

I. A Young Phenomenon

“You’ve come on your own, Gaston?” said my Uncle Frémiet, astonished, as he greeted me at the door of his dining room. “What about your wife? Isn’t she coming?”

“Aurore? Yes, indeed she is coming, but she had to go to a business meeting with Madame Simo...Simodzuki.”

I dropped the name of the billionairess more to justify the importance of the meeting than out of a sentiment of base vanity, and immediately perceived that I had just committed an indiscretion, foolishly.

With a reverential and ironic expression, my uncle shook his head. His white beard and “art-photographer’s mane” were still a trifle Bohemian in spite of his age and notoriety.

“Saperlipopette! Madame Simodzuki! That’s not small beer!”

My aunt, who had heard my reply, surged out of the kitchen where—as a cordon-bleu cook—she was overseeing the preparations for dinner. She kissed my cheeks, alarmed: “But Gaston, it’s an imprudence to let the poor girl run round Paris in an automobile on her own, on the same day that she’s come out of the clinic.”

I refuted the affectionate reproach with a smile. “Not the same day, Aunt—don’t worry. She came out yesterday, and is entirely better.”

The sonorous voice of my uncle added, mischievously: “And even if she was risking a headache, that wouldn’t be too high a price to pay for an opportunity to get into business with Madame Simodzuki. Do you know who she is? Has your wife talked to you about her?”

“No—Aurore telephoned me from the Institute to tell me that she wouldn’t pick me up and would come directly here. She only told me the lady’s name. She’s a billionairess, isn’t she?”

“Yes—and how! She’s mentioned in this evening’s *Intran*. Haven’t you read it? Sit down in this armchair, then, and listen. But an aperitif first, eh?”

We sat down; my aunt poured the traditional Cap Corse wine and my uncle started reading:

“The richest woman in the world is Japanese, Madame Yone Simodzuki, an extraordinary businesswoman, the owner of a fleet of ships, steelworks, sugar-cane and cotton plantations, etc., who has succeeded in building a handsome fortune of thirty million pounds sterling, which is 3,750 million francs.

“A widow with no direct heirs, this philanthropic billionairess has already founded a considerable number of charitable and scientific institutions in Japan, China and America, and generously distributed enormous sums for the relief of poverty and the spiritual wellbeing of humankind. A stream of that Pactolus has also begun to flow in France. During a voyage to Europe six months ago, Madame Simodzuki acquired a considerable piece of land on the Île du Levant in the Hyères, adjacent to that which forms the naturist colony of Héliopolis, founded by the Doctors Durville.¹ Since that time, large-scale work has been carried out, including the establishment of a powerful wireless transmitter, on the billionairess’ property. Although, disliking all interviews, she has obstinately refused to make her plans known, we believe that she too intends to preach the regeneration of our aged humankind by a return to nature, and the jealous care with which the new domain is enclosed permits the supposition that integral nudism will be practiced there. The wireless station will spread an abundant propaganda in favor of that hygienic doctrine.

“Madame Simodzuki herself arrived in Paris the day before yesterday, having come from America via the Azores, with a view to recruiting adepts...”

The door opened and Aurore made her entrance. We ran to her. My aunt, who has a mania for embraces, hugged her forcefully. Then, holding her at arm’s length beneath the glare of the ceiling light, she said: “My poor girl! You’ve had a narrow escape! It’s completely healed, then, your injury?”

My uncle also approached, to examine the slight scar that slanted across her left temple from the eyebrow to the hairline.

“Well, my niece, I’m glad to see that it hasn’t compromised your looks...or your activity. Scarcely on your feet and off you go to work! We were just reading”—he brandished the newspaper, which he had not put down—“this article on Madame Simodzuki. Perhaps you can inform us about her plans to regenerate humankind by integral nudism, or whatever?”

By the reproachful glance that my wife shot me, I understood even more fully the extent of my recent gaffe. She affected a light tone. “Regenerate humankind? My God, no. Madame Simodzuki didn’t accord me any confidence of that sort. A simple business proposition...regarding my father’s patents.” And in order to change

¹ Gaston and André Durville established Europe’s first naturist village, Héliopolis, on the Île du Levant in 1931. Varlet, an enthusiastic nudist resident on the mainland not very far away, was undoubtedly familiar with it. Nudism is still *de rigueur* on the island today, and compulsory in some areas. Science fiction fans will be familiar with the location by virtue of the enthusiastic account of it in Robert A. Heinlein’s *Glory Road*.

the subject of the conversation she said: “Do you have any news of Oscar? Is he content with his reportage? Still in Germany?”

Père Frémiet sensed that he had raised an undesirable subject in the billionaire, and put down the newspaper, while Madame Frémiet hastened to reply: “Yes, yes, he sends us his news almost every day, and he seems content. The annoying thing is that we haven’t been able to write to him; he’s on a secret mission, under a false name, and the police...well, he ought to be back this evening, the dear boy. I hope that he’ll be here in time to have dinner with us...”

My uncle rebelled, categorically. “Oh, no! It’s half past eight already. You’re not going to leave your guests to starve indefinitely...especially poor Aurore, scarcely convalescent. In reality, we don’t know whether our ‘young phenomenon’ will arrive today. His telegram from Berlin, at nine o’clock this morning, said: *Expect return by air this evening*. Now, I telephoned Le Bourget two hours ago and I was told that the regular service from Berlin had arrived, but that there was no Oscar Frémiet, journalist, among its passengers. The question’s settled. Enough delay, Gisèle; tell Mélanie to serve. If, by chance, our young phenomenon still arrives this evening, you can be sure that he’ll have eaten.”

My aunt strove to gain a few more minutes by exhibiting the postcards received from Berlin, but they were deceptively laconic—not one allusion to reportage.

To a question from Aurore, Père Frémiet replied: “No, he told us hardly anything before he left, and we have very little idea what he went to Berlin to do. It happened very suddenly ten days ago. Spinoff from an unimportant investigation in Saint-Malo had given him an idea. He didn’t tell us any more except that his future as a reporter depended on his attempting to check out that idea in Berlin. It’s he’s guessed right, he’ll become an ace in his profession, the equal of Géo London or Arthur Dupin²...and he seems to have succeeded, but I’m waiting for him to fill me in to get the details. He’ll tell us this evening, if he arrives...and the best way to make him come is to sit down at table.”

My aunt gave in. We left the armchairs.

“Sit in your usual places, my children. Gaston here, beside me; Aurore next to your uncle. Oscar can sit at the end.”

An exquisite lobster bisque was savored with pleasure and almost in silence, apart from the just praise due to the mistress of the house, who had simmered that delectable recipe. When the chicken had been carved and the slices ritually distributed, Père Frémiet uncorked the Châteauneuf-du-Pape, filled the glasses and we drank to the health of “the absent and the present.”

My aunt took advantage of that to ask Aurore for an account of her accident.

“Always avid for emotion, my wife Madame Frémiet,” grumbled the photographic artist. “But go on, my niece. We only know that you were in a road accident.”

Aurore obliged. “There’s nothing much to tell. I was coming out of the Institute with Professor Nathan. By chance, I didn’t have my car, which was in for repairs. My excellent employer offered me a lift in his. He was going to see Quentin Dufour, the mineralogist, in the Rue Lamarck a short distance away. I accepted. As we came out into the Place Clichy...I was in the back to the right of Monsieur Nathan, who had opened the widow on his side...and there’s a sudden swerve. I glimpse an enormous dark red motor-coach on the left, hurtling like a meteor. The professor puts his head forward; mechanically, I throw mine back...a horrible bang, windows and bodywork smashing...and I lose consciousness. I came round in a hospital bed, with my dear Gaston leaning over me, anxiously...”

She fell silent. My aunt emitted a huge sigh of retrospective fright. My uncle tugged at his flowing white beard.

I added: “Professor Nathan was killed outright, his skull perforated by a veritable dagger of glass from the windscreen of the coach. Another shard had struck my poor Aurore over the left eyebrow and she was wedged into a corner of the seat by the bodywork, which had folded up like an accordion. The chauffeur, thrown out of the car without any serious injury, gave my address, and a policeman came to fetch me in a taxi. Oh, I spent ten atrocious minutes during the journey. The man knew that ‘my wife’ had been taken to the hospital, but he didn’t know how serious her condition was. I was expecting to hear the worst...”

Gently, I took Aurore’s hand, to squeeze it tenderly.

With tears in her eyes, my worthy aunt preceded voluble expressions of commiseration with brief “ohs” and “ahs.” My uncle, however, who, in spite of his excellent heart, “detested that sort of manifestation,” affected a surly expression to philosophize:

“And that’s the irony of fate, my children! It was the explorer Dumont-d’Urville, I believe, who had confronted the cannibals of Polynesia, tempests, yellow fever and gone around the world several times without a scratch, who, on his return to France in 1840 or thereabouts, perished stupidly, like a vulgar suburban bureaucrat,

² “Géo London” was the pseudonym of Georges Samuel (1885-1951), who was the star reporter of the daily newspaper *Le Journal* from 1920-50. Arthur Dupin played a similar role for *Le Petit Journal*.

in a railway accident on the Versailles line.³ Two years ago, my dear niece, you undertook the most dangerous long-distance flight ever, twenty times around the world, beating all the altitude records, in your astronomical rocket, one of the least reliable of machines, in which you risked being asphyxiated, crushed, burned, volatilized...”

My worthy uncle sometimes lacks tact—but with her habitual scientific objectivity, Aurore seemed amused by the evocation. She finished it off herself: “And after all that, it was in a banal automobile accident in the idle of Paris that I came within a hair’s breadth...”

My aunt, frightened, dared not put the blame on her lummoX of a husband. She murmured: “Shut up, Aurette! You’re giving me goose-pimples. One doesn’t joke about such awful things. Not to mention that the death of poor Monsieur Nathan might change your situation at the Institute...?”

“Yes, certainly. I’ve already let them know that I’m resigning. It was to Professor Nathan that I was attached, not his successor.”

“Bah!” said Père Frémiet. “You don’t need your salary to live. With your shares in Moon Gold...they’ve gone down a bit since the Wall Street Crash, but it’s still solid. You ought to take advantage of your resignation to take a vacation.”

“We might be going on a tour of the Côte d’Azur.”

I pricked up my ears. It was the first I had heard of that supposed plan.

“The Côte d’Azur! Oh, you lucky people! To roast in the sun at Monte Carlo or Juan-les-Pins, instead of marinating in the rotten spring of Lutèce. We’d gladly come with you, if it were possible!”

“What’s stopping you?”

“What about the business? There’s a crisis—everybody in the world is cutting back, I know, but however few come, one can’t neglect them.”

There was an imperative and prolonged ringing at the door of the apartment.

“It’s him!” cried my aunt, bounding to her feet.

The maid had run to open the door. We heard an alarmed “Monsieur Oscar!” supple and rapid footsteps approaching, and the “young phenomenon” irrupted into the room like a cyclone.

There were little cries of joy from his mother, affectionate nudges from his father, and embraces; then, having taken off his rain-soaked trench-coat, he distributed a double handshake and an amicable wink to Aurore and me.

“Ah, here you are, Aunt Rette! All patched up, then? You’re no longer suffering the effects of the little accident? How are you, Uncle Gaston?”

Although, strictly speaking, Oscar Frémiet was my cousin, the age-difference had caused that fictitious formula of relationship to be adopted for the sake of protocol.

Assailed with questions from his mother, the young man replied to them with affectionate condescension, but was in haste to cut things short. His father looked at him with indulgent and quiet pride. I considered the beardless adolescent with sportive muscles, and pronounced and decisive but youthful features behind his horn-rimmed spectacles, with a sort of amused surprise: that scamp scarcely seventeen years old, of whom I had been making fun only a few months earlier, had suddenly found a vocation as a journalist and had “hooked” a mission worthy of an ace of the profession, thanks to the precocious talent and fortunate initiative he had deployed.

“So, my lad, you got back by air anyway? Your father telephoned...have you at least eaten?”

“Yes, Maman, yes, my old dear,” Oscar said, sitting down at the table, while everyone else resumed their seats. “Don’t get excited. I’ll tell you everything while we all have a cup of coffee. There was no restaurant aboard the plane I came back on—a special flight. My American colleague had furnished himself a solid snack, which I shared with him, but there was nothing to drink except a thermos full of some cocktail. Disembarked at Le Bourget at twenty-ten; headed straight to the *Jour*, deposited my paper...yes, the text of my article...and here I am! Brrr! It’s hot, your coffee, Maman!”

“Don’t choke, my love. Drink first, talk afterwards.”

“It’s okay! A true journalist ought to know everything, even how to talk while drinking a cup of exceedingly hot coffee.”

A true journalist! How well he said that, the scamp! But he spotted the sly smile that I exchanged with Aurore and flashed us a wink of triumphant malice.

“Yes, my friends, you’re laughing because you take me for a child—but it’s you who are young, in spite of your patriarchal age and the respect I owe you, it appears, as my noble ancestors. I warn you that I’m going to boggle your minds.

“I was in Saint-Malo twelve days ago, sent to gather information about the wreck of the English yacht *Calypso*. I’d collected everything I could, and I still had three hours to kill before my train left. While scanning the newspapers in a harbor café I came across a local rag, *Le Navigateur Malouin*, copies of which are hardly ever seen in Paris, and an item caught my eyes. This is it.”

³ Jules Dumont-d’Urville’s entire family perished in France’s first railway disaster on 8 May 1942.

He took out his notebook, extracted a cutting, and read:

“‘A curious find. A locally-based whaler, the *Cachalot-Blanc*, Captain Fargusse...’ I’ll skip the details about fishing and whaling. ‘On the twelfth of February, which is to say, two months ago, the ship was sailing in the part of the Antarctic Ocean called the Ross Sea, at 77° 30’ south latitude and 171° east longitude, a few miles north-east of the volcano Erebus and Cape Crozier. That day, at nine o’clock in the morning, the officer and men of the watch saw and heard a bolide pass over the ship and land of the edge of the ice-sheet. The captain, hoping to sell the aerolith to the Museum, launched a boat to collect the meteor. It proved impossible to find. By way of compensation, the search turned up a marine torpedo deprived of its propeller, embedded in the ice. The discovery of that device, which had doubtless wandered the seas for years before ending up in the Austral region, constituted a document valuable to the study of oceanic currents. It is curious to think that it was the result of a bizarre coincidence, and that without the fall of the bolide...etc.’

“Perhaps you find that story simply curious, like my colleague in Saint-Malo? But I winced at the ‘bizarre coincidence.’ I wanted to see the pseudo-torpedo. The captain of the *Cachalot-Blanc* had already sold it to a scrap-metal merchant, from whom I recovered it. The machine, made of duralumin, not steel, did not possess a propeller, but a reaction-tube.

“In brief, it was, quite simply, an astronomical rocket.”

The young man paused in order to enjoy our astonishment, and then continued: “Since the prohibitions promulgated in the wake of the Lichen misadventure and the great shut-down, against further attempts at ‘interplanetary flights or long-distance flights capable of leaving the terrestrial atmosphere’ astronomical research has, as you know, been severely restricted, no longer permitting—officially, at least—ultra-rapid aircraft propelled by reaction to go beyond the atmosphere. The experiments carried out in places have remained more modest.

“Rockets are, in principle, fitted with a telemechanical apparatus permitting them to return to their point of departure, like a boomerang to the feet of the thrower, but the possibility that an accident might overtake the steering-mechanism has necessarily prevented long-distance trials over inhabited territories. Even in Berlin, where the only known astronomical field in Europe is located, the rockets are always tested in static equilibrium. No launch has, it appears, yet taken place.

“That didn’t prevent me from suspecting that the *Cachalot-Blanc*’s rocket might come from there. I confided my doubts to my boss at the *Jour*, Monsieur Schmidt, who is no idiot, fortunately. Result: two days after the twenty-sixth of March—ten days ago—I left on a special assignment, with letters of recommendation and papers in the name of Jean Vannoz, aviation technician born in Lausanne, Switzerland...

“You did very well, Father, to let me study a little mechanics and send me to spend several vacations in Germany. Don’t worry, I’ll pay you back for that—that and the rest...

“In brief, in the middle of a forest in Tegel, a suburb of Berlin, three-quarters of an hour from Linden on the tramway, I found the airfield for rockets, otherwise known as the *Verem*: a superb tract of land of four square kilometers, with concrete hangars, construction workshops, laboratories, and sentries at the gate. My letters of recommendation were good, though, and the chief engineer, Herr Nebel, accepted me at face value.

“Now, I’ll read you some of the notes that I used to write my article: you’ll have the first taste.”

II. Oscar Frémiet's Notebook

28 March. Watched dismantling of a rocket. A manufacturer's trade-mark wouldn't be more conclusive. It's exactly like the *Cachalot-Blanc*'s "torpedo." A slim cigar two meters long, arched in section at the front like a zeppelin, equipped at the rear with winglets movable by a telemechanical apparatus. Between the base and the winglets is the engine—which is to say, an ignition chamber and a tube through which the hot gases escape, acting by reaction. The carburant reservoir occupies the second third of the interior space. The forward third is simply ballasted with sand, but that sand could be replaced by an explosive, and the machine would be a formidable weapon of war.

29 March. Two rocket trials today, carried out one after another by Nebel for important visitors. It's a great spectacle. The observers and the team of three technicians, of which I was part, took up a position ten meters from the pylon where the rocket was placed, solidly moored in the recoil recorder, with contacts and dynamometers to measure the reaction provoked by the explosive mixture and the power of the rocket-engine. We all crouched down behind sandbags, with helmets on our heads and our eyes protected by a plate of triplex glass.

A switch activates the engine at a distance. A jet of fire spurts in the direction of the ground. A dazzling light illuminates the surroundings. The heat given off is intense. The most disquieting thing, however, is the mysterious sound of the explosion. It translates the colossal forces at work very well: several thousand horsepower during the fifty or sixty seconds that it lasts. Afterwards, the engine is red.

It's true that the air-cooling apparatus can't function in static equilibrium, but engineer Nebel abstains from making that observation to the visitors. And when the inevitable question is asked—"Don't you ever launch rockets?"—he replies: "Oh, we're not nearly ready for that. We don't even have the right fuel yet."

In fact, the product which serves for these experiments is a mixture of benzol and liquid oxygen, very dangerous to handle. The assistant responsible for filling the reservoir dresses in an incombustible asbestos suit, his predecessor having been burned alive.

I heard a reporter from the *Lokal Anzeiger* object: "But what about atomic hydrogen? Hasn't that substance already permitted an American woman, two years ago, to go up to more than a thousand kilometers?"

"*Jawohl*," Nebel replied, "but that substance is excessively delicate to manufacture. The American woman of whom you speak only succeeded in her long-distance flight thanks to special methods for the preparation and liquefaction of the atomic hydrogen. Those methods belong to the Moon Gold Company, which has thus far refused to grant us the slightest license of exploitation."

"You envisage interplanetary navigation, however...?"

"Merely as a distant possibility."

The admitted objective of the research is to permit velocities of transport on earth incomparably faster than any aircraft can provide. There is even a model passenger rocket in hangar D, designed for the Berlin-New York service, which it will make the journey in 23 minutes. But that's just a wooden mock-up.

30 March. I'm learning to read the graphics. This morning's rocket, if it had been allowed to depart freely instead of being confined to its pylon, would have traveled 5,000 kilometers, the one this afternoon 7,500.

31 March. These rockets, which embody variations of design and receive careful improvement here, are never launched from the aerodrome, but they "leave" even so. Once they've been fully tested, they're put in hangar C. When there are twenty of them, a truck takes them away by night to an unknown regulation.

I got this information from an obliging young woman, Ida Miounof, a Polish-born American employed in the wireless office—for the *Verem* has its own private station; another mystery). Between shifts, Mademoiselle Ida likes to wander around the area. I met her in the canteen where we eat at midday. Is she really American? Might her papers be false? I suspect her of being a spy, like me.

2 April. I told her my impression that this field is nothing but a front, a trick. She replied: "Rather like those factories where components are produced of an apparatus that's assembled elsewhere?"

Behind her reticence, I think I detect that she's seen that in Russia. What the devil was she doing in the Soviet Republic?

3 April. Mademoiselle Ida is a journalist like me, working for the *Chicago Daily News*. She confessed that to me while we were dining in a restaurant in Berlin to which I invited her. As good and loyal colleagues, we've made a pact to pool our information. I told her about the *Cachalot-Blanc* rocket. In exchange, she told me that

engineer Nebel and Professor Oberth⁴—the big boss, whom we rarely see—talk to one another about “out there.” And “out there” must be the real experimental field, where rockets are freely launched. Ida often sends coded radio messages—which she doesn’t understand, she says; the coder is a cantankerous and incorruptible old Fraulein, and she has no idea what the destination MAZ4 indicates.

She and I think that the mysterious “out there” is located in the southern hemisphere, on some deserted island in that immense zone of rarely-traveled seas. But where? It would be necessary to make use of several receiving stations to calculate the point of origin of the transmission, MAZ4, by radiogoniometry. That’s not within the scope of two simple journalists on secret assignment.

5 April. No more doubt! The *Verem* serves to camouflage experiments of clandestine armament. This evening, a lucky chance permitted me to overhear a scrap of conversation between Herr Nebel and a visitor in civilian dress with the air of a junker. I arrived soundlessly on my crepe soles at a door standing ajar as the visitor pronounced, in a contained but emphatic voice, in an authoritarian tone: “And above all, no leaks. Germany has to be the first nation to dispose of a sufficient number of these marvelous engines of war.”

I knocked on the door and introduced myself to the engineer with my most naïve expression. He was about to shout at me, irritatedly, but with what could he reproach me? I’d just brought him my daily report; I’d knocked in the regulation fashion. I sensed his sharp gaze scrutinizing me. Had I heard? And if I had, had I understood? And what importance had I attached to the words?

⁴ Hermann Oberth (1894-1989) published the pamphlet *Die Rakete zu den Planetenräumen* [By Rocket into Interplanetary Space] in 1923, and expanded it into the book *Wege zur Raumschiffahrt* [Ways to Spaceflight] in 1929. He was the senior figure in the *Verein für Raumschiffahrt* [Spaceflight Society] whose attempts to popularize the possibility of spaceflight obtained Oberth the privilege of designing the rocket featured in Fritz Lang’s film *Frau im Mond* (1929; subtitled in English as *By Rocket to the Moon* and *Woman in the Moon*), from which Varlet took the inspiration for the character of Aurore Lescure. Varlet could not know in 1936 that Oberth would indeed work on military rocket projects at Peenemünde during World War II, helping to develop the V-2 rocket bomb.