

I. Old Friends

On disembarking at Le Havre, after a week-long crossing effectuated in excellent conditions, the engineer Olivier Coronal's first impulse was immediately to leap on to an express train that would take him to Paris in a matter of hours. However, in spite of his haste to find his friends—the engineer Golbert, his daughter Lucienne and her husband, Ned Hattison—he decided to stay in Le Havre for a few days.

He caught a cab and was taken to a modest hotel, where he retained a room. Then, leaving his luggage behind and only keeping about his person the money-bag containing his petty fortune, he went for a walk in the town. He felt joyful and emotional, gripped by wellbeing simply by virtue of knowing that he was in France, and that he was finished with America and the Yankees.

Two years, he said to himself. For two years I've been living with those people. I needed that long to be able to judge them accurately and appreciate the deadly influence that their civilization exerts upon us.

In the crowded port buzzing with activity, and the streets through which joyful bands of sailors on leave were moving, everything Olivier saw seemed surprising and cheerful, and gave him pleasure. He experienced a sensation of indefinable contentment on finding himself, after years of absence, in the midst of people who were truly his fellows, and familiar objects.

That first day passed as if he were under an enchantment. The engineer felt reborn. He forgot his troubles, his disappointments and even his broken household completely, in order no longer to think about anything but the future of work and hope that had opened before him.

All that evening, sitting on the terrace of a harbor-side café, he abandoned himself to a consolatory dream, and reflected as to what he ought to do next.

I have to find Léon Goupit, he said to himself. In Chicago, his situation was too critical, and the moments too precious, for him to be able to explain to me the details of what happened during the meeting of the billionaires at which he was present. I need to talk to him at length. The Yankees aren't people to waste their time in experiments in hypnotism. The goal that Harry Madge is pursuing is quite evident. He wants to employ the mysterious powers of suggestion, magic and spiritualism against Europe. Oh, if I only knew how far his work has progressed!

Olivier Coronal promised himself that he would bring the engineer Golbert, his master and old friend, up to date with what he knew, and ask his advice. In the mere two months during which he had devoted himself to the study of psychic sciences, the young man had already hypothesized a few fundamental principles.

Together, he said to himself, Monsieur Golbert and I will thwart the billionaires' plans; we'll match them weapon for weapon, discovery for discovery. The future of the human race depends on it. We have to prevent the Americans from realizing their monstrous projects for the spoliation of Europe.

Two days after his arrival in Le Havre, Olivier Coronal watched the arrival of a steamship from New York.

It is always an interesting spectacle to see a black dot appear in the distance, almost confused with the sea, which gradually increases in size as it draws nearer and takes on a distinct form. On the quay, all the telescopes and binoculars are aimed at the vessel as people try to indentify it. Friends and relatives are there, feverishly awaiting the disembarkation of the passengers.

Out of curiosity, the engineer mingled with the crowd that had assembled to greet the steamship as it came into harbor. Slightly apart, he contemplated with interest the maneuvering of the enormous vessel, on whose deck all the passengers were standing, waiting impatiently to land.

When the double gangplank had been set up, he watched the travelers file off. There was nothing more cosmopolitan, more varied. They were mostly Americans, but there were also groups of English people, clients of some travel agency, Germans in gray suits, blond and indolent Belgians, Italians, Spaniards and Frenchmen. The latter were identifiable by their urgency, their haste to quite the steamer and find themselves on the soil of their homeland again.

Olivier Coronal followed the seemingly-interminable procession with his eyes for a good ten minutes. More than five hundred people had already come down, and the animation of deck had diminished noticeably. He was about to resume his stroll when his attention was attracted by a group of about fifty Americans moving on to the gangplank one after another. Although they were all elegantly dressed, buttoned up in frock-coats, wearing red cravats and coiffed in shiny hats, they still seemed to have a strange and mysterious appearance.

Under the guidance of two of their party, who appeared to be in charge and who bore an astonishing resemblance to one another, they assembled on the quay in total silence. In their fleshless faces, the eyes alone seemed to be alive, wide open with a disquieting fixity.

The eyes of lunatics or hypnotizers, Olivier thought, on looking at them attentively. *Who can they be?*

The American gentlemen took their place in the carriages of the direct train waiting on the quay, and a few minutes later they were borne away toward Paris

The spectacle had intrigued the engineer considerably. He did not know what to think.

In the brief conversation he had had in Chicago with Léon Goupit, the latter had not had time to explain in detail everything he had seen, nor to describe the two Altidor brothers. If he had, Olivier would have guessed the identity of the men with strange faces. *They're the envoys of the American billionaires: Harry Madge's hypnotizers*, he would have exclaimed. For want of a precise description, however, he remained in doubt, and it was only later, on the evening of the same day, that the idea occurred to him.

He settled his hotel bill immediately, packed his bags and took the night express.

There's nothing astonishing, after all, he said to himself, *in the Yankees starting their new campaign against Europe in this fashion. They intend to render themselves masters of all our secrets before going into battle.*

The idea increasingly took form in his mind that the men he had seen disembark from the New York steamer that very afternoon were hypnotizers, spies in the service of the Yankee billionaires.

Under the influence of that notion, he did not waste any time before going to Meudon to confer with his friends, Monsieur Golbert and Ned Hattison.

He knew the little villa well and had no difficulty finding it when the Versailles omnibus train that he had taken at set him down of the most charming of the Parisian villages.

It was barely eight o'clock in the morning. The night had been cold; the roofs of the houses were covered with a layer of white frost; the hard ground resonated like iron underfoot.

In the open country Olivier soon found the edge of Meudon Wood, whose trees, powdered with frost, were waving their denuded branches in the wind. At a bend in the path, the Golberts' little villa appeared, with its surrounding garden and its cheerful façade garnished with climbing plants. He paused for a moment to contemplate it. Light swirls of smoke were emerging from one of the chimneys. The shutters were open.

They're already up, the young inventor said to himself. *Poor friends, working in silence, how I wish that I were not bringing you bad news. You don't know yet what is being plotted against Europe on the far side of the Atlantic. Does Ned Hattison even know the truth about his father's death?*

At that moment, the door to the garden opened. A young woman appeared on the threshold.

Lucienne Golbert! Olivier exclaimed, suddenly moved to the utmost depths of his soul. *How she's changed!*

It was, indeed, no longer the cheerful young woman with the lively manner of old. She seemed to Olivier to be more serious. Her fine Parisian face seemed to have taken on a more severe expression. The traces of life's worries were already visible there.

The young man went forward. He caught up with Lucienne, who, inconvenienced by a large portfolio that she was carrying under her arm, had been obliged to put it down in order to close the door. When she heard footsteps behind her, she turned round. Their gazes met.

"Olivier Coronal!" she cried, while the inventor, who had come to a standstill, unable to contain his emotion, could not say a word.

He ended up stammering: "You're going out?"

"Yes—but not any longer," Lucienne exclaimed, opening the door again. "The lecture I was going to attend will probably be repeated. Hurry up and come in. What a surprise you gave me! Ned

and my father are having breakfast. I need to warn them; they'd be too astonished—especially Papa—if they saw you come in just like that.”

On the far side of the garden, scarcely fifty meters away, the steps of the villa rose up between two clumps of rose-bushes, whose stems climbed along an iron balustrade little more than a meter from the ground.

“It's winter,” said Lucienne, pointing to the empty flower-beds and the leafless bushes. “Our garden has lost the gaiety that you remember...” In the vestibule, she said, mysteriously: “Wait here for a few minutes.”

She opened a lateral door and Olivier heard her exclaim: “Guess who's just arrived! I'll give you a thousand.”

“What do you mean?” Golbert and Ned Hattison replied, in chorus. As Lucienne had said, they were finishing breakfast in the dining room.

“Guess! It's one of our good friends who has been far away. Let's see how perspicacious you are.”

There was a moment of silence. The two men had risen to their feet. Their faces expressed the sharpest surprise. “It's not possible!” they said. “Is it Olivier Coronal?”

Before Lucienne had replied, the inventor had opened the dining room door and had precipitated himself into his friends' arms. “Yes, it's me!” he cried, hugging them warmly. “My dear Monsieur Golbert, how happy I am to see you again—and you too, Ned. You're surprised, aren't you? That's quite natural. I didn't tell you I was coming back.”

“And nothing in your letters allowed us to anticipate your arrival,” said Ned. “Your decision must have been made in a hurry.”

As for Monsieur Golbert, seated in his armchair, he was so emotional that he was incapable of saying anything. His eyes expressed a boundless contentment; he did not take them off Olivier Coronal for an instant.

“You're going to have something to eat, Monsieur Coronal,” said Lucienne, who came back in carrying a cup of hot chocolate. “You must be exhausted.” To her father and husband, she said: “Let the traveler get his strength back—you'll have all the time in the world to talk to him.”

The inventor was obliged to comply. While drinking his chocolate he understood, from his friends' expressions, that they suspected some grave motive for his departure, and that they had numerous questions to ask him.

He anticipated them.

“I haven't just come to France to spend some time here,” he said. “I've broken all the ties that retained me in America. I'm absolutely free, and won't leave France again. My divorce from Aurora Boltyn must have been finalized by now. I'll explain later how that came about, but...” Following his train of thought, he added: “The newspapers must have kept you up to date with many things.” Then he fell silent, waiting for a reply—an encouragement to continue.

As he had been about to launch into the story of the drama in Startown, he had hesitated, not knowing how to go about it. Did he not have before him the son of the man that Léon Goupit had killed? Even though he had completely renounced his father's ideas and left him to pursue his work of destruction alone, would Ned have sufficient abnegation to envisage that death as something inevitable, and not to conserve any hatred toward his father's murderer?

“Indeed,” the young American replied. “I've been kept informed by one of the great newspapers of the Union, the *Chicago Life*. We've followed the course of events—but all the information provided with regard to the explosion of Startown seem to me to be absolutely implausible. I'm counting on you to give me a more accurate account of what happened.”

Ned Hattison had pronounced these words very calmly, without any apparent emotion, but the inflection of his voice had nevertheless given a hint of an infinite sadness. The conflict that had taken place within him, between his former opinions and his current aspirations, was detectable. In spite of everything, he was suffering a great deal from the tragic death of his father, but, for easily-understandable reasons, he did not want to let it show.

“I'm grateful to you, my dear Olivier,” he said, “for the sentiment that makes you hesitate to talk to me about the events in Startown, but I assure you that those facts, although painful, are only of secondary interest to me, and that your story, whatever it might be, will not awaken any hatred in my heart nor change my way of seeing. You can, therefore, speak frankly. I am not in a position to judge

Léon Goupit's actions. He acted, I don't doubt, according to his conscience. An honest man is always right when he takes his convictions as the sole criterion for his actions."

Sitting side by side, Monsieur Golbert and Lucienne were listening in silence. Standing next to them, Olivier Coronal fixed his gaze on Ned Hattison's face. He felt troubled. Such grandeur of soul and such abnegation moved him to the highest degree.

"First of all," Ned asked, also mastering his emotion, "is it true that Léon Goupit committed suicide in a cavern, as the *Chicago Life* reported?"

"No," said Olivier. "He underwent incredible adventures. One morning, in Chicago, he arrived at my house, utterly exhausted, pale and distraught, and asked me to help him to escape. I made him change his clothes in a hurry, and, after having tended his injuries, I took him to the Atlantic Railway station myself. Two days later, he sent me a telegram saying that he was leaving for Europe aboard a merchant ship. He must be in Paris by now."

"But why hasn't he come to see us?" Ned exclaimed.

"Why? For the same reason that made me hesitate just now to talk to you about these things. Under his apparent devil-may-care attitude, Léon conceals an excellent heart and a great delicacy. I know that he likes you a great deal. In Chicago, he often spoke to me about you, but he must have thought that what he did in America prevented him from presenting himself here."

Ned Hattison did not reply, and with common accord, the conversation passed on to a less painful subject.

Olivier Coronal did not want to bring his friends up to date immediately with the imminent peril that European civilization was in once again. *Tomorrow*, he thought, I'll talk to them seriously. *Ned knows about the American billionaires' plans, since he helped in the foundation of Mercury's Park and Startown. He won't be astonished that I've discovered them. Since his father's death sets him completely free and eliminates the last link attaching him to his past, he'll doubtless agree to help Monsieur Golbert and me to save Europe from the yoke that the Yankees intend to impose upon it.*

"You see, my friend," said Monsieur Golbert, "we live here, far from the noise, in a solitude propitious to mental labor. Our present situation, modest as it is, is sufficient for our happiness. Everyone has work to do, and if we're unacquainted with luxury, we're also unacquainted with boredom."

In fact, the ill-fated attempt to build the subatlantic railway had almost completely ruined the family. When they had come back to the villa, Monsieur Golbert and Ned only had about two hundred thousand francs left.

Courageously, the young man had set to work. For a year, he had occupied himself in designing engines for automobile manufacturers, spending all day at that task and only devoting his evenings to his personal studies.

For his part, Monsieur Golbert, in spite of his advanced age, had displayed an incredible activity. On behalf of a railway company he had formulated plans for a new kind of electric locomotive. In the first trials, it had achieved a speed of two hundred kilometers an hour.

Thanks to the two men's perseverance, the family budget had soon increased in a tangible fashion, and in less than two years, Lucienne had found the means of saving a few thousand-franc bills.

The young woman was the providence of that house of tranquil labor. Always smiling and gracious, she devoted her life to her father and her husband. Cleverly anticipating their least desires, she was the loving and devoted companion of the latter, able to give him wise advice while affecting to care for him, while for her father, whom she never neglected, she was full of delicate attentions and charming, child-like familiarities as well as profound respect.

Only in the evenings, gathered around the lamp in the room that took the place of a study, while Lucienne skillfully made fair copies of plans for machines and engines, did the two men relax in working for themselves, exchanging thoughts and discussing their aspirations. Both had the same love for humanity, the same ideal of happiness and fraternity.

What Monsieur Golbert called the great social wounds—poverty and its derivatives, alcoholism and the majority of infectious diseases—attracted their particular attention. They spent long hours in discussion, seeking remedies for the general ills suffered by the entire working class. Far from allowing themselves to be put off by obstacles and the often-flagrant ill-will of those who ought to have been the most preoccupied with questions of social wellbeing, they drew upon all their

knowledge and thirst for justice and happiness to find an effective relief, a practical solution to the terrible social question.

After several months of uninterrupted work, the two men had arrived at results of real importance. Moving from one deduction to another and one trial to another they had succeeded in discovering a vaccine for alcoholism, and a society had already been founded for its propagation and universal introduction. That discovery had made Monsieur Golbert happier and more contented than anything else he had achieved thus far.

“It will save thousands of human lives every year,” he had said in the report that he had made to the Académie des Sciences. “Alcoholism is the great wound of our society. It is necessary to combat it at all costs, to block its frightful progress. The intelligence and strength of future generations is at stake. The terrible social scourge threatens the future even more than the present. It fills the hospitals while emptying the workshops. It is important not to waste time. Let us fight for the salvation of our nation and its particular genius. In suppressing alcoholism, we shall have destroyed one of the principal causes of poverty and degeneracy.”

Monsieur Golbert gave that passage of his report to Olivier Coronal, to read in a journal that had reprinted it.

“I approve entirely, my dear master,” said the young man. “You have done more for humanity than the inventor of a new canon or a powerful explosive. It’s with similar discoveries that one increased human happiness and prepares the way for generations to come. Oh, if only all scientists thought like you, if they were not primarily guided by self-interest and love of fame, within fifty years human intelligence would have overcome all the obstacles that hinder its progress. The social question—that seemingly insoluble problem—would be rapidly resolved if science could assure people of what they need to live and freed them from the tax they pay in vices to console their misery.”

Lucienne had ended up leaving the three men alone in the study. To celebrate Olivier’s arrival she gave orders to the only maid she had in her service to prepare an excellent lunch, and accompanied her personally to the local market.

The inventors were still conversing when she came back into the study to announce that the meal was ready. “To the table!” she said, joyfully. “I’m sure you’d forget the time if I wasn’t here to remind you.”

They offered a few witty rejoinders her claim, and went into the dining room—but without abandoning the discussion.

Having not seen one another for two years, Monsieur Golbert and Olivier had a great deal to tell one another, and many events to relate. Ned Hattison, still slightly reticent, was mostly content to listen, without making any observations. In spite of everything, the young American could not easily abandon himself to gaiety. Not very talkative, even seeming taciturn to those who did not know him, he possessed, by way of compensation, the gifts of observation and logic.

“One thing that I don’t quite understand,” he said, suddenly, taking advantage of a momentary silence between his two friends, “is the manner in which Léon Goupit succeeded in getting away. You told me yourself, and I read in the *Chicago Life*, that he had been buried alive in a cave. I confess that I don’t understand.”

“I’ll explain all the details that Léon gave me,” Olivier replied—and told the story of the Bellevillois’ adventures in the immense antediluvian cavern, recounting how, after having escaped death twenty times over and being carried away by the furious current of a subterranean torrent, he had found himself in Harry Madge’s park, and the providential hazard that had enabled him to witness a meeting of the billionaires through the grille of an air-vent.

Ned Hattison and Monsieur Golbert listened attentively. “That’s almost miraculous,” they said. “You haven’t told us that before. But what happened at the meeting?”

“Things that are very disturbing, for us,” Olivier said. “I promised myself not to spoil today and not to tell you until tomorrow, but since our conversation has returned to the subject, I’ll bring you up to date with what I’ve learned. Are you aware that a Society of Billionaires has been formed in America, with the objective of ruining Europe and setting the United States at the head of the civilized world? Do you know how that transatlantic peril, which we have foreseen well in advance and often discussed, has been organized?”

“Yes, my friend,” the old scientist replied. “Ned surprised me by revealing it—but what are you getting at? The danger is no longer imminent since the destruction of Startown.”

“It threatens us more than ever. It has only changed its form.”

And briefly, without going into detail, Olivier Coronal explained what Léon Goupit had told him about the plan that the billionaires had adopted.

“We’re no longer menaced by cannon and torpedoes,” he said. “Harry Madge, the president of the Chicago Spiritualist Club, has taken over the direction of the enterprise. He had demonstrated to his colleagues the nullity of material sciences and had shown them a series of conclusive experiments in hypnotism, reading at a distance and other psychic phenomena. The Yankee dollars are no longer being used to construct arsenals. An enormous sum has been consecrated by them to the foundation of a kind of College of Psychic Sciences, in which Harry Madge is working to train first-class hypnotizers. When the time comes, these readers of thoughts and documents will hurl themselves upon Europe as on a easy prey. They will attack all the secrets that comprise our strength, and appropriate our weapons.”

Olivier concluded, bitterly: “That is where matters stand at present. The hypnotizers are about to begin their espionage. Their strength is redoubtable, invisible and sure. The secrets of our arsenals and our diplomacy are no longer secure. The plans of our fortresses and the files of our general staff will perhaps come into their possession. And that’s only the first part of the program that our adversaries have planned. Afterwards, when they know exactly what our resources are, and can utilize all our inventions to their own advantage, they will enter into battle, and we shall be helpless against them if we have not, in the meantime, succeeded in vanquishing them with their own weapons.”

Olivier did not say everything. He did not mention the disembarkation that he had witnessed in Le Havre, of the Americans that had seemed to him to be hypnotizers.

“Are you certain about what you’ve just said?” asked Monsieur Golbert.

“I must still be short of the truth,” Olivier said. “Tomorrow, though, I’ll have complementary information that will make up some of the deficit. I’ll go to see Léon Goupit and talk to him.”

“It would be terrible,” the old man murmured, absorbed in thought. “Are the psychic sciences really so powerful?”

“The experiments I’ve carried out myself have convinced me of it. We’re in the presence of a highly energetic force that is almost totally unknown. In the next war, victory will belong to whoever has the greater success in capturing souls, in being the first to discover the great law of the omnipotent will.”

These words made a profound impression on Monsieur Golbert and Ned. Entirely devoted to their meditations, they had forgotten they were at table, and had hardly touched their food. Lucienne was obliged to intervene.

Under the young woman’s influence, the conversation took a less severe turn, and the meal was completed amid outbursts of the frankest gaiety—for what they were talked about at that point was none other than Tom Punch.

As they could hardly go out in the cold weather, the three men continued their conversation in the villa’s little drawing room, in which Lucienne had served the coffee. Soon, however, Ned, offering the excuse that he had something urgent to do, left his father-in-law and Olivier Coronal alone.

A few hours later, in spite of the insistence of his friends, who tried with all their might to make him stay, Olivier took the train back to Paris.

“I’ll come back tomorrow,” he said to Monsieur Golbert, “when I’ve seen Léon Goupit. We’ll continue this afternoon’s conversation.”

“That’s all right,” said the old man. “Let’s be patient. Perhaps all is not lost. We ought to hope so. We have to vanquish these egotistical and ambitious men of the New World, and I believe that the psychic sciences, on which they are counting on using to annihilate Europe, will furnish us with the means of our salvation. Let’s have confidence in the future, my friend. The genius of our nation can’t be stifled by the young American civilization. That’s nothing but gold and banknotes, and the criminal dreams of men thirsty for domination cannot prevail against the intelligent strength of our people.”