

IX. The Accident on the North-South

The article has interested us so keenly that we almost forgot Aurore's appointment. When we finished reading it was ten past three. In order to reach Nathan's house by half past, we only just had time to take the North-South to the Madeleine station and cross the road.

On the way, we talked about it.

"You see, Aurette, you're no longer at risk of disgrace when people discover your identity. Now they'll crown you with honors. Thanks to the anticipations of this enthusiastic scientist, you've become a benefactress of humanity. It's good for you, this article—I no longer hold his rudeness against him."

"It's good for me, and for the reception that awaits my father and Lendor tomorrow...yes, but all the same, it commits an injustice that I won't forgive him. It doesn't say a word about Dr. Alburtin. To read it, one would think that it was Nathan who had the inspired idea of experimenting on the meteorites with X-rays."

We reached the Metro entrance at the junction, facing the tramway stop. A hand-written placard fixed to the double doors at the foot of the staircase announced without commentary: *The circulation of trains on line 3 (Champerret-Gambetta) is suspended between Saint-Lazare and Villiers stations. The latter station is temporarily closed to the public.*

The same idea occurred to us, provoked by the professor's commentaries on the acceleration of the lichen's growth.

"Some minor accident," I said, in a tone that attempted detachment.

"Villiers station is near the Hôtel Métropole," Aurore added, simply, without looking at me.

At the entrance to the platform, a suffocating odor of rotting flowers replaced the phenol of the corridors, which testified to an attempt at disinfection. Under the vault of the station a dull, non-human rumor was audible. One might have thought that it was the noise of a forest whose branches were cracking under a winter frost, mingled with crepitations. The lights—"diseased" for the most part, wrapped in vegetal networks—were reddening. Crowded on the platform edge, the travelers were opening their eyes wide and scratching themselves silently.

The Xemobiota had invaded the tracks—but it was no longer a timid offensive, as at Villiers that morning; a vehement thrust of the extraterrestrial creation was developing aggressive battalions of lichen on the rails, a reddish-purple coating bristling with spikes, like a giant crystallization. In the vault, packets of branched stalactites were hanging from the two trolley-wires and the three feeder cables. Here and there, new prolongations of these vegetal masses, as thick as a thumb and as long as a hand, were visibly surging forth, developing like the sections of an expanding telescope...or, better, like those party balloons into which one blows. After a brief interval, a blood-red bubble formed at the tip of the arm, which burst with a noise like a child's pop-gun, projecting its dust of spores.

The spectacle hypnotized us all. Not a word was pronounced during the four or five minutes that the train made us wait. Finally, it arrived, whistling. It stirred up a cloud of dust, noisily crushing the vegetation on the rails. The front of the engine was scared and stained with red, as if it had just cleared a path through an abattoir. Oblique traces of the same kind striped the walls of the carriages.

It was hideous, but the force of habit engulfed the passengers in the carriages. The people getting out were uttering sighs of relief and hastening toward the exit. The doors slammed. The conductor gave the signal. Slowly, the train went into the tunnel.

Our first-class carriage was moderately furnished. Aurore was able to sit down on a folding seat; I remained standing beside her. Our neighbors, afflicted with mutism, gazed apprehensively at the sick light-bulbs while scratching mechanically. Seeing one of them completely masked by its carapace of crimson lichen, a tall and gangling boy-scout took a "Swedish knife" from his belt and started scraping the bulb. His example was soon followed, and the cleaned lamps brightened, lightening the moral atmosphere of the carriage.

At La Concorde, a flood of passengers getting on jam-packed the carriage, pressing me against Aurore, who was obliged to get up from her folding seat—but I had the warmth of her body against my side and shoulder, and the communion of our gaze rid the silence of its constraint.

Meanwhile, the pause went on. On the platform, facing us, the station-master, leaning over his telephone was alternating replies directed into the apparatus with remarks to the train conductor, who was waiting at the door of his glazed cabin. Finally, the difficulty seemed to be resolved. We moved off—at reduced speed, as if the train were groping its way. Half way from Chambre-des-Députés we slowed down even more, and then stopped. After two or three minutes, there was a false start; we went forward a few meters, then stopped again, definitively.

Even though they are quite familiar to Parisians, these breakdowns in mid-tunnel are always slightly disturbing; people think about possible accidents. Today, in that carriage lit by blood-stained bulbs and surrounded by a rumor of monstrous menace, it was agonizing.

Stopped indefinitely...the impatience among all those people, in a hurry to reach their destinations, broke the silence. People murmured, in low voices at first, then loudly.

"What are they waiting for, then?" complained a man in a bowler hat and tinted spectacles—doubtless a teacher.

"Take care of the lamp above your head, then," the boy-scout said to him. "It's starting to get murky again."

Aurore raised her wrist-watch toward me, on which I read 3:27. "I won't get there by half-past."

"And he's perfectly capable of refusing to see you, if you're late!"

Silence fell again. People stopped talking, in the hope of hearing a signal outside—an order from the conductor, or the noise of an employee's footsteps on the track. In the sonorous silence of the tunnel, however, there was still nothing more than a dull rumor mingled with crackling, rustling and snapping sounds...the enormous growth of the Lichen at work...and also the purr of a violent air current, whose movement through the open ventilators was tangible.

"Can you hear it?" Aurore said to me. "That's the rush of air created by the lichen's nutrition, which is absorbing the atmosphere of the tunnel on a massive scale."

I admired her scientific presence of mind.

Behind me, though, there is a shrill, strangled scream. I turn round, as all the passengers do.

"There...there! It touched my neck! It's all warm!"

A fat woman, her features twisted in fear beneath her make-up and her eyes bulging, is pointing to an open ventilator at the top of a window, through which a hideous red thing has surged, like a flayed fist. People jostle one another trying to get a look at it. Peering more carefully, I distinguish behind the glass, among the reflections of the illuminated interior objects in the blackness of the tunnel, an enormous tentacle of lichen, whose growth has introduced its tip into the carriage.

"The fungus! The Lichen! The Xenobiota!" All the names applied to the cosmic vegetation spring forth at once. The danger has been realized: the accelerated, lightning-fast growth.

Shrill female squeals...frightened, indignant exclamations.

"They aren't going to let us go..."

A confirmed alarmist affirms: "The lichen has invaded the tunnel; the train's stuck inside; we'll be crushed, asphyxiated..."

Everyone looks at his neighbors, tensely, only waiting for a signal...and there'll be panic. I see Aurore's lips quivering, her eyes searching mine for a composure that is in the process of escaping me, under the pressure of the unanimous folly. Desperately, I take refuge in the obsessive idea of protecting Aurore at all costs. I lean toward her.

"Pay attention, my dear." She is backed up in the angle formed by a seat-back and the window of the carriage. I turn slightly and enclose her within the barrier of my arms, my hands on the aluminum bar. "Don't move. We're going to get out through this door here, since there's an emergency ladder to get down to the track."

Outside, the tunnel is filing with cries, the sound of footsteps: the gallop of a stampeding herd. The passengers in the other carriages fleeing toward the station?

In our carriage, everyone runs to the forward doors and, in the reddened penumbra of the invaded bulbs, they strike out with their fists, trying to break down the doors. In vain—they're blocked.

"What about us? Aren't they going to let us out? They're going to let us die! Guard! Here! The first-class coach! Never mind—let's get out of the windows."

The sound of breaking glass. Outside, the majority of the fugitives have gone past. Calls for help, vituperations, blasphemies from the laggards...a revolver shot resounds, close at hand.

"Get out, quickly! Move, damn it! Damnation!"

At our end of the carriage, however, the small communication door opens, and the white beam on an acetylene lamp, brandished by a controller, leaps to my eyes. And a sub-officer commands: "Attention in there! Order to evacuate the train and proceed on foot to Chambre-des-Députés station. But the current hasn't been cut off...we haven't been able to telephone the sector. Watch out—beware of the electric rails. Walk well within the rolling trails or outside to the left. No jostling, one at a time—but hurry up!"

While everyone starts running, the man comes to the door close to which Aurora and I remain in isolation, and pulls a lever that opens the battens, through which the wind rushes in, and the tempestuous racket of the growing lichen. He hangs his searchlight on the bar of a luggage-rack, lifts the chain securing the iron ladder flattened against a seat-back, rotates it on its axial support and, guiding it outside the carriage, lowers it into the retaining groove, amid a muffled sound of breaking branches.

"Exit this way!"

The man goes down first, lantern in hand—and the bright acetylene beam reveals the spiky red thicket of the lichen that is extending its tentacles underneath the carriage.

I hoped that, in view of our favorable position, Aurora and I would be the first to get down after him, but all the passengers have flooded back *en masse* toward that doorway.

The disappearance of the lantern has left us in almost complete darkness; the light-bulbs, left to their own devices, have ended up masking themselves. Clinging to a bar with one hand, holding Aurora in front of me with the other, I succeed initially in retaining our position of priority in spite of the pressure, but at the moment when, letting go of the bar, I advance my hand toward the vertical ramp at the top of the ladder, some big devil takes advantage of it to knock my hand away with a blow of his fist, pushes me back furiously, takes my place, and gets down.

For two seconds, at the very edge of the gaping opening, wedged among the frightful jostling of the front rank, in which people are using their elbows to resist the pressure, I sway, with nothing more to retain me, and with Aurora in my arms, braced with all my strength.

"Don't push, damn it! Let us get down!"

A surge shoves me...we are thrust over the edge.

Not directly on to the track; branches deaden the fall, breaking dryly like elder-twigs. I fall on my side, my companion on top of me; she hasn't even made contact with the ground. Getting to her feet first, she helps me to do likewise.

"No harm done, Aurora?"

"No harm done, Gaston?"

The ladder, a few paces away, disgorges the fugitives one by one. Hand in hand, we insert ourselves into the Indian file, for the space between the carriage and the wall of the tunnel is not wide enough to walk two abreast.

Under our feet, a path has been cleared, but the proliferation is continuing frenziedly under the carriages: a confused mass from which menacing limbs project, tentacles that brush us as we pass by. The cries of the fugitives ahead of us and behind us don't drown out the confused din of the busy lichen; it fills the tunnel with its gigantic and hectic growth. And ever stronger, the roar of the formidable flood of air that lashes our faces, and against which we labor.

Bravely, Aurora follows me; I feel her stumble.

"Am I going too quickly?"

"No, no! Go on—there's someone stepping on my heels."

And in front of us and behind us, in the trotting file, always cries of: "Faster! Get a move on!"

Surpassed, the first two second-class carriages, empty inside, with bloody light-bulbs. Now we're in the dark; in the light of the acetylene lantern, lost in the distance, red stalactites stand out. I stumble over a bush of warm tentacles; it's impossible to advance. Has the lichen suddenly blocked the passage? No—the path veers to the left to take the middle of the rails.

We go on between two confused, bristling walls full of crepitations, which rise up to shoulder-level. Above our heads hang stalactites whose tips brush us; my arms and torso bump into warm spongy tentacles, the little ones giving way elastically, the larger ones shattering...and the man in front of me is no more than five meters away! The crazy living growth is still accelerating.

In a funereal nightmare, I march hopelessly, struggling against the Niagara of air that whips us, with Aurore in tow, mute, breathless, stumbling, through that living grotto, the enchanted wood that is slyly attempting to bar our passage, to blockade us among its fronds, to swallow us...

To reach the station! Where is it? There's no more trace of light visible ahead, not even a signal. Is the tunnel already blocked by the lichen? No, the torrent of air proves that its remains free.

Cries of protest and oaths propagate behind us, getting closer—a furious stampede catches up with us...a violent impact of Aurore's hand against mine...and I fall down with her, shoved sideways by someone overtaking us in the branches of lichen.

A hideous impression, feeling those branches give way beneath one! Of being buried in a swarming mass of dry, warm tentacles, which yield beneath one's hand, slip away beneath one's feet, making me despair of ever being able to get up again. And on the path, the fugitives, who are panicking and howling in fear!

"Aurette! My Aurette!"

Her silence scares me. She has fallen down with a little groan and is still lying there, abandoned. On my knees, leaning over her, I gently palpate her face. She exhales, in a breath: "It's over. I'm going to faint. Leave me—save yourself, beloved!"

The confession fills me with a surge of triumph and desperation. She loves me! At last!

And we're doomed!

Those few seconds of immobility have sufficed for the lichen to invade us with its inexorable dust. Like those of an octopus endowed with intelligent purpose, the dry, warm tentacles have multiplied their garotte around the recumbent body. Blindly, I tear them away in fistfuls, break them and try to free her from them—but they renew themselves constantly, and others elongate. I'm gripped myself, invaded, entangled in the multiple and disgusting embrace of those slender, dry, warm limbs...

It's over. It's death...

And, in a despairing surge of ecstasy, I deposit on the lips of my beloved the first kiss, which will also be the last...

What does that clamor of deliverance rising up in the distance of the tunnel matter to me? Those people out there, crying their joy at being saved...

Me, I shall die happy.

But what's happening? In addition to those cries, and the decreasing roar of the air-current, which is slackening, there's a kind of enormous silence in the tunnel, an incomprehensible lacuna, the stopping of something. No more crepitations, no more crackling; the enchanted forest of living and aggressive branches has been frozen in immobility, as abruptly as the flick of a switch. And the tentacles over Aurore and me are also frozen...I still remain in their grip, but the octopus seems to have been struck by catalepsy.

Suddenly, I understand the meaning of the cries that are getting closer.

"The current's been cut off! There's no more danger in walking on the electric rails!"

The lichen is paralyzed, for want of electrical nourishment; the pressure of life has paused. We're saved...saved! And Aurore loves me!"

With thrusts of the hips, feet and fists, I detach myself, breaking and tearing away the still-warm tentacles. I free Aurore, take her in my arms and pick her up...

We're alone, the last to remain; everyone else has decamped, saved. And the memory comes back to me of the occasion of our first meeting, in Cassis, when I held her in the same way in Alburstin's automobile. But this time, she loves me!

A wave of heroic vigor carries me way, and I no longer feel the weight of my cherished burden.

Ten paces, and beyond an unsuspected bend in the tunnel, the noisy platform of the station appears, where silhouettes are agitating in the light of acetylene searchlights. Others come to meet us—rescuers...

In my arms, Aurore is reborn, reanimated, and wants to be put on the ground.

"I can walk, Gaston, I assure you. That ridiculous weakness has passed."

I refuse. Triumphant, exultant, I'm about to express my joy at her confession—but a nurse comes up to me and asks: "Is she injured? Does she need a stretcher?" And when I set Aurore on her feet in order to demonstrate that she has no need of one, the woman supports her by the other arm, and, when we reach the end of the platform, helps her climb the iron ladder.

The nurse, in her solicitude, as if she is reluctant to let go so soon of her last two refugees, insists that we drink a cordial—authentic Green Chartreuse, no less. Nurses, doctors and firemen surround us, and journalists too—but thanks to one of their colleagues, who happened to be in the train during the accident and is dictating an article to them, we're able to escape without difficulty. I even see someone make a gesture of surprise at the sight of Aurore, and take a step toward her...but I was already drawing her toward the stairway.

Once through the barrage of agents and the crowd, having covered 50 meters, we finally breathed again, on the Quai d'Orsay.

Aurore disengaged her arm, which I was still supporting.

“The air is doing me good. Shall we walk for a little while?”

Under the half-defoliated trees of the Quai, between the Seine and the road-traffic, it seemed to me that we had returned to real life. The previous minutes, spent underground, in the power of the Lichen, appeared more phantasmagorical than an opium or hashish dream. If the memory of the intimate form of address and the supreme word “beloved” had not been profoundly engraved in my heart, I would have doubted that I had heard them. In any case, I experienced a certain modesty in recalling them; I felt that she had let me glimpse, by surprise, a forbidden underside of her soul; it had been a mistake; after that confession, she *ought* to have died. Having both survived, there could be no more question of it between us—and yet, since I knew...how could I recover the simple good comradeship that she had imposed on me in the preceding days?

So be it! I could not surrender myself to the triumphant surge that had lifted me up just now, but I could at least, by means of an allusion...

She was walking by my side, pensively, sometimes observing me obliquely. She had guessed what was passing through my mind. She was following the course of my sentiments. At the very moment when I was about to speak, she stopped me.

“No, Gaston, my dear friend—not now. No irremediable speeches. Listen to me. Only one thing happened, in the tunnel, when I fell: that you renounced saving yourself in order to attempt to save me, or die with me. I didn't say anything. Nothing. It doesn't count, since we're here, alive. It's necessary that it doesn't count. Nothing should or can be changed between us. Except, the memory of your devotion...”

“Good comrade!” I could not help exclaiming, bitterly.

“You see? You're incapable of restraining yourself, just now. It's necessary, for the future of our friendship, that we don't stay together today. We're going to go our separate ways. Here's a taxi”—and, raising her arm, she stopped the car, which came to a stop alongside the sidewalk—“which will take me back to my hotel. I'll rest, sleep—don't worry about me. In compensation, I'll come to your studio tomorrow morning, for a sitting.”

“The last...”

“And then we can talk. But I repeat, in the name of our friendship—no allusion to the forbidden word that the supreme danger extracted from me. Is that agreed?”

“Yes, Aurette. It's agreed.”

“Until tomorrow, then, Gaston—9 a.m.”

And, briskly saying “Hôtel Métropole” to the driver, she climbed into the cab and slammed the door—but she opened the window in order to give me, in the guise of a better farewell, a frank, honest smile of loyal friendship.