

CHAPTER I
In Which The World Is Astonished
To Find That It Still Exists

A great calm. A nature weary of turning somersaults, which seems to be catching its breath. After the cyclones and the torments, the breeze that is blowing now is scarcely strong enough to disturb a few leaves at the very tops of the trees.

After the deluges of water, which changed the smallest streams into furious torrents, after the eruptions of lava and mud, and after the terrifying tidal wave, nothing but occasional showers of warm drizzle, sleepy rivers, gently-trickling streams, and clear and limpid pools. After the frightful uproar and the formidable collision of all the forces of incensed nature, the most complete silence everywhere: a silence that the birds, still mute, seem to be afraid to disturb.

Human beings, after the five months of the Great Upheaval, observe in surprise that the universe has not been utterly annihilated by decree of the Supreme Will—a fate to which, with their strength exhausted and their nerves stretched to breaking point, they had fully resigned themselves.

During those five months, when the globe shuddered beneath electrical discharges, people eked out a living in their various hiding-places, in the precarious refuges into which they had fled, trembling, shivering and waiting—as their prehistoric ancestors must doubtless have done during the cataclysms of the world's earliest ages.

Having no news of anywhere else, no society existed any longer among the ruins accumulated by the catastrophes, save for small disconnected groups of humans, vegetating while prey to every possible anguish. The humankind of cities, ultra-civilized humankind, thus lived a prehistoric life in caves, with the sole ambition of escaping the wrath of the unchained elements and of finding meager daily nourishment amid all the dangers...

The calm arrived suddenly and unexpectedly; in the space of a few hours the phenomena became less terrifying; the roar of the immense torment faded to groans that grew duller and duller. Finally, daylight reappeared...

The life-cycle of humankind was, therefore, not complete, as everyone had believed. The stupefied universe observed that it still existed. The Sun was still shining, the sky became blue again; the air that people breathed was no longer charged with sulfur and electricity; people could emerge from their holes, cellars, caves, trenches or partly-collapsed houses without the fear of receiving a mountain upon their heads, a tree across their bodies or a Niagara about their legs.

Robert Laforcade, intoxicated with cheerfulness and befuddled by astonishment, recovered consciousness in a covert in the hills of Burgundy, into which he had been thrown without knowing how, where he had lived in holes, quarries, cellars and caves with other fugitives brought from different directions by the catastrophes. Robert perceived that he had a long beard, clothes reduced to tatters held together by threads, a body covered in cuts and bruises, an atrocious hunger and an immense desire to know, now that it was over, what had happened: to take account of events; to learn as quickly as possible what might remain of the old world—and, if he could, to find his wife, about whom he now thought without anger.

Robert Laforcade stood up, raised his arms to the sky and immediately tried to launch himself forwards. He leapt down rapidly to the foot of the crag he had climbed and took a few paces, but his head swam, a pallor invaded his hollow features, and he fell heavily to the ground. Other people ran towards him: emaciated and ragged individuals dressed in the ill-fitting debris of clothes, who had emerged, as he had, from the shelters in which they had long been trembling. These people, companions in misery and terror, seemed almost mad with joy before the extraordinary and sudden appeasement. They rushed to help him, lifting him up and carrying him into a sort of cave hollowed out in the flank of the hill, in which they had been cringing for a fortnight, like their troglodytic ancestors, under perpetual threat of being struck by lightning, crushed, drowned or starving to death.

After long weeks of overexcitement and terror, a crisis of exhaustion had struck Laforcade down just at the moment when the danger seemed abruptly to have vanished.

CHAPTER II
In Which The Survivors Observe Several New Facts
And Some Rather Significant Changes

Robert Laforcade was ill for three months, weak and feverish, suffering—like many others—from nervous exhaustion. He slowly recovered his strength in a large house, which had been discovered open and abandoned near to the refuge. He was cared for by some of his companions—men and women unknown to him before the Great Upheaval, for whom he had once struck down a wild boar with hatchet-blows, at a time when they were suffering greatly from hunger, in the same manner as the ancestors of the world's earliest days, and for whom he had risked his life to go in search of a few meager vegetables in the ravaged fields.

The calm was permanent. Since the day when the immense fracas had been abruptly interrupted, nothing had troubled the gentleness of the appeased elements. There had only been benign winds and benevolent showers of rain, after which rainbows appeared in the field of clouds: the ancient sign of pacification and protection, a symbol of hope greeted by all hearts with the same gratitude as before.

One by one, the refugees had left. The only one who remained with Laforcade in the house whose owners had disappeared was a stout fellow named Houquetot, formerly a petty clerk in the Auxerre registry office, who had run aground there like all the rest, and who had broken a leg in one of the last quakes. Robert Laforcade had been delirious for a long time and then had remained somnolent, oblivious to everything, his head empty and almost devoid of thought. Houquetot had taken a long time to recover the use of his leg, limping from room to room, doing the housekeeping and cooking with the help of a woman from the neighborhood, still bewildered by the prodigious events. He tried to make the convalescent Laforcade rest while he got better, becoming impatient and anxious in the meantime.

"Go? Go?" cried Houquetot. "My dear Monsieur, you were wandering in the head three days ago; you have to be patient, damn it! You and I—but especially you, who were more than three-quarters dead last week—have come too far for a few more days in this house, which is pleasant enough, to be too much of a burden."

"What's the date?" said Laforcade, walking over to the window even though he was still dizzy.

"The 25 or 26... Or perhaps the 30, for..."

"Of what month?"

"December—I'm sure of that."

"Go on!" said Laforcade, dazedly. "I can see greenery, fruits even, and flowers...and yet..."

"As to that, my dear Monsieur, I'd risk breaking my leg again by falling down if I hadn't already got somewhat used to these strange fantasies of the season. It may seem to you to be a literally supernatural excess, but that's the way it is. No, you're not dreaming—and I spend my time mopping my brow, in December!"

"Let's see—it was in early May that the first disturbances..."

"That the Great Upheaval began, just as I was about to draw my salary and be replaced at my desk in the registry office, because..."

"And I remember marking off the days in my pocket-book when I could, while it was still possible to distinguish day from night..."

"Me too!"

"But I had to skip several days."

"So had I!"

"That lasted several months. When it was all finished, we must have been in October."

"As you say—between the 15 and the 22, by my count. Good. Your little accident happened, you fell ill, you spent... hang on... you spent 64 days in bed, so we are now, according to the calculation of Jean Houquetot, ex-clerk at the registry, I have the honor of telling you, between December 25 and 30. Noël, Noël! Merry Christmas! You aren't finished with astonishments..."

"While you were lying there at full stretch, dreaming, and I was sprawled in an armchair by the window with my poor injured foot, I looked out and listened to the tales that the others, who had the use of their legs, brought me from outside. For a week, after the end of the Upheaval, we had winter, snow and ice, fallen leaves, streams covered with ice—then, no less abruptly, warm breezes returned. We thought

that it was autumn, from which we had emerged prematurely, coming back on the scene, but not at all—it was spring!”

“What?”

“Yes, at least a fortnight of a delightful spring after the terrible tumult—of which, despite everything, my head was still full. The frozen fruits on the trees have fallen, have been replaced by flowers which very quickly became buds, then fruits, as you can see, while the summer and autumn succeeded one another with a haste that neither I nor anyone else can understand... along with many other little things, besides.”

“What other things?”

“Almost everything—for instance, the Sun no longer rises on the same side!”

“What?”

“Yes. And the Moon is playing funny games with us. I won’t try to explain it, because my knowledge of astronomy is limited to being able to tell the Sun and Moon apart without too much risk of error, except on foggy days... and at night, the stars aren’t the same as they were...”

“You’re dreaming!”

“I’ve thought I was dreaming, and told myself that the emotions of recent times must be making me see things, but everyone else saw it too... The thing is verified now, the scientists have taken it up, the newspapers are talking about it...”

“The newspapers have reappeared?”

“Life has begun again in the ruins of the world while we were both here being looked after. Hold on—here’s a few that I got in the village. They aren’t the latest issues, but they’re new to us, anyway. Look.”

Houquetot handed Laforcade a few small sheets of printed paper, akin to posters, with large headlines and brief articles, like broadsheets published in times of political crisis. Laforcade unfolded them hastily and scanned them, jumping from article to article, his eyes attracted by the headlines.

OUT OF THE DEPTHS:

It is with tremulous hearts that, as survivors of the terrible cataclysms that have ravaged the globe and threatened its conclusive destruction, we take up the pen again...

The human race has not perished—at least, not entirely. We have emerged from the Great Terror, and have resumed our march along the furrow traced by our ancestors...

Let us not deceive ourselves; it is a new era that is beginning. The old times have gone forever. The Sun has risen on a new world...

IN THE RUINS:

Communications are beginning to be re-established with our nearest neighbors in Central Europe. Under the direction of worthy citizens who have taken the business of government in hand, regiments of workers have taken on the most urgent tasks and are trying to get the principle railways and telegraph lines back in working order. There is no news yet of America, all the cables being broken; the few dispatches sent by wireless telegraphy remain unanswered, but one of the few remaining ships that did not suffer too much damage in the devastated ports is preparing to depart with an elite crew on a voyage of discovery. What news will the new Christopher Columbus bring back?

AMAZING MODIFICATIONS:

It is definitely and routinely in the west that the Sun now rises, as all the world can see. Science is obliged to recognize the extraordinary change that has overtaken the movement of the earth, and the absolutely regular speed at which our globe now turns from east to west, contrariwise to its behavior in past ages. What is the cause of this enormous modification? Is it an effect or a cause? What will its consequences be? Far be it from us to dare audaciously to lean over the vertiginous abyss. Human beings have been punished for their pride, and have perceived that they are but wretched insects, or even less, in the order of nature, which is as incomprehensible as ever and vastly out of range of their intelligence.

THE SILENCE OF THE POLITICIANS:

Hi ho! In the ruins of the flattened world, when efforts to reconstitute society and nations are being made everywhere, here are the debris of our ancient assemblies, the leaders of baneful politics, the supporters and profiteers of the cruel divisions of yesteryear, trying to swim up to the surface of the great shipwreck and seize power again, in order to put things back the way they were before the cataclysm—

which many people elect to see as the merited chastisement of the social follies of a civilization gone astray. Stop there! The apocalyptic lightning-bolts of the Great Terror have shown us the abyss...

THE APPEAL TO SCIENCE:

A congress of prominent figures in all the branches of science is being organized as quickly as possible, which will collect and collate all observations of the present situation of the globe: all the new facts, the paradoxical anomalies overturning ancient givens, reversing the certainties of yesteryear.

What happened during the month of the Great Terror? What is the extent of the terrestrial or cosmic perturbations that we have undergone? Has the active period of these perturbations really come to an end? What modifications have they brought? Are they transitory or permanent?

Absurd rumors reach us from every direction, exaggerations or follies caused by the universal disruption; we shall not reproduce them—it is for science to study and to verify...

Robert Laforcade passed over these articles rapidly, hastening over information on the general disasters, the universal devastations of five terrible months of convulsions. Thus, in times of ancient terrestrial revolutions, the first men must have seen their cities or their poor huts smashed up, their first attempts at civilization stifled and destroyed.

According to all these news items, however, it seemed that the destruction was less than might have been supposed, that the human race had weathered the storm. The number of victims within the population of each nation was certainly immense, but the masses huddling in their shelters had survived.

Robert's companion in suffering, the brave Houquetot—who was evidently cheerful by nature, and had already got recovered in aplomb, forgetful of the catastrophes—drew him from his reading.

“Do you want to know the funniest thing that happened to me, in the universal upheaval? Well, my dear Monsieur, I've got two teeth back that I lost at least 25 years ago! Is it the effect of these springtimes that are coming back to us? And it seems to me that certain stabbing pains that I had begun to get over...”

Robert Laforcade looked at the rags in which he was dressed and rummaged in his torn pockets. He found a few items there: a sturdy knife he had picked up somewhere along the way, which had rendered him sterling service; a box that had once contained matches, a precious treasure that he had been obliged to eke out but which had finally been exhausted; and a damaged wallet, torn and partly burnt, containing the fragments of paper reproduced in a previous chapter. That was all; he, who had formerly dealt in millions, no longer possessed a *sou*.

“How am I to get back to Paris—or what remains of Paris?” he murmured. “No money, and clothes in rags.”

“Bah!” said Houquetot. “Money hasn't yet recovered all of its former value. Besides, I've got about 50 francs in my pocket, and I'll go with you. As for clothes, mine have almost as many holes and frayed edges as yours, but do you think anyone pays any attention to such things in the present state of affairs? Listen—get some rest, have a good night's sleep, and tomorrow we'll be off! You've got a head that aches, and I've got a leg that shakes, so we'll make our way in small stages.”

CHAPTER III
Impressions of Return

Robert Laforcade and Houquetot, limping along and supporting one another, made their way to Paris, assisted and transported from time to time by one of the convoys of carts and carriages carrying provisions, which were occupied in the immense and general task of clearing the ruins and repairing the disasters. Already, with entire populations at work, the greater part of the work was done. Almost everywhere, towns and villages were recovering their former appearance and resuming the normal course of affairs that had been so rudely interrupted.

Everywhere they went, masses of debris or the trees of some fallen forest were being raised up again, broken bridges and land-slipped railway embankments were being re-built, and the ruins of towns burned out or destroyed by earthquakes were disappearing. Everywhere, the entire human ant-hive was at work.

Laforcade, with the practiced eye of a businessman, noticed all these unexpected changes and all the tasks undertaken, marveling at the sight of masses of men working without strife, all with evident good will, their collective efforts perfectly orderly. "How well it's all going!" he cried. "Must men fall victim to great catastrophes for their qualities to gain the upper hand over their faults? One would think that misfortune has brought back calm, reason, wisdom. Has the cataclysm brought back natural man—the good human dough relieved of all evil leavening, the healthy and generous creature?"

"The good times are back—provided that it lasts!" Houquetot rejoiced. "For more than a few days, at least—that being the usual maximum span of good things."

It had to be admitted that the benevolence of everyone towards everyone else was plainly visible: no shouting, no vulgarity, no more quarreling, no more harsh and arrogant superiority, no more envious expressions or angry and hateful glances at others. On the contrary, there was a sort of confused fraternity born of universal ruination and perils shared.

They finally arrived at Neuilly. In a fever that made his heart beat as if it were about to burst, Robert Laforcade no longer saw anything, paying no more attention to the immense upheaval. He no longer felt weary, and hastened towards his house, dragging Houquetot—who could not hold him back—along with him.

Did the quarter still exist? Was his house still standing? He dared not hope any longer; he had not been able to learn anything certain while he was en route. Information, details and stories about what had occurred during the five months of the great catastrophe in the countries of Old Europe, devastated throughout, had arrived by the minute—hurried telegrams, complicated, confused and contradictory news items, including news of the other continents with which communication was being restored—but there had not been the slightest revelation of the fate of Neuilly.

Neuilly, however, still existed in large measure. Finally! A few more steps, a few more avenues to cross, and there was the Laforcade town house, still almost intact. Laforcade abandoned Houquetot and hurled himself forward. The gate was open. A rapid glance in the direction of the concierge's lodge—no one there. Blocks of stone and builders' tools on either side of the façade: the house was being repaired, but the masons were not there; it was lunch-time.

Robert ran up the front steps. As he opened the door to the silent vestibule and stopped, intimidated by the silence, Houquetot caught up with him. At the same instant, a door opened at the far end of the hallway, and a woman appeared in the frame of the doorway.

"Berthe!"

"Alive!"

Robert Laforcade and his wife are in one another's arms. They have both obeyed their immediate impulse. Their second movement is to draw back to look at one another briefly.

Neither of them seems very sure of the reality of the event; they look at one another, the wife still elegant in her simple black garments, the husband, of course, in a bad way in his ragged clothing, with his beard and hair unkempt. But the third movement is a reversion to the first; the wife weeps on her husband's shoulder, and it seems that the husband is spilling as many tears as she is.

"Oh well, not too bad for spouses in the middle of a divorce," said Houquetot. "This might call for a reconciliation!"

CHAPTER IV

The Extraordinary, Unexpected And Stupefying Truth Begins To Reveal Itself

The most obvious traces of the great perturbation disappeared some time ago, thanks to the hard work of the multitude. Seasons have succeeded seasons, years have passed. Society is reconstituted. The world can breathe. There seems to be no reason to fear a new offensive of the cosmic phenomena in which the world nearly perished.

The march of the seasons has become regular, and no longer accelerated, as in the interval immediately following the crisis. Since the commencement of the new era, however, unprecedented and extraordinary events have continued to emerge in abundance, with every passing minute of daily life, and it is, so to speak, the accumulated details of the extraordinary—one little fact after another—that emphasizes the difference between the New Era and the time before with every day that passes.

Monsieur and Madame Laforcade, who were suing for divorce before the great event, are not divorced. The solicitors have not seen either spouse again. That does not mean, alas, that everything is settled! After the initial effusiveness, the emotional shock of Monsieur's return, he and Madame have both recalled memories of painful years of sulking and quarreling; a certain coldness has come back, and the household has begun to exist in a local atmosphere somewhere around zero degrees.

Madame, although much less preoccupied than before by social relationships, is still fretful. Robert is very busy; like everyone else in the wake of the great upheaval he has thrown himself wholeheartedly into work, in order to reconstitute his life and recover the means of subsistence. The general catastrophe has saved him from imminent personal catastrophe, but for him, as for everyone else, incessant effort is necessary to the gradual reformulation of the state of affairs. Even while thus embroiled in work and all sorts of personal and general preoccupations, however, he cannot avoid noticing certain things. There is a sort of continuous amelioration in the conjugal relationship; the glacial atmosphere of the early days seems to be warming. He and his wife speak to one another more easily and in less formal tones of voice. Admittedly, they have a great many new impressions to communicate to one another, and so many more-or-less amazing observations to make to one another.

"Berthe has a charming appearance nowadays," Robert thinks, as he looks at his wife. "She was nearing 36 when it all happened. It's three years since then, and 36 plus three is 39, even if the ultra-rapid seasons of the first phase don't count as years, as people claim. I would never have thought she was as old as that; she's rosier and younger-looking than before!"

"Robert astonishes me," Madame Laforcade said to herself, in the meantime. "The years haven't touched him; on the contrary, he looks better every day!"

And it also seemed to both of them that the same excellent appearances were manifest in the faces and bearing of many of the people surrounding them; doubtless there were exceptions, but, in general, public health was good. There must have been a sort of renewal since the terrible events—to the extent that one might have thought that the earth had purged itself in that bath of lightning and sulfur, as in an immense Turkish bath, of all its ancient impurities and evil ferments.

A few days into this interval, however, Madame Laforcade fell seriously ill. She felt ill one morning; her head became dizzy and she felt weak. The following day, a violent fever kept her in bed.

Robert interrupted his business affairs to wait for the doctor, an old family friend, who had been summoned immediately by telephone. This was Doctor Montarcy, whose work on neurasthenia and the exhaustion or perturbation of the nervous system, no less than his studies of microbial diseases, had elevated him to the first rank of modern therapists. Everyone was familiar with his slender and clean-shaven face, his golden pince-nez and his long snow-white hair.

Monsieur Laforcade had not seen him for a long time, and found him changed—older and a trifle worn out, which was not at all astonishing. After the preliminary explanations, the doctor sank into an armchair next to the invalid and studied her silently, with an anxious attitude that alarmed Robert and the sick woman noticed herself.

"Well, doctor, what are we dealing with?" said Robert. "It's nothing, isn't it?"

"Nothing?" exclaimed the doctor, leaping to his feet so abruptly that his pince-nez fell off. "Nothing, as you put it—but it's immense, it's amazing!"

"I beg your pardon?" said Robert taking him by the sleeve. "Ahem! You're dreaming, my old friend."

"I'm dreaming! When I explain it to you, you'll see whether or not I'm dreaming! You must have some suspicion, though, having noticed..." He took a notebook from his pocket and consulted it, making an occasional note while playing with his pencil-holder. "As observers and analysts, society people really don't shine; they only have eyes, it seems, in order to take delight in their foolishness. So you haven't noticed...but let's get on with it; you'll understand soon enough. You can judge the enormity of the phenomenon and its consequences for yourself—which are, I assure you, extraordinary, unexpected and fantastic. What asses, all the same, what idle talkers—I don't mean you, I mean my intellectual colleagues who are quibbling, still discussing it between themselves, in low voices, so that it doesn't get out too quickly..."

Robert and Berthe, who had become very pale, looked at one another anxiously.

"It's necessary to finish up by recognizing it for what it is. Madame's illness, for whose effects I grieve, will serve as my immediate demonstration."

Berthe was on the point of fainting.

"I've never seen you like this, doctor," cried Robert, furiously. "Are you in your right mind today? Can't you see that you're scaring your patient? It's nothing very serious, though—I'm sure of it!"

"Nothing very serious—on the contrary, as you shall see! If you recall, I've already treated Madame for this...wasn't it about nine years ago?"

"Yes, indeed, nine years ago, Berthe was rather ill—a nervous illness, primarily, but not very serious."

"That's exactly it... This will be more benign, don't worry..."

"But you said..."

"I said that nothing in the world was more serious, in terms of consequences more than phenomenal, almost extravagant, of which I hesitate even to give you a glimpse. Formidable consequences, which...but you...you cannot, however, have failed to notice some of the strange things that constitute, not merely veritable breaches of ancient natural laws but inversions of them—their complete reversal, my dear Robert!"

"Certainly," said Robert, impatiently. "Numerous bizarre things, reversals of the seasons—but that's not the point. Let's get back to my wife's illness."

"But I already got to it, when I told you that it's the illness she had nine years ago..."

"Yes, but..."

"But it's the same, my friend, the same! But beginning at the end, of course, for Madame Laforcade is presently suffering the last ill-effects of her convalescence. They will become exaggerated, and then..."

Robert and his wife looked at one another.

"He's wandering in the head," thought Robert.

"He's mad," Berthe told herself, somewhat reassured. "I like that better."

"No, I'm not mad!" exclaimed the doctor, who had understood the significance of that exchanged glance. "Not at all! Listen to me. When I tell you that it's the illness you suffered nine years ago that has come back, I mean that it's you who have returned to that epoch of your life, in the course of the general reversal to which we are all subject—you, me, the neighbors, and every other human being on Earth, and perhaps our entire Solar System! Have you got it yet? Do you understand? Have you grasped it? I'm giving you the key to the strange events and improbable phenomena, in the midst of which science is arguing against itself, trying to hypothesize, to comprehend, to co-ordinate..."

"I'm not the only one to have understood, of course; scientists everywhere studying their particular specialties, assembling the facts, have arrived at the same conclusions, and the truth has become obvious! Many of them, of course, are still struggling and don't want to yield to the sovereign evidence of the facts, but the last resistance will collapse when this year's International Congress, which opened three weeks ago, hears the report of the committee appointed last year..."

Madame Laforcade, very pale as she lay on her pillow, said nothing, her eyes questioning her husband, who was thinking hard, with his head in his hand.

"Yes, my friend, life is going backwards—that's the absolute truth! The universal upheaval, in the course of which the human race thought it had reached its end, was more complete than anyone thought in the early days that followed the Great Terror, when the first strange and bizarre things were observed. One cannot say that the world has ended, since it continues in its course, but it is continuing in the reverse direction! After the great breakdown, when one might have believed that time was in revolt, the clock of the centuries started working again—but it's working in reverse. The world, in short, is going backwards!"

Berthe could not help smiling.

“Oh, you can laugh!” said Doctor Montarcy. “Don’t hold back—plenty of others have laughed through their noses at me and all the others who were among the first to solve the great mystery. But let’s get back to you—how old were you nine years ago, when you fell ill? About 30, weren’t you? Well, you’re 30 once again—you’re reaching that milestone for the second time, but from the opposite direction. Come on, my dear Laforcade, look at your wife—haven’t you noticed that she’s getting younger every day? She thinks she’s 39, but she’s only 30, my friend, and next year she’ll be no more than 29! There you are! There’s nothing in that to cause you grief. And you, my friend, are nine years younger too, as am I and everyone else in the world...it’s quite simple. Hold on, look at me for a moment: honestly, don’t you think that I’ve been growing younger for some time?”

“My word, doctor,” said Robert, laughing, “since you’re appealing to my honesty, I’m forced to confess that it doesn’t appear so.”

“Truly?”

“Yes, I think you’ve aged. Your hair’s white...”

“White! But I have to wear a wig nowadays, my hair having fallen out...”

“That doesn’t seem to me to be a sign of rejuvenation, you know...”

“On the contrary! My hair has fallen out—my white hairs—but others are growing, black ones...look!”

With a rapid gesture, the doctor flung away his respectable crown of white hair. Underneath it, his head had a close-shaven appearance, and was almost completely black.

“Extraordinary!” said Robert.

The doctor picked up his wig and brandished it, his pince-nez dancing a frantic saraband. “And I feel, my friend, the youth that’s coming back to me. I was in the winter of my life, but here I am in the middle of autumn! Tomorrow will be summer, the glorious summer of valor and strength! The day after will be spring, with all its promises. Oh no, let’s say no more about promises... spring no longer promises anything...”

Berthe let her head fall back, and closed her eyes.

“But we’re tiring you out, Madame,” said the doctor, putting his wig back on and letting his enthusiasm fade away. Her convalescence is passing now and she’s definitely a little worse; you’ll have to wait for the fever to die down, but it won’t be anything much... Let’s leave her to rest; I’ll give you a prescription...”

Robert took the doctor to his study and sat him down at the desk. He heard people talking in the drawing-room and opened the door, having recognized the voices. There were two people there he knew: the old and celebrated writer Palluel, and the worthy Houquetot. They had come in search of news of Madame Laforcade, having learned that she was ill.

“It’s nothing,” Robert replied to their first question, “or almost nothing.”

“On the contrary, it’s all very serious!” exclaimed the doctor, while scribbling his prescription.

Palluel and Houquetot looked at Robert. “I’m talking about the illness, doctor,” said the latter.

“Ah! Good, the convalescence is over; here comes the worst of the fever!”

“Eh? What’s he saying? Funny doctor!” murmured Houquetot.

“I’ll explain it to you shortly,” said Robert.

“Don’t explain anything—don’t abuse my confidence. When I’ve revealed the matter to the Congress, and all the world will know—your friends can wait until then!”

Palluel and Houquetot sat down, looking at one another curiously. Palluel had been visiting the Laforcades frequently for some time, Madame Laforcade having suddenly recovered her sympathy for the venerable but scarcely worldly and elegant historian. As for Houquetot, who had made Robert’s acquaintance in such terrible circumstances, he had become a friend of the family, and Robert had found him a job that completely realized his most ambitious aspirations: easy work and modest duties.

The doctor had finished scribbling; his pen had cracked audibly as he underlined his signature with a flourish. He was now making notes in his pocket-book, while his pince-nez continued performing acrobatics.

“There you are,” he said, getting up. “I’ll come back tomorrow. Not a word until this evening—this afternoon I’m reading a summary of my observations to the Congress of Investigation and I’ll reveal everything. Ah, Monsieur Palluel. Delighted to see you, my dear colleague! Are you keeping well? Look at me—you seem a little peaky?”

“Not at all, not at all!” exclaimed Palluel, getting up excitedly.

“Yes, yes, you can’t hide anything from me—I’ve got it. I still have a physician’s eye for deciphering the slightest untoward symptom in the most unreadable physiognomy. You’re not looking well, my friend—take care of yourself!”

“Doctor,” said Robert, laughing, “you’re terrible this morning. You see illness everywhere. Monsieur Palluel is holding up very well. Personally, I think he looks superb—flourishing.”

“Well, I can discern an anxiety in his expression. Come on, my dear colleague, you’re a studious man, admit that you feel a certain anxiety about... Let’s see, I can’t explain myself too clearly... About all these phenomena that your observant mind cannot have failed to perceive, and for which you’re seeking an explanation...”

“Well yes, that!” Palluel admitted. “I’m worried about the general state of affairs, and particularly on my own account. There’s something that’s bothering me personally—I’ve gone back to writing poetry!”

“What? But that’s excellent. You have every reason to go back to writing poetry!”

“Yes, yes, I’ve gone back to it—except that I dread that I’m returning to childhood and, not to put too fine a point on it, going senile, because, all the verses that I write, I discover subsequently that I’ve written them before!”

“Very good! Very good! Oh, how delighted I am that you’ve told me that! Let me make a little note. And these verses that are coming back to you—when did you write them?”

“Thirty-five years ago!”

“Perfect! I anticipated as much... Irregularity in the phenomena, some proceeding more quickly, others more slowly... You’ve corroborated it, my friend. Thank you!”

“What do you think, then?”

“You’re returning to childhood, as you said. Me too! Come with me to the Congress and you’ll understand!”

“I beg your pardon, doctor,” Houquetot put in. “Since you’re here, spare a second consultation for me, for I also have things to tell you...”

“Verses are coming back to you too?”

“Oh no, not that—with me, it’s teeth. This is the 12th one that’s come through again! I’m dying of starvation—my gums are permanently swollen!”

“How old are you?”

“I’ve jumped the six.”

“What?”

“I’m over 60.”

“Well, you’ve jumped the six again, and the five, and perhaps the four. Don’t worry—you’ll understand this evening. To the Congress, my dear Monsieur Palluel!”

CHAPTER III
Impressions of Return

Robert Laforcade and Houquetot, limping along and supporting one another, made their way to Paris, assisted and transported from time to time by one of the convoys of carts and carriages carrying provisions, which were occupied in the immense and general task of clearing the ruins and repairing the disasters. Already, with entire populations at work, the greater part of the work was done. Almost everywhere, towns and villages were recovering their former appearance and resuming the normal course of affairs that had been so rudely interrupted.

Everywhere they went, masses of debris or the trees of some fallen forest were being raised up again, broken bridges and land-slipped railway embankments were being re-built, and the ruins of towns burned out or destroyed by earthquakes were disappearing. Everywhere, the entire human ant-hive was at work.

Laforcade, with the practiced eye of a businessman, noticed all these unexpected changes and all the tasks undertaken, marveling at the sight of masses of men working without strife, all with evident good will, their collective efforts perfectly orderly. "How well it's all going!" he cried. "Must men fall victim to great catastrophes for their qualities to gain the upper hand over their faults? One would think that misfortune has brought back calm, reason, wisdom. Has the cataclysm brought back natural man—the good human dough relieved of all evil leavening, the healthy and generous creature?"

"The good times are back—provided that it lasts!" Houquetot rejoiced. "For more than a few days, at least—that being the usual maximum span of good things."

It had to be admitted that the benevolence of everyone towards everyone else was plainly visible: no shouting, no vulgarity, no more quarreling, no more harsh and arrogant superiority, no more envious expressions or angry and hateful glances at others. On the contrary, there was a sort of confused fraternity born of universal ruination and perils shared.

They finally arrived at Neuilly. In a fever that made his heart beat as if it were about to burst, Robert Laforcade no longer saw anything, paying no more attention to the immense upheaval. He no longer felt weary, and hastened towards his house, dragging Houquetot—who could not hold him back—along with him.

Did the quarter still exist? Was his house still standing? He dared not hope any longer; he had not been able to learn anything certain while he was en route. Information, details and stories about what had occurred during the five months of the great catastrophe in the countries of Old Europe, devastated throughout, had arrived by the minute—hurried telegrams, complicated, confused and contradictory news items, including news of the other continents with which communication was being restored—but there had not been the slightest revelation of the fate of Neuilly.

Neuilly, however, still existed in large measure. Finally! A few more steps, a few more avenues to cross, and there was the Laforcade town house, still almost intact. Laforcade abandoned Houquetot and hurled himself forward. The gate was open. A rapid glance in the direction of the concierge's lodge—no one there. Blocks of stone and builders' tools on either side of the façade: the house was being repaired, but the masons were not there; it was lunch-time.

Robert ran up the front steps. As he opened the door to the silent vestibule and stopped, intimidated by the silence, Houquetot caught up with him. At the same instant, a door opened at the far end of the hallway, and a woman appeared in the frame of the doorway.

"Berthe!"

"Alive!"

Robert Laforcade and his wife are in one another's arms. They have both obeyed their immediate impulse. Their second movement is to draw back to look at one another briefly.

Neither of them seems very sure of the reality of the event; they look at one another, the wife still elegant in her simple black garments, the husband, of course, in a bad way in his ragged clothing, with his beard and hair unkempt. But the third movement is a reversion to the first; the wife weeps on her husband's shoulder, and it seems that the husband is spilling as many tears as she is.

"Oh well, not too bad for spouses in the middle of a divorce," said Houquetot. "This might call for a reconciliation!"