

AN INVASION OF MACROBES

CHAPTER III

As soon as the soirée was over I went home. My apartment was in the Chaussée de la Muette, in the delightful quarter of Paris bordering the Bois de Boulogne. I plunged into my sheets, but although I was very tired, I could not go to sleep at first. A nagging thought was running through my head, which one word dropped into Tornada's rambling summarized in its entirety.

What was the meaning of the term "macrobe," which he had pronounced several times? Not that I had any trouble establishing its etymology. *Macrobe* was obviously the term opposite to *microbe*, signifying very large, in the same way that the latter term signifies very small. It wasn't necessary to be much of a Hellenist to deduce that. But how big had those animals been able to grow, assuming that the scientist really had developed them abnormally? Would they have a destructive effect as phenomenal as his sinister prophecy indicted?

No! It would become slightly unhinged oneself even to dream of it. And I strove to drive away that stupid anxiety. As it did not cease to recur, I thought about my fiancée, and then about my automobile, which I had just changed in order to buy a more powerful one. My imagination placed Suzanne in the vehicle by my side, while Monsieur Vernet was in the back seat, and I finally departed for a delightful excursion that occupied my entire slumber.

The next morning, I woke up feeling very spry. It required the perception of my newspaper to remind me of the incidents of the previous day. I opened it unhurriedly, without even searching for some sensational headline. Anyway, the rag contained nothing new, except that the railway strike was still threatening. I got dressed and had breakfast cheerfully, and went out under a radiant sky in order to go to the Institut Pasteur on foot.

I felt less enthusiasm than usual to devote myself to my customary tasks that day. Those who love the atmosphere of a laboratory know the veritable satisfaction one experiences in going into rooms bathed with light, putting on the long white smock that is like a uniform for pupils and their masters alike, and sitting down amid the greetings of comrades at the glass-topped table garnished with the hundred various utensils whose precious mechanism and ingenious complication aids bacteriological research. In truth, I felt that I was a very small and very modest cog in the vast factory of health to which the great Pasteur gave the initial impetus, but it seemed that the scientist's memory encouraged my efforts, and that his glorious past was prolonged in my humble labor.

That day, as I said, I took longer than usual to make the journey. I would gladly have let myself idle. The weather was so conducive to dreaming, and nature was putting such seduction into everything! The young leaves on the trees had never been as green, the air was calm, as fluid as the celestial spaces. Everything was vibrant with the joy of spring, and the Seine, which I crossed by the Pont de la Concorde, deliberately extending my route in order to savor the terrestrial beauty more fully, was nothing but a vast crucible in which a thousand diamonds were glittering, given birth by a breeze that was adorable to breathe.

My hopes as a fiancé came into unison with the tenderness scattered over the city; I saw myself a few months older—our marriage was arranged for the middle of August—holding Suzanne in my arms, walking beside the river, initiating her into the marvels of the great liquid way, renewed at every hour of the day, adopting, in accordance with the influence of the light—mist, sunshine, darkness, even rain and storms—such diverse and ever-seductive appearances. The quays silent or animated; the water peaceful with the slumber of boats, or noisy with the bustle of barges, the smoky and whistling passage of steamboats; the bridges crowded or deserted; the reflections of grave monuments or the pure profiles of

domes, towers, belfries—yes, the whole river was a poem that I would read with Suzanne, and no power in the world, save for death, would be able to prevent me from traveling it with her.

But I perceived that I was late. I hailed a cab; and, rapidly transported to the Institut Pasteur, I went through the door and reached my laboratory.

As I went in I was surprised to find a highly unusual animation there. Twenty students were surrounding one of my colleagues, who was leaning over a microscope, listening to him pronounce words whose meaning I could not grasp, but to which bursts of laughter replied. I advanced toward them. It was only then that the name of Tornada, which was stimulating their gaiety, reached my ears and reminded me, with a disagreeable—even painful—sentiment, of the previous evening's scene, to which I had not given another thought, so much had my thought built me an ivory tower inaccessible to the actions of others.

"Here's Gérard!" exclaimed my colleague, perceiving me. "You've arrived just in time, my dear friend, to give us your opinion. Put your eye to this microscope..."

I did as I was asked; taking his place, I interrogated the field of the apparatus, which was extremely powerful. I saw there, moving between the two transparent slivers of the preparation, several animalcules of a form that was unknown to me. Magnified a thousand times, they presented a swollen central section with seeming extremities, one a tail and one a head, the latter rather elongated and endowed with a few vibratile movements. The ensemble was, moreover, rather confused, for one can imagine how tiny an animal is that has to be magnified to that extent for one to begin to make it out.

"Do you recognize that dirty beast?" joked my colleague, addressing himself to me.

"No."

"What might it be?" he asked, again.

I consulted the objective again.

"I don't know."

"Well, no, my dear chap; it's the famous *Micrococcus aspirator* of alkaline environments described by Tornada, which we're trying to fatten up by means of his method. I believe, in truth, that we've only succeeded in making it thinner..."

At the tone of his response, and the laughter that broke out around me, I thought he was trying to trick me, by presenting me with one of those microorganisms that abound in nature but that science has not yet classified. Although my research was not orientated in that direction, I did not want, even so, to appear ignorant, and I joined in with the gaiety. However, a sharp interior disturbance contradicted the amusement on my lips, and it was further accentuated when my knowledgeable comrade went on, more seriously: "Yes, that wretched little beast has remained inexorable to all our attempts; we've cared for it and pampered it for months on end, rigorously following Tornada's method—but nothing; it gives its belly the cold shoulder; our cooking isn't to its taste, and I firmly believe that Tornada's paper is nothing but a joke in rather poor taste."

He turned to the students. "Messieurs let's not waste any more of our time on this joke; let's go on to other exercises. If I ever see Tornada again, I'll ask him whether he's making fun of the Institut Pasteur. To work, Messieurs!

A few further ludicrous reflections by the pupils saluted the definitive burial of that research. One offered the straight-faced suggestion that the scientist ought to be trepanned in order to discover the microbes that were inspiring such delirium in his brain. Another proposed extracting therefrom a serum usable in the treatment of madness, although wisdom was also a very tedious malady. A third, finally, regretted the failure of the experiment, because it would have been amusing and lucrative to exhibit the *Micrococcus aspirator* in a menagerie.

"Shutting Tornada in with it dressing him as an animal-tamer, eh? What receipts!"

A new order from my colleague extinguished the juvenile jokes pitilessly, however. Soon, there was nothing to be heard in the room but the discreet noises of a laborious anthill.

For my part, the failure of the scientist's method, and the buffooneries that had been its consequence, had dissipated the malaise and the puerile presentiment that had oppressed me briefly. I started to smile at

the vague dread to which the threats of the madman and Commandant Junisseau's revelations concerning the giant laboratory had given a kind of logical consistency.

I resumed my ordinary occupations serenely, and at six o'clock in the evening, satisfied with my day, I escaped from the Institut, like a bird drunk on liberty, in order to go to Monsieur Vernet's house the Boulevard de Sebastopol, where I was to dine.

I was scarcely in the street when I heard a special edition being advertized. I approached the crier, and was able to read in the huge characters of the headline news that stupefied me:

A scientific phenomenon! Public danger! Appearance of giant man-eating animals near Mantes!

I could scarcely believe my ears. I bought the paper and discovered, in no time, quite simply what the news vendor had just been howling. The paper gave no further details, and the few lines that related the circumstance would have passed unnoticed if the headline had not printed them in such large letters.

I must confess that a little frisson ran through me at first, but the idea occurred to me at the same time that Dardant, the editor of the *Parisien*, had heard Tornada's declaration, and that he was occasionally wont to print "hoaxes"—a hoax excusable on this occasion, to deflect attention from worries about the impending strike. Those reflections reassured me.

I took the Metro, and became even more confident when, having reached the great boulevards, I observed that my opinion was shared by the public. On the sidewalks, on the terraces of the cafés, everywhere, people were reading the newspaper and welcoming the dispatch with bursts of laughter and shrugs.

I bought a bouquet, and it was with a light heart that I crossed my future father-in-law's threshold. I kissed my fiancée's hand and gave her my flowers, and we sat down at the dining-table. That family meal, with its admirable intimacy, distanced me so completely from the external world that it was only at dessert that I thought of unfolding the *Parisien* to show her the news.

It produced the same effect on Suzanne as it had had on me. It seemed to her to be an amusing invention, significant of Dardant's prodigious mercantile talent. But as Monsieur Vernet remained pensive, I was surprised, and asked him what he was thinking.

"Who can tell?" he replied. "Perhaps Tornada isn't completely mad. His paper has merit..."

"So you believe, Monsieur Vernet...?"

"I don't believe anything, my friend; I don't know anything. But..."

He concluded his thought with a vague gesture, which was not very reassuring. As Suzanne was becoming anxious, I said: "Doesn't your friend Marceline Colais live in Mantes? Couldn't she tell us something? Would you care to telephone her?"

"Right away! Right away!" Suzanne approved.

The apparatus was brought to the table, and I obtained a connection easily. My fiancée took one earpiece while I put the other to my own ear. An anxious attention attached us to the apparatus. Suzanne spoke,

"Hello! It's Suzanne Vernet who's telephoning. What's this that the newspapers are saying about anthropophagic animals in your region?"

A burst of laughter replied to us. The young woman did not know anything, had not heard anything, and made fun of our credulity. Just as she said goodbye, however, Suzanne and I went pale. We had heard, quite clearly, a very singular sound coming from the earpiece. It resembled the whistle of a siren, which was followed by a noise similar to that produced by a collapsing house—all dominated by a scream of terror, the sound of a woman panicking.

We were stunned. What drama was unfolding out there, on the other end of the wire?

"My God! What can have happened?" asked Suzanne, shivering.

Then, after a pause that we employed in looking at one another interrogatively, she continued: "My friend's scream... that racket... it's all inconceivable... don't you think so?"

"Try to restore the connection," said Monsieur Vernet.

I tried to interrogate the apparatus again, in vain. Three times, in a nervous voice, I begged for the connection to be restored, but the operator told us that it was impossible to obtain one. A fourth appeal met with the same response.

That episode had bowled us over. We strove, however, to find a reassuring interpretation. We criticized the incompetence of the switchboards and the improbable noises that were heard crackling on the line even in times when they were functioning normally. In truth, our explanations were only designed to make us feel better. The dinner was concluded without enthusiasm, and Suzanne and I bid one another goodnight, with the emotion of lovers whose tenderness is threatened by an evil destiny.

"If ever something happens," she confided to me in a whisper, "come here quickly to find me..."

I promised her that. Once outside, I wanted to clarify the matter. In the splendid nocturnal weather, a trip to Mantes in my forty horsepower Motobloc was a simple excursion. I would therefore go to Mantes. I turned into the boulevard, heading for the Metro that ought to take me to the Chaussée de la Muette. The great artery immediately filled me with anxiety. At a distance, I heard ominous noises, and I saw an agitated crowd swelling. When I arrived at the location of the tumult, however, I found that it was only a demonstration by strikers.

It passed by, and life became normal again at that spot. The theater audiences were spilling out during the intermissions; the display windows of the cafés were ablaze. Some displays imposed their luxury in an orgy of electricity. Open air phonographs and cinematographs in windows gathered spectators. Nothing had changed. It was nocturnal Paris, the elegant good humor of which was not even eroded by the strike.

I went home. I dressed for the road and went to the garage next door to my apartment. My chauffeur, his day's work completed, had gone. At first, I hesitated to undertake the excursion on my own, but, incapable of resisting my curiosity, I switched on two powerful headlights, took my place in the driving-seat, and sped away in my machine, which was soon beyond the toll-booths.

The Bois and the hill to Suresnes were traversed in no time. My powerful and docile vehicle, which had recently been delivered to me by the famous manufacturer Page, carried me along with a magnificent surge, and I listened delightedly to the palpitations of its mechanical heart, as calm and regular going up the hills as coming down them. I passed through the pretty towns on my route—which form an almost uninterrupted border of gracious houses all the way to Saint-Germain—like a whirlwind. After going through Saint-Germain I perceived that I had unwittingly taken the road to Poissy. I was in the middle of deserted woodland, framed by two walls of trees split overhead by a palpitating sky.

No one who has not undertaken such nocturnal escapades can imagine the emotions and the fantastic suggestions imposed by the landscape—to which my obsession gave a particular force. I required all that preoccupation not to get carried away and to retain a measure of composure, and the full glare of my headlights not to mistake for extraordinary animals the foliage that I went past on my route, and the air stirred up by the speed of my passage for their breath. The moon was hidden; I could only see the obstacles revealed by my headlights, and when I had gone past them I thought I was leaving behind an immensity populated by phantoms.

I arrived in Poissy at about half past eleven. I was very glad, after traversing a few silent streets, to come into the middle of a party. A musical competition was keeping the town awake; multicolored illuminations were running along the façades; the main square was animated by an open air ball; and a brass band, playing on a stage covered with garlands, was guiding the gesticulations of uniforms and bright dresses. The sight of that enthusiasm and gaiety made me appreciate the puerility of my fears. Would these people be amusing themselves in that fashion if danger threatened them? Could they be unaware of it?

I stopped my auto in front of a tavern, in order to draw off some moral rearmament more than to warm myself up with a cup of coffee, and I hesitated briefly as to whether to continue my journey. However, as I had promised myself to dissipate my nightmare completely, I got back into the driving seat and stepped on the accelerator again, making a detour in order to rejoin the direct road from Saint-Germain to Mantes.

Now, let me collect my impressions, because the next hour became stupefying, and it was at that moment that I entered veritably into the drama. I remember perfectly that I had completely forgotten the macrobes, and that I had no other thought than savoring the charm of nocturnal tourism, when I arrived

within six kilometers of Mantes. My first anxiety was in observing that there were no lights indicating the location of the town—a sign that led me at first to think that I had missed my way.

Surprised to have gone astray on a road that I knew very well, I had stopped to consult my map when a strange echo, coming from a few kilometers away, interrupted my research. It was the roar of a siren, but a very particular roar, deeper in the middle and more highly pitched at the end than the sound produced by the warning devices fashionable to indicate the approach of automobiles. The clamor reminded me exactly of the one I had heard over the telephone. A short silence followed, more frightening than the din, which held me in suspense. Then a second blast burst forth, soon followed by a third, then a fourth, then five and then ten, twenty, in an enormous, frightful concert.

No, there could not be as many automobiles as that. And a terrible suspicion took possession of my mind again. Shivering, I turned my machine round, dimmed my headlights, and climbed up on my seat, directing my eyes toward the enigma of the obscurity. I waited, ready to flee.

I did not have to wait long. My senses, their acuity multiplied tenfold by an anxious curiosity, soon enabled me to perceive that an extraordinary phenomenon was occurring in the vicinity. The roaring had ceased, but it was replaced by sounds that I had great difficulty at first comparing to sounds that I knew. I heard: *Frott...! Frott...! Frott...! Frott...! Frott...!* as if immense iron brooms were being swept over stone. Yes, it resembled gigantic sweeps of a broom clearing the distant ground—and it was getting nearer, without any obvious great rapidity.

Frott...! Frott...! Frott...! the air repeated.

What was happening out there? What hallucinatory horde was raking the terrestrial crust like that? What monstrosities were approaching?

To interrogate the mystery, I knelt down on the seat of my vehicle, and, with my hand clutching the back, I looked in bewilderment in the direction of the town whose lights were extinct.

I had not discovered anything there when my eyes, adapting slightly better to the gloom, distinguished some three kilometers away, surging from a place where I knew there was a dip in the terrain, a confused phosphorescent form, moving unevenly off the road, sometimes to the right and sometimes to the left.

It was impossible for me to estimate the dimensions of the moving object at that distance, but it was certainly very large. In sum I could only compare the visual impression to the one that a green mist would have given me, seen from a long way off, at the moment when it emerged from the ground in order to displace itself by performing zigzags.

In the limpid firmament, the stars stood out without losing any of their brightness—which proved to me that the radiation of the mass was not very vivid. The glimmer sank into a dip in the terrain, then reappeared, closer and more extended, accompanied by several others, whose number gradually increased until I counted a dozen of them. Finally, the entire horizon was occupied by those phosphorescent presences, and the rumble that they allowed to be heard, heavier and more sonorous, soon demonstrated to me that I was dealing with colossal solid displacements.

To describe my terror is an impossible task. The most elementary prudence would have advised me to flee, but an invincible need to know attached me to the unreal spectacle. The creatures drew nearer. The more distinct they came, the more convinced I was that a kind of gigantic arm emerging from them was accomplishing circular gyratory movement, reminiscent of those described by an elephant's trunk, very rapidly.

They were still a good kilometer away, and yet I thought that I could already perceive their breath—unless it was an improbable displacement of air provoked by the rotations of their appendages. And I stayed there, paralyzed and stupid, entirely focused on their luminous progress, only retaining the vaguest consciousness of the fact that they were now approaching with greater rapidity.

Yes, I was still there, hypnotized, when suddenly the sky was filled with the fall of an immense green bolide, which came to land fifty meters away from me, to my right, while I was deafened by the roar of a siren, and a violent blast of air nearly tore me out of my seat.

Then, finally obedient to terror, conscious that I had just escaped death, but that death was still threatening me, I turned round, stamped on the accelerator of my Motobloc and, clinging to my steering-wheel, sped away frantically.

How did I not crash twenty times during that flight at a hundred kilometers an hour? How, with the feeble glare of my dimmed headlights, was I able to avoid ditches and avoid running off the road at bends? It was a pure miracle. Fortunately, French roads are admirable. My whole machine was quivering, creaking and lurching. One might have thought that my panic had infected it.

I went through several silent villages. I remember slowing down, as I passed a belated peasant, and shouting at him: "Run! The macrobes are coming!" But he looked at me uncomprehendingly. He must have thought I was mad. Had I not thought Tornada was mad myself? And I resumed my flight. The road seemed to sink behind me, becoming a gulf as soon as I had passed over it.

Before arriving at the forest of Saint-Germain, however, I was ashamed of my cowardice and wanted to make amends with a little humanity. Confident in the advance I had over the fantastic animals, I took the turning toward Poissy again, in order to raise the alarm. Oh, what a fatal inspiration! It must have been half past one when I got there; the nocturnal fête was coming to an end, the dances were languishing, the illuminations going out. Recognizing a gendarme in the middle of the crowd I asked him to take me to the Maire.

I shall never forget the indignation of that honest municipal officer when, disturbed in his legitimate slumber, he appeared at his window still half-asleep, wearing a red headscarf.

"What do you want?" he growled.

"I need to talk to you urgently, Monsieur le Maire," I replied. "It's a very serious matter. The life of our fatherland might depend on it."

"Have you put our hand on a spy?"

"No, Monsieur le Maire, it's much more serious, much more serious..."

I divined that he was hesitant, but the presence of the gendarme undoubtedly reassured him, for he closed his window in order to open his door to me soon thereafter, holding a candle-tray in his hand. I followed him into a banal drawing room, and the only memory I have of it that that a Japanese tapestry hanging on one wall immediately attracted my curiosity. It represented a warrior with bristling moustaches aiming his spear at a fantastic animal, the silhouette of which, by an apposite freak of chance, adopted the form of a *Micrococcus aspirator* to which a thick furry pelt had been added. In the state of preoccupation that I was in, that coincidence frightened me, and I spent the entire beginning of my visit—all the time that the Maire took to light an oil lamp—hypnotizing myself with that exotic work of art, not without noticing that my attitude was making the good bourgeois anxious, for he stopped several times to look at me from the corner of his eyes.

"I'm listening," he said, finally, offering me a chair protected by a dust-cover, while he sat down on a sofa, hiding his bare legs under the flaps of a vast dressing-gown.

"Monsieur," I began, forcing myself to speak calmly, "I regret to disturb you at this undue hour, but the peril is at your gates; the macrobes are coming, and as they might invade your town at any moment..."

"The macrobes?"

No, you cannot imagine the physiognomy that the honorable representative of the citizens of Poissy adopted at that moment. I do not know any actor, the funniest of all the buffoons of our theatrical stages, or the most tragic tragedian among the great stars of drama, who could have imprinted his features with such a mixture of bewilderment, stupor and terror. Yes, terror—not of the danger that I had just related to him, but of me. That is, moreover, understandable. I was trembling like an alcoholic; my hair retained the disorder of my flight in the auto, and my eyes were hallucinated by the Japanese tapestry. I must have looked as if I had just emerged from a straitjacket.

"Let's see!" he said, getting up and prudently putting the table between us. "What are macrobes?"

"They're giant animals, Monsieur le Maire, quite similar to the one your tapestry represents---there, you see, on the wall..."

"And where are these animals?"

"Half way along the road from Mantes to Poissy."

“You’ve seen them?”

“Just now. I was in my car...my car...I had to turn round. You do believe me, Monsieur le Maire?”

“Certainly, my good friend!”

“And you’ll warn your fellow citizens, advise them to flee?”

“Certainly—right away...”

How did I not guess that the stupid old man was not planning at that moment a means of immobilizing me? He took a few more steps around the table, still to get away from me—for in my ardor to convince him I had attempted to get closer to him. Then, suddenly, he bounded outside, saying: “Wait here, I’ll warn them...I’ll be back!”

And he disappeared, turning the key in the lock on the door. Stupefied, I remained patient for a moment; then, finally understanding my interlocutor’s intentions, I became indignant, shaking the door violently. The sound of footfalls responded to my anger. The door opened again; three gendarmes grabbed hold of me, and would not let me go.

A grave individual with long hair, his expression clouded by sleep, was accompanying them. He examined me, looked at my pupils, took my pulse, listened momentarily to the arbitrary vociferations that the arbitrary violence was causing me to utter, and then, taking a few steps back, he held a discussion with the Maire. I could hear what they were saying.

“Yes, yes, he’s very excited. A fit, probably, perhaps *delirium tremens*...”

“What shall we do, my dear Doctor?” the Maire asked, anxiously.

“Put him in a safe place! We can’t let him go...he might be capable...”

“Where, in a safe place? We don’t have a hospital.”

“I can only think of the prison.”

“Obviously.”

“Obviously.”

“You’ll make your report tomorrow, won’t you?” the Maire concluded. “You’ll not that we were obliged to lock him up because he’s a danger to public safety?” Turning toward me, he added: “Poor fellow.”

His testimony of pity did not pacify me. On the contrary, I covered the municipal officer and the physician with the most violent imprecations, which increased their certainty that I was quite mad. The gendarmes shook their heads dolorously. I tried to escape their grip, in vain. The more I struggled, the tighter the vice of their fingers became. I had to confess myself defeated, and allow myself to be tied up with a cord whose knots dug into my flesh. Finally, I was lifted up on to the shoulders of a gendarme in order to be carried to a cell.

The prison was next door to the Maire’s house, so we only had a short street to cross. My guardians opened a massive door, dragged me along a corridor and threw me into a square redoubt reeking of ordure and brightly enough lit by a gas-lamp for me to make out a drunkard snoring on the straw.

“Isn’t it dangerous to leave them together?” asked the Maire.

“Have no fear,” said one of the gendarmes, “given that we’ve tied him up like a chicken for the oven.”

“As for the other, he’s out for the count; he’ll sleep until tomorrow,” added a second uniform.

“And then again, if one of them kills the other, it’ll be no great loss to society,” the doctor philosophized.

“In that case, my friend, let’s go to bed,” the ministerial officer concluded, serenely.

The lock grated, my despots’ footsteps drew away, and I was left alone with the drunkard.

All these incidents might seem amusingly picturesque to those who are reading them, but I can assure you that I retain an exceedingly melancholy memory of them. During the first few minutes in which I found myself claustrated in that infamous company, my anger dissipated to give way to an anxiety, of which Suzanne and her father, as you can imagine, were the sole objects. I anticipated that I would be locked in that cell for at least a day, the time for a medical investigation to repair the gross error of the Poissy practitioner. What would happen during those twenty-four hours of detention? What formidable events, the menace of which was sweeping the ground out there, in the direction of Mantes—

events inaccessible to human will—might prevent me from rejoining my pure fiancée and my venerable friend.

I reflected, fearfully. All the incredible things that I had seen on that sinister evening returned to stand out with irrefutable clarity on the screen of my memory.

Obviously, the mystery still subsisted, with its frightful horror, but there was no doubt that I had been close to those phosphorescent monstrosities; that they were solid bodies of incalculable dimensions; that their whistling, like the noise of a siren, signified an enormous displacement of air; that their progress was accomplished without great rapidity.

One sole point left me hesitant, with regard to that last remark, which was that one roaring mass, the one that had determined my flight at the moment when I perceived the others, had seemed to me to fall from the sky, as if a trampoline had projected it to land beside me. I had then had the deafening sound of its fall in my ears; I remembered having felt the earth vacillate. Did not that fact permit the conclusion that the fantastic animals were, at certain moments, capable of speed, of progressing by means of prodigious bounds?

But those few seconds had gone by in such confusion, and a legitimate terror had attenuated the veritable impression to such an extent, that on reflection, I no longer dared affirm that fall, and that the apparition might, instead of descending from on high, have surged forth from below, when a caprice of the terrain had hid it from me. No, I no longer knew. In my uncertainty, I preferred to rally to the latter hypothesis, inasmuch as my need for personal tranquility also concerned the two dear distant beings, Suzanne and her father, whom my absence tomorrow was bound to torment.

My absence? Why could I not find myself close to them? Why could I not demand of my ingenuity, and my muscular strength, the means of escaping, of getting back to them? My eyes made a tour of the cell; I sounded the thickness of the walls that isolated me from the rest of humankind.

No chance of escape that way; Hercules himself could not have shaken the imposing resistance of the massive stones; a pick-ax, which I did not possess, would have taken days to bite into them.

As for the narrow window that I observed above my head, its orifice was defended by iron bars so voluminous and so solid that I could not even think of separating them—and in any case, the rope that bound me from head to foot was reminding me dolorously of my impotence.

No, before thinking about getting through the door, the only issue that I recognized as possible, it was first necessary for me to get rid of my bonds, and they were laboring my flesh violently enough for me to recognize that there was nothing for me to do but bow to fatality and await the implacable unfurling of events.

I lay my head on the straw that served me as a bed, and a long shiver of distress, as might be caused by the fall into an abyss, ran through me.

“Want summat?” growled a quavering voice, at that moment, beside me.

It was my drunkard. He had just woken up, and after having propped himself up on his elbow, he was looking at me with a blissful smile. He was clad in a dirty, threadbare chestnut-colored costume, some cast-off from a well-to-do wardrobe. His graying hair sent dusty wisps in all directions. His wild and unkempt beard was varnished, under the chin, by a trickle of drool.

“Y’thirsty?” he asked, again.

I turned my head away, sickened. Was I, on top of everything else, to be subjected to the amiability of that repulsive individual?

He seemed, in fact, to be full of the most fraternal intentions toward me. He was still smiling. He belched. Then, interpreting my silence in favor of his sentiments, he tried to move closer to me. He got up, fell back on the straw, and attempted a new thrust, which brought him on to all fours—after which, holding on to a ring sealed into the wall, he succeeded in standing up. Tottering, with his hands in his pocket like a satisfied landowner, he came over to me, studied me for a moment, rejoiced noisily in the inferiority that retained me tied up at his feet, then hiccupped: “Yer a bugeois, no? Not on the social? Me, I am. But so what? All brudders. Ever’tthin’ aff t’turn upside-down for us all t’be equil. Eh? Get it, m’dear—no mo’ bosses...no mo’ workus...equility f’r all! And feet for’ard! Eh? What’yer say?”

Oh, that ignoble language, which might perhaps have moved me to pity on any other occasion, but which took on I don't know what prophetic significance that night! Evidently, if the nightmare that I had lived near Mantes for intense minutes were ever realized, if I were not dreaming, if I were not mad, all the democratic ambition of my drunkard, the great social leveling that was the obsession of the humble, was about to be accomplished before long, as the normal conclusion of a biological adventure. Evidently, from one moment to the next, the classes might no longer exist, wealth no longer differentiating people, and parallelism would be established under the threat of a common danger. Would they be effective, then, the theories that I had heard emerging from other mouths than those of libertarians, when sociologists had predicted in my presence that science would accomplish the egalitarian work rejected by charity? Alas, could I imagine that the hour might offer itself so precociously, in circumstances so dramatic, under the influence of a laboratory discovery?

And once again, I was brought back to thinking about Tornada by the divagations of my cellmate.

I decided, however, that I ought to be obedient to circumstances, and perhaps make use of my occasional philosopher. I turned my gaze toward him. He was pitiful, repulsive and terrible. In the gaslight that struck his face, the expression of his physiognomy was suddenly modified. His smile was transformed into a rictus; he passed from affection to hatred. His beard bristled, his eyes filled with an evil gleam. I understood that I had become the focal point of a long rancor.

"Bastard!" he howled, raising his fist. "No mo' bugeois! Absint' for ev'ry cit'zen, f'rever!" Drawing closer to me, he added: "Say: death t'cops!"

And when I remained obstinately silent, he repeated the order: "Gwan, say death t'cops!"

I would certainly have granted him that exclamation in order to have peace. I even began to pronounce it, when my complaisance froze on my lips. The drunkard, obedient to his interior rage, had just taken out a knife, and was leaning toward me. I confess that I felt a rather disagreeable frisson pass through me.

"Y'don'wanter? Well, I'm gwant'bleed yer."

He made the gesture. I saw the flash of the blade heading toward my immobility.

But the knife, fortunately misdirected by the alcoholic, missed its target and lodged instead in the gap between my torso and my arm, while the effort projected my would-be murderer on to the ground, from which he tried in vain to get up again. Fearful, nevertheless, of a further attempt, using the only means of avoidance permissible to me, I rolled over and over for several meters—and at that moment I had the particularly intoxicating impression of being liberated from my bonds.

It had in fact, been the case that, while my adversary's weapon had not succeeded in stabbing me, it had severed the rope that wound around me, in such a fashion that, by a blessed hazard, instead of annihilating me, his action had freed me.

I conceived such gratitude for the drunk that my first sentiment, once I was untied, was to put my hand to my fob-pocket, in order to recompense him generously for his failed crime—but I did not have to carry out the intention; the drunkard had fallen asleep where he was, arching his lips into a new smile, as if the soul of justice were translated on his face.

From then on, my escape plan was easy to conceive and carry out. At daybreak, when one of the gendarmes came to check on the condition of his two prisoners, I pounced on him and, planting my head in his chest, sent him flying into the corridor. I stepped over the representative of order, without taking pity on his groans, and found myself running in the open air.

A few peasants arriving for the market saw me pass by with amazement. Needless to say, they put down their baskets in order to pursue me, for the mentality of the crowd is so formulated that any man running without a reason immediately inspires the idea that he is a criminal, but I had a sufficient start on them to give myself the infantile satisfaction of breaking a few windows in the mayor's house; after which I leapt into my Motobloc—which, fortunately, was still parked under his windows—and took the road to Paris without worrying any further about sparing such stupidly-governed citizens from the disaster.

Amazingly, the great city was waking up in absolute calm. In the Chaussée de la Muette, the shops were opening as usual, the little people were setting off for their customary work. I parked my auto at the

sidewalk, ran to buy the newspapers, and observed with surprise that they had no information. Even the *Parisien* had fallen silent about the event and had retracted the news that it had published the day before, attributing it to the work of a practical joker. On the other hand, it devoted a great deal of space to the railway strike, and I learned thus that the Nord, the Est and the Orléans had suspended their departures for lack of staff.

“The work of a practical joker!” I sniggered, crumpling the newspaper

Those words immediately dilated before me with a sinister amplitude. I could not leave them with the banal significance that the reporter had wanted to give them, and they provoked a new bitterness within me. A practical joke was, indeed, about to be played on the nation, but what a joke, concluding with what consequences!

The silhouette of the man who had planned it sprang forth again in my memory. I saw him again, coming into my future father-in-law’s drawing room, devoting himself during the early part of the evening to placid conversation, welcoming the homage of those who venerated his science, shunning his detractors, offering my fiancée, in the form of poetry, the adornment of a mind that was able to detach itself from the arid problems of biology, and also seemed to be accessible to charm, tenderness, pity and dolor—and suddenly, at the moment when the clock had announced the opening of another day, rising up like a horrible prophet, declaiming to a elite with an incoherence of language, a dementia of gestures, at which, alas, I could no longer be content to smile pityingly.

Yes, it was a joke: a horrible joke.

I could not free my memory from it. I gazed with dazed eyes at the unfortunate traders who had no suspicion of the menace, and who would soon become its victims. The street, whose picturesque bustle ordinary offered me so much attraction at that hour, when the great city placidly prepares for its daily work, filled me this time with an unprecedented dolorous melancholy.

While I generally held the effort of those laborious shopkeepers in high esteem, deeming a social benefit their promptitude in rising early, running to the Les Halles, making their purchases and coming back just as rapidly to display their wares, organize their deliveries, decorate their windows and satisfy the needs of their clientele; while I admired their tenacious economy, their savings acquired sou by sou, which, converted into shares and bonds, constituted the fortune and strength of our nation relative to foreign nations; while they confirmed the impression in me that the fate of a people is subordinate to the work of the humble, and that the initiative from below takes precedence over everything that radiates from above—that morning, by contrast, their tranquil energy exasperated me. Were they not about to be the turkeys of that formidable practical joke, tomorrow, or perhaps today?

Veritably, their gait seemed to me to have taken on something turkey-like: they were heavy and flat, waddling like poultry—and if they had been warned, they would certainly have started uttering the incredulous clucking of a poultry-yard!

I remained on the pavement momentarily, in that disconcerting contemplation. An open bakery dispatched the flavorsome aroma of fresh warm loaves in my direction. I breathed it in without allowing myself to be tempted. I soon saw a shopgirl come out, her hair tousled, her expression still clouded by sleep, holding a piece of paper in her hands, wrapped around a few croissants just out of the oven. She was graceful; she characterized in her modest garments the elegance particular to young Parisiennes. Simply by the way she tucked up her skirt, she testified to the artistic character of her race.

She considered my appearance with astonishment—my animal skin and the dirt on my face. Before stepping off the sidewalk to cross the road she paused beside my auto and examined the bodywork with a knowing expression, approving of it with a nod of the head. One last glance that she darted at me seemed to demand a place in the vehicle, evocative of open spaces, rapid travel beneath the blue sky, through landscapes caressed by the sun. The she drew away, hurrying to work.

Little shopgirl, if you had known the terror that reigned within me, would you have implored me with that tacit prayer?

I consulted my watch. It was not yet seven o’clock. A sentiment of reserve, incomprehensible in the circumstances, a dread of disturbing my friends so early, advised me to put off for a little while the

moment when I would arrive to throw fear into their peaceful intimacy. I sat outside a café and ordered a glass of milk, which I forgot to drink.

Weary of the earth, of everything that moved upon it and everything that was in preparation for it, I looked up momentarily at the sky. What a contrast! Up there, everything expanded in a delightful fluidity. A blaze of dawn light flowed from the adorably blue infinity over the rooftops, bringing out against a golden background the jutting balconies of a recently-constructed tall building, proud of its novelty among others more ancient. Would that order still subsist tomorrow? Would that architectural décor, terminating a centuries-of esthetic tradition, edified by the genius of a people, be standing much longer? Would it not crumble, collapse and fall apart, like Messina in its recent convulsion,¹ under the brutal effect of monsters?

But no; that was implausible, and I had to smile at my dread. And I focused, as the objective of my illusions and my hopes, on a little curly cloud drifting in the celestial softness. Its tranquility comforted me. I could not imagine disaster surging from such placid harmony, beneath such a reassuring firmament.

I swallowed my glass of milk; I called the waiter to settle up with a ten franc piece, and while waiting for him to bring me my change I picked up my newspaper again in order to confirm my quietude—for it seemed implausible to me that a calamity as redoubtable as the one whose advent I dreaded could be unsuspected in its columns.

Again, my search was in vain; all the reportage, from the masthead to the stop press, was taken up by calculating the effects of the rail strike. And I became indignant that the Nord, the East and the Orléans had suspended their traffic for lack of personnel.

“It’s truly a fine time for those animals to go on strike!” I could not help saying to the waiter, who came back carrying a saucer containing coins.

He looked me up and down. I judged him to be a rude and frustrated citizen, one of those people who judge the enemy by the cut of his waistcoat and would make a meal of a well-dressed man. God knows, however, what my costume looked like! But my auto was there, testifying to my wealth and the privilege of my class.

The waiter cleaned the marble table-top with swipe of a dish-cloth and riposted: “Isn’t it always the moment? Demands have no time limit. The longer the proletariat waits, the more they’ll suffer. Why shouldn’t they profit from the occasion, citizen?”

“What occasion, my friend?”

I expected a response that related to my inner anguish.

“Well, the occasion...”

“Again, what?”

“You want me to spell it out? You know very well.”

“I don’t know anything,” I insisted.

“Citizen Bitard, secretary of the C.G.T. has been arrested,” he declared.²

“Oh, my friend, he’s not the one that it’s necessary to arrest!”

He expressed his surprise with a violent swipe of his dish-cloth. “Who, then?”

“It’s them.”

“Them?”

“Yes, them... the others... out there!”

I remember his disdainful, indignant expression, and the manner in which he expressed his opinion of how I had spent the night, simulating the gesture of drinking to imply that I was drunk. I neglected to make him revise his sentiment, for I got up abruptly and abandoned the table, forgetting to pick up my change.

The railway strike suddenly appeared to me as a further complication aggravating the probable situation. The social catastrophe, even if it did not spread to other lines, would immobilize and paralyze an entire city just at the moment when an exodus might become necessary. What would become of those

¹ The city of Messina, in Sicily, was almost completely destroyed by an earthquake on 28 December 1908.

² La Confédération Générale du Travail was—and still is—one of the principal trade unions in France.

people without a means of flight at the time when it was necessary to flee? What an untimely obstacle, due to the imbecilic pressure of a few troublemakers!

I felt the need to get back to my fiancée as soon as possible. Having climbed back into my vehicle I took the quickest and least encumbered route to reach the Boulevard de Sebastopol—but I had reckoned without the vicissitudes that still awaited me.

Thinking that the streets would be deserted at that early hour I was going along the Seine, intending, once I reached the Châtelet, to make a turn that would bring me directly to the house of my future father-in-law, when, having reached the level of the Quai d'Orsay railway station, I ran into a violent crowd that the police were having difficulty containing. I don't know how many thousands of hotheads were there, inflamed by anger and alcohol, thundering imprecations and raising arms at the ends of which cudgels were twirling, while, in the distance, a black mass disposed in six ranks—a cohort of the central brigades—were waiting to be given orders by a short Prefect of Police surrounded by a general staff of peace officers and conferring with them.

My car had reached the outer eddies of that crowd, and, perched in my seat, I contemplated the spectacle with all the more passion because I wanted to find therein a confirmation of my secret dread, to believe that I was facing a people conscious of the danger that threatened them and preparing the resistance. But I soon had to abandon that idea when I had interrogated by a gamin who, having climbed up on to a street-light, was encouraging the demonstration with his acidulated clamors. Just as he was about to reply to me, I saw him suddenly go pale, direct his arm westwards and shout: "There they are! There they are!"

I turned round, expecting giant apparitions, but I only perceived a sparkle of helmets dominating the stature of war-horses. It was the dragoons, summoned to bar the strikers' route as they were preparing the cross the Seine and sack the Quai d'Orsay station. Their mass, projecting the flashes of weapons, soon stopped behind me, an opaque and menacing animal barrier, toward which the central brigades, suddenly going into action, began to drive the demonstrators, herding them with a reckless savagery—with the result that I was trapped between the two parties, cursing the fury of both, watching, with the sole desire to escape as quickly as possible from the pitiless impacts of whirling sabers and cudgels, the cries of the wounded, the falling bodies and the splashes of blood that thrusts directed at heads and faces caused to spring forth.

Soon, a frantic revolutionary brandishing a stick at the end of which hung a red handkerchief leapt on to my car to rally his companions, and I became the center of the battle. Fortunately, the agents could only succeed in making roads into the first ranks of the crowd; an armor composed of ten human tampons protected me from their ranks. My mudguard and headlights gave way under the pressure, I heard their splintering mingled with the vociferations, and I was already fearing for the more precious mechanisms of my engine when, before a more desperate charge by the strikers, the police yielded, broke ranks and retreated. I took advantage of it to back up slowly, heading toward the dragoons, who were charging in their turn, and who, when they reached me, divided their ranks in order to let me through.

From then on, I was uninterested in the outcome of the collision. I scarcely noticed it when a fanatic with the face of a boar grabbed a horse by the nostrils and unsaddled the rider, who was trampled by other horses, and when a peace officer of giant stature, shaking off a cluster of hooligans intent on destroying him, was cut down by a saber-thrust that a maladroit dragoon had intended for one of his adversaries. I had only one urgency: to escape as quickly as possible and get back to my fiancée; and after having turned the vehicle round, I was about to depart, leaving those stupid energies at odds when a female voice emerging from a group of spectators planted on the sidewalk called to me: "Monsieur Gérard! Monsieur Gérard!"

Your name, shouted from the middle of a crowd—especially a crowd subject to such a delirium—is always somewhat impressive. I turned round.

"You, Madame Danielli!" I exclaimed.

I had just recognized a celebrated pythoness. Madame Danielli hosted a famous salon simultaneous frequented by naïve spiritists, skeptical scientists and a few artists and satirical writers. One could not, however, resist her elegant youthfulness and her tragic mask, afflicted by numerous successes of second

sight. Combining cleverness and distinction with her remarkable gifts of mediumship, she was welcomed in the best society, and fished for her clients in the troubled open waters of worldly credulity. She announced everyone's destiny after reading the lines on their hands, and, it was said, the fate of peoples did not escape her when she consulted the reflection of the stars by night in the transparency of a lake she owned in Italy. She adapted to her prophecies the phenomena and the instrumentation of recent discoveries in science; radium was in her domain; she applied it by some unknown method to the materialization of the perispirit and the astral body.³ In sum, she offered a curious complication of good faith and trickery that I had detected on the two evenings when I had allowed myself to be dragged to her house by one of my friends, a professor in the Faculté de Médecine.

"You here, Madame?" I repeated.

"Do you blame me for having got up early to come and observe an event that I had predicted a long time ago?"

She was triumphant; her physiognomy did not reveal any compassion for the outrages that were being perpetrated before her eyes. On the contrary; her teeth were dazzling in a radiant smile, all the more so because a flattering approval, emitted by the snobs surrounding her, was supporting her victory.

"Ah! You predicted it!"

The most suspicious intelligences pass through phases of credulity. It is at moments of sentimental crisis, when nerves tensed for too long leave you in a kind of psychic inferiority. You then become prey to a confidence for which you will criticize yourself in calmer moments; you allow yourself to submit to puerile investigations of your self—and history reports such weakness among great captains and the most notorious political schemers. Suddenly, that was my case.

"Is this the only event you predicted for the present epoch?" I asked her, awaiting her response with such an expression of interest that she understood immediately that I was about to fall under her influence.

"No."

Then, taking a further step, I said: "Can you tell me something I know, which perhaps I'm the only person to know, which will be manifest today or tomorrow?"

"Certainly," she affirmed, with conviction.

"I'm listening."

With a gesture, she asked her entourage to move aside. She seemed to isolate herself from the external world. Her features dressed themselves with mystical suffering. Her gaze widened, became hallucinated, and penetrated mine. It also seemed to me that my brain received some kind of fluid discharge sent by hers, and I shivered.

"What I have to tell you," she murmured, her lips almost joined, leaning her suddenly-stiffened silhouette toward me, "is that it's necessary for you to get out of Paris as soon as possible, taking those who are dear to you with you."

"Why?"

"A peril is in preparation for you....it's coming...it's getting closer..."

"What?"

"An incredible event...yes, truly incredible..."

"Once again, what?"

She hesitated. Her throat appealed for air as if a hand were blocking its entrance. I noticed that the veins of her neck were distended, tracing blue lines beneath the nacre of her skin. Her eyebrows coming together, her forehead furrowed, she continued: "What? I can't tell you, exactly. It's a phenomenon so unfamiliar, so strange..."

³ "Perispirit" was a term frequently employed French spiritism, having been invented by its most influential pioneer, Allen Kardec. It refers to a hypothetical "fluid body": a subtle substance improvised by a spirit in order to connect with the sensory perceptions of observers. Basically a refinement of the idea of a ghost, it has some kinship with the Theosophist notion of an "astral body," which was a later invention than Kardec's and was more widely popularized.

“I want to know,” I insisted.

“Well, I see large arms reminiscent of elephants’ trunks...but are they really arms? Can arms terminate in shocks of long hair divided in two? I can see them, though; they’re agitating...they’re agitating in front of a green terrain...but a green that isn’t that of nature...one might rather take it for a green fog...and I can see little animals...yes, tiny, very tiny...as tiny microbes running over a sofa...in a drawing room where a young woman is smiling...”

“Go on! Go on!” I begged, observing that her nervous exaltation seemed to be coming to an end.

I did not obtain anything more. Suddenly, she went pale, and her eyes wandered. She tottered, and her companions only just had time to leap forward to catch her in their arms. That was the way that her divinatory crises usually concluded.

I did not stay to care for her. Subject to the suggestion of her prediction, in which I detected, among the incoherence of its imagery, a confused fraction of truth, I fled; I sped toward the Boulevard de Sebastopol, going via the Place de la Concorde and the main roads.

I have often reflected since then about the curious oracle of the young pythoness. I do not believe in occultism or any supernatural manifestation, but it is certain that an order of divinatory phenomena exists, which science is already attempting to explain, and of which it will succeed one day or another in unraveling the threads of the mystery.

With regard to my own case, I believe I can confirm that Madame Danielli—who, it will be noted, told me nothing that I did not already know—had extracted the elements of her prediction from me. How? Simply by reading the thoughts that my disorientated mind had delivered to her as easily as a book recounts an individual’s sentiments. Endowed with a particularly sensitive nervous system, the perspicacity of which is not attenuated by the location or the circumstances, she penetrated my soul, received its impressions by means of the same mechanism by which wireless telegraphy puts two distant poles in communication; she only repeated back to me what she had discovered within me.

That conviction is also inspired in me by the disjointed and baroque fashion in which she translated the images which, at that emotional moment, were vibrant within my skull. When she embellished the microbes’ trunks with “shocks of long hair divided in two” it’s probable that I was thinking at that moment about the characteristic shape of Tornada’s beard, and that the seeress only glimpsed that particularity, which she grafted on to the appendices of the giant animals. In the same way, the green terrains and green fog that she had mentioned were a confusion of two impressions I had retained from my nocturnal excursion, one resulting from the monsters’ phosphorescence, the other from the extent of the ground over which they were moving. And the same explanation appeared to me to attach to the final phrase of her discourse, for the “tiny microbes running over a sofa in a drawing room where a young woman is smiling” doubtless derived from the memory I hastily invoked, while she was reading me, of the original soirée of the drama, when my fiancée and I had discussed Tornada’s scientific pretensions and the madman had announced their realization by bounding on to a sofa in the middle of my future father-in-law’s drawing room.

In order to make the matter even more comprehensible, I will say that my mind, at the moment when the pythoness was documented it, was similar to a disordered cinematograph, turning at such a speed, and so incoherently, that the person reading its impressions could only transmit them in the form of blurred visions superimposed on one another.

At any rate, what the young woman had said had troubled me strangely. I added it to all the supernatural aspects of that frightful adventure, and began to feel an indescribable distress. It seemed to me that my reason was tottering on the brink of an abyss, and I began to wonder seriously whether the diagnosis of the physician who had had me locked up in the prison at Poissy as a madman might not offer some appearance of logic after all. The sentiment that persisted from that descent into doubt was fear, an atrocious fear, which made my hand tremble on the steering-wheel of my auto, distilling a cold sweat on my temples.

I passed furiously through the Place de la Concorde, the Rue de la Paix and the great boulevards. At the corner of the Boulevard Sebastopol I scraped another automobile; it was a miracle that I did not

reduce my vehicle to smithereens. I greeted the accusations and insults of the people who witnessed the collision with a snigger; I passed on, and finally arrived at my friends' house.

I found Monsieur Vernet and my adorable fiancée there, well rested by a good night's sleep, finishing their breakfast. What a sovereign peace there was in that interior, where those two elite individuals lived! What comfort and consolation there was in that familial vision! Succeeding the anxieties that I had just traversed, and preceding a drama whose horror I could foresee, I knew the price of the gentle intimacy of that hearth. I went into it with the wonderment of a disaster-victim escaping from devouring flames or engulfing waters.

The table was set in the dining room; a clean tablecloth with red stripes forming rectangles, covered the tabletop; the white bowls and metal receptacles exhaled the flavorsome odor of milky coffee; crusty bread-rolls rounded their backs in the vicinity of delicate butter; the silverware gleamed placidly. Around the meal there was a restful ambience: a Provençal dresser dormant beneath its centenarian patina, supporting red-tinted copper pans; a bread-basket like a cage with lustrous bars; the antique clock, with the regular tick-tock of its swinging pendulum; the preciously polychromatic plates decorating the walls; the modernized chandelier still opposing its candles to the electric switch; and the deep, shaggy, soft Orient carpet, into which the feet sank, easing the difficulty of walking, making you forget that elsewhere, it was necessary to crush in order to advance in life...

There, in that limpid décor, my friends were inaugurating their day. Suzanne had tied back her hair in a hasty torsade; a mauve peignoir liberally espoused her harmonious figure; she was imparting the confidences of her young heart to her father with a happy loquacity: the impressions of a fiancée's happiness, which the night had cradled and appeared in the morning fresher and even more radiant.

Monsieur Vernet, already dressed in order to give his lecture, attenuating by the gentleness and bounty of his venerable face the austerity offered by his costume of frock-coat and black cravat, was listening, with his elbows on the table, reflecting in the adoration of his eyes the charm to which he was subject. Oh, how far they were from the implausible peril with which I was about to poison their conversation, when I irrupted into the dining room, and threw myself, utterly exhausted by fatigue and emotion, on to a chair that Suzanne offered me.

I stammered my odyssey; I recounted my frightful night, my adventure in the darkness, my peril in confrontation with the phosphorescent monsters; and the tragic voice of the sirens, and the fall of the green bolide, which must have been a monster's leap; and my return amid the abyss of the roads, and my sojourn in prison.

I glimpsed an anxious interrogation in their eyes; I understood that they too were beginning to doubt my mental condition.

"Come on, my boy, are you quite certain of what you're saying?" Monsieur Vernet asked, to begin with.

"Unless I've gone mad," I objected.

"Oh no, it isn't that, thank God, that I'm supposing...but you might, while accomplishing the journey that you've described to us, have been influenced by a suggestion from the previous evening. The mysterious troubles the bravest, and the imagination is exasperated under the influence of fatigue. It's a physiological phenomenon noted by science, and it has been observed that dreams are thus transported into reality. Come on, think hard: ask yourself whether you were not asleep in the seat of your car when you stopped before Mantes?"

"It's possible...it sometimes happens, in sleep..." Suzanne added, trying to soften the impact.

When I sketched a negative gesture, Monsieur Vernet continued.

"I remember that during the war of 1870, one night when I was posted as an advance sentinel, I went to sleep under the exhaustion of overwork. In my mind, haunted by the invasion, a suggestion was then produced in which I mingled the enemy—who, however, were not occupying the département in which we were camped. I saw an entire Prussian army pass by in the moonlight, and imagined that it was accomplishing a flanking movement with the intention of surrounding us and crushing us.

"I only experienced that dream for about five minutes, during which I remained upright, with my back against a tree, but when I woke up, the impression of it was so clear, so persistent, so absolute that I

confused my orders with my imagination and fired a rifle shot to warn my companions of the danger; after which I flew to the advance posts, where I recounted with the greatest sincerity—as you have just done, my friend—what my mind had created during my brief slumber. The regiment moved off, ready to do battle, but it was observed the following morning that no Prussians were there—any more, I hope than monsters were there last night, in the vicinity of Mantes.”

“No!” I exclaimed. “I swear to you that I have not been the victim of a hallucination of that kind! I had full mastery of my brain when I saw what I’ve reported to you.”

I resumed my story; I put so much effort into convincing them, brought forth so many plausible details, so many precise memories, and supported them with scientific reflections establishing so clearly the integrity of my faculties, that they finally allowed themselves to be infected by my anguish.

We discussed the consequences of the event at length. They did not seem to me to be as frightful as I had been led at first to imagine them.

“In the twentieth century, damn it, it would be very surprising if people couldn’t defend themselves against animals!” asserted Monsieur Vernet, raising his head with a challenging expression.

“Evidently, we have cannons whose force of projection is incalculable,” agreed my fiancée.

“We have explosives that can blast through the walls of fortresses and the steel of armor-plate,” Monsieur Vernet insisted.

“We have toxins, we have all the treasures of chemistry!” I enthused, adding another dimension of possibility to the measures of destruction.

“The government will take action!” the scientist affirmed.

“Has it even been alerted?” I said, doubtfully.

“It seems implausible to me that it hasn’t, my friend.”

And, deciding the employment of my morning, which I had intended to spend waiting with my fiancée, the worthy man gave me his advice: “Go to the Ministry of Posts. See Vigueur on my behalf; demand the truth, which he might perhaps be hiding from the public, and get him to tell you exactly how grave the danger is. We’ll decide what to do thereafter.”

“But what if it’s too late?” I objected.

Nevertheless, I did as the scientist said.

My driving costume, which I had not had time to change, caused the ushers some disquiet; I had a great deal of difficulty getting as far as the minister. Fortunately, a cabinet attaché recognized me under my animal-skin and had the doors opened for me.

I was had only just arrived in the minister’s office, and had begun to tell him about my adventure, to which he was listening with the pitying indulgence that the language of lunatics provokes, when a communication from the telegraph office informed us that after Mantes, communication by wire with Le Havre had been cut off.

“There must have been a storm,” said the minister, with absurd confidence.

“No, Monsieur, it’s the macrobes.”

He looked at me with even more pity. This time, however, I was convinced. I no longer had the right to doubt my reason. Was not the interruption of telegrams a further proof that had just been added to all those I had accumulated during my mysterious nocturnal encounter?

I left the minister, searching feverishly for a means of escaping the terrible approach. It seemed to me to be utterly imprudent to await events and to depend on human resistance. Was it not a legitimate egotism that commanded me, first of all, to ensure the retreat of my future family, and my own?

Spurred on by the memory of what Tornada had said—“Flee! Flee without losing a minute! Flee tomorrow!”—and regretting that we had already lost one day, it was under the lash of a whip that I returned to my fiancée’s home.

Suzanne was alone, Monsieur Vernet having thought that he ought not to miss his lecture at the Collège de France. I had never seen the dear child so tenderly emotional, and simultaneously so resolute in the face of the decision to be made.

“Listen, my dear Jean,” she said, “I don’t know what these macrobes are, or what real danger they pose, but my heart—and you know very well what renders it vigilant—advises me that we should leave.

At the rate at which you tell me they're advancing, they probably won't reach Paris for two days. We still have time, therefore. Would you like us to leave together, tomorrow?"

"This evening, Suzanne, this evening!"

"Well, all right then, this evening! It will be our anticipated honeymoon voyage, and I'll easily convince Papa to leave..."

She smiled, adorably sad. Confident in her good sense, I asked her: "In what direction shall we go, my dear Suzanne?"

"Southwards, eastwards or northwards, since the west is occupied by the enemy."

"Alas, Suzanne the railways to the north and east are on strike."

"The P.L.M., then," she said, trenchantly. "We'll meet at seven o'clock in the buffet at the Gare de Lyon, shall we? We'll take the nine o'clock express to Marseilles."

I accepted enthusiastically. If she had been taking me toward Mantes I would still have followed her. Each of her words was a command, which I accepted while blessing her.