on his slightest movements. Then, with a steel point, he inscribes a cross on one of the hands in the fluid-charged photograph.

"On the corresponding hand of the medium the same cross is found. The skin is scratched, and yet the medium had not made the slightest movement. His hands have remained visible, flat on a table.

"I could, gentlemen, cite thousands of analogous facts, which all proclaim the nullification of material sciences.

"Another scientist has succeeded in photographing the spirit that has lived with him for some years. You will admit that photographic plates cannot be accused of complicity or of lying.

"Certain experiments performed before witnesses are there to confirm what I say, to proclaim the power of spiritualism, for the science of which William Crookes has laid the foundations, and which can no longer be put in doubt.

"Thought readers are sufficiently well-known for me not to go into complementary details. The phenomena of hypnotism, magnetism, exteriorization and telepathy are studied increasingly every day, recorded, classified and analyzed by an army of researchers, thinkers and scientists."

William Boltyn was the first among his colleagues to recover from the kind of stupor that the spiritualist billionaire's discourse had produced. "But I don't see what all this can have to do with the realization of our project," he said.

"You're right," said Harry Madge, "So I'll get to that right away. I have no intention of convincing you with words.

"I said just now that in order to vanquish our enemies we need to find a way that is different from theirs. Let's leave them to found cannon, construct machine-guns, invent rifles and build ironclads. In that direction, the chances of victory are too well-balanced. What we need is to be indisputably stronger, to be able to crush the Europeans completely, with weapons that they do not have, against which they cannot defend themselves.

"A mysterious and terrible force exists. It is one that permits two individuals to feel sympathy for one another, to communicate over thousands of leagues without the aid of any telegraph. It is one that can lift blocks of stone weighing thousand of kilograms from the ground without the aid of any machine. Well, gentlemen, I have channeled a part of that invisible and unlimited force, and I have come here today to propose that we use it against our enemies. That force will, moreover, be multiplied tenfold by the power of our dollars,"

The billionaires' amazement was immense. They looked at one another as if wondering whether they ought to applaud or get annoyed.

Harry Madge seemed so sure of himself that they were impressed, but what he was saying was so extraordinary that they no longer knew what to think.

"Gentlemen," the spiritualist continued, "you know that, a few years ago, I built a palace not far from Chicago, on the shore of the lake. I cannot, nor do I wish to, give you the explanations that you expect of me here—but everything is prepared in the subterranean halls of my palace with a view to a series of experiments that ought to convince you completely. I therefore invite you to be my guests for a few hours, to suspend this meeting and postpone the judgment that you will be able to pass on my theories. All the facts and all the anecdotes I have related to you are far inferior to what I have accomplished. It only remains for you to judge for yourselves..."

Although more than one billionaire had the private conviction that Harry Madge was not entirely sane, no one raised any objection. General curiosity had been awakened by the spiritualist's speech. All those present were of a mind to accompany Harry Madge to his home.

Even if the success of the enterprise had not been at stake, another motive would have led to that decision. In fact, many rumors were running around regarding Harry Madge's palace. It was said to be full of fantastic things, and sometimes, it was affirmed, inexplicable noises could be heard thereabouts, which seemed to be emerging from the depths of the earth.

The billionaire was a virtual recluse. On the rare occasions that he received visitors, it was always in the same room, very simply furnished. No one had seen the rest of the house. None of his listeners wanted to miss out on the opportunity he was offering them to satisfy their curiosity.

Everyone went out of the gilded hall.

As he was about to take his place in the elevator with his colleagues, William Boltyn was accosted by his butler, Stephen, who handed him a telegram. He could not stifle an oath when he had opened it.

It was from the editor of the Chicago Life, and it read:

Startown assassin caught in cave has committed suicide.

Had Boltyn been alone at that moment, he would certainly have given vent to a fit of fury. For a few seconds, he could not distinguish anything around him. His blood was boiling in his veins. His hands clenched, as if to strangle an invisible enemy.

For an hour, since Harry Madge had stated speaking, he had been making efforts to hide his anger. He saw himself being supplanted in his role, and in his authority, by the president of the Spiritualist Club. His vanity was suffering cruelly. This final hammer-blow struck him full in the heart. Would it also be necessary for him to renounce his vengeance?

"Curses!" he murmured, through clenched teeth, his face convulsed by chagrin and rage. He no longer felt steady on his feet. His energy seemed to abandon him. He began to doubt himself and his billions.

He stiffened himself, however, and put his face straight. He did not want his colleagues to perceive his disturbance. It was necessary that he remain, for them, the proud dominator that he had always been.

With a firm step, he rejoined his companions. They were only waiting for him before setting off.

A few minutes later, a procession of automobiles of all sorts was hurtling through the streets of Chicago in a hectic manner. The chauffeurs were engaging in a kind of race. Sitting gravely in their seats with their long side-whiskers and their uniforms buttoned up to the neck, their eyes fixed on the horizon and their hands on their silver steering-wheels, they were battling at speed, dashing along the avenues and crossing the squares with vertiginous rapidity. Automobiles with internal combustion engines and steam engines, and electric landaus, followed one another a few meters apart, occasionally overtaking one another. Horns were sounded continually, and the machines juddered.

The cortege charged along the rectilinear avenues of Chicago, which were almost deserted at that time of night, at top speed. The rare passers-by wondered what the frenzied cavalcade could possibly signify.

"The billionaires!" they murmured.

In the bare, flat countryside the race continued. One after another the automobiles went across the level crossings of twenty of the fifty-two railway lines that terminated in Chicago. Nothing could any longer be seen but their quivering electric tail-lights, plunging into the opaque darkness.

In his chariot with crystal walls, Harry Madge, well ahead of the others, seemed to be surrounded by a phosphorescent aureole. At times, the wheels of his strange vehicle seemed to be dissolving into the ground.

Motionless, his eyes fixed on a metal dial that seemed to be activating a wheel pinning furiously above his head, the billionaire spiritualist, in his bizarre cap with the copper ball, was flying at ground level, like a luminous mist blown along by a gust of wind.