

DAËH: THE FIRST HUMAN

PART ONE: THE NOMAD

I. Her

At the top of the chalky cliff, the branches of the thicket parted. A brutal and bronzed face appeared amid the foliage, and then the flesh of a shoulder, an arm and a breast—and the crawling woman stood up, naked and hairy.

She was a short, thickset female with a massive torso and sturdy limbs; everything about her was broad and abrupt except the pelvis: the height of an adolescent and the amplitude of a street-porter; short legs, low-set knees, flat feet, thick hands and spatulate fingers; her muscles, as knotty as an oak, clinging to a rocky skeleton, and her belly protruding; on the ruddy blackcloth of her skin, a flexuous fleece was designed in a symmetrical décor, the point of which narrowed over the sternum and descended in two curves from the throat all the way to the crease of the groin, while from behind two other volutes departed from the armpits to join up with the dorsal spine and slide over the loins, where they broadened out like a fan.

A mane of coarser hair, which garnished the skull with tresses and hanks, framed the face with a somber russet-tinted halo, the last flames of which reached the nascence of the shoulders. Within that thicket, the neck was even more massive, beneath a solid jaw. The vast mouth, with fleshy lips, projected its redoubtable dentition forwards, and it was as if the entire face was crushed beneath the slab of a sloping forehead; the nose, squat and broad, stood up level with the cheekbones and extended the double flare of the mobile nostrils to spire the revelations of the wind.

In the shelter of the low forehead, consumed by the hair, the violently emphatic eyebrows were indented to form two grottoes, in the depths of which the eyes were agitating like skittish animals. Those eyes were brown and narrow between the wrinkled eyelids, which only allowed a narrow stripe of cornea to be seen; by virtue of the habit of watching for multiple and incessant perils, they expressed anxiety, and moved restlessly.

Standing on the edge of the cliff, the woman lowered her gaze stupidly into the gulf, and the images entered into her: in the location where Paris would one day be built, the Seine, four leagues broad and yellow between the green forests, flowed beneath the stormy sky. From the depths of the horizon the river was racing furiously, and it covered the whole region like a tumultuous lake; on the shore of its waves, the woman saw the black dots of hippopotamuses and rhinoceroses moving, and in places, emerging from long grass, the round backs of elephants marching in single file. Over that morose immensity, the rain was falling hard.

She did not gaze for long. Accustomed to the narrow spectacles of the forest, she experienced vertigo before the excessively vast and mobile gulf. In the semicircle of those extremely distant horizons, which seemed to her to be shifting, like the river, her head was already dizzy; her eyelids blinked.

She tried to raise her face toward the sky, but the clouds were moving too rapidly; quickly, she closed her eyes. She shook her shoulders, and her mane streamed; then, slowly, she recoiled until she sensed the tickling of twigs on her back. On making contact with them, she pivoted with an abrupt movement; flexing her legs and tilting her upper body forwards, with one arm projected to part the branches and the other leaning on the ground, head down, she plunged into the wood.

For one more moment her voluminous rump stood out clearly against the dark background of the thicket, and then the curtain of foliage closed behind her.

II. Genesis

It was the first days of the human species, long before the bitterness of the temperature obliged our ancestors to seek shelter in the depths of caverns—and yet it was yesterday, or very nearly, since it was only one or two thousand centuries ago.¹

By then, our planet, after so many successive revolutions, had already taken on the form whose broad outlines were scarcely to be modified again before our day. The envelope of the earth, gradually cooled, had wrinkled like the rind of a ripe fruit, and had been punctured by volcanoes; then, as it shrank, the globe, having become tetrahedral, had pushed outwards the ridges of its quadruple fracture; those wounds had scarred into long chains of mountains, at the feet of which the continents were stacked; on the unexpected crests, the humidity of the atmosphere learned to condense, inventing the snow and ice that were previously unknown.

The Alpine creases now bristled their refrigerant summits, but at the same time as that enormous freezer had surged forth, a cauldron had been hollowed out in parallel; to the west of Europe, a broader ocean displayed its immense surfaces of evaporation under the topics. Between that nucleus of heat and that nucleus of chill, the air current carried with it a tide of clouds. Untiringly, for centuries, the swell of clouds flowed from the marine region toward the mountainous regions. Through such a thick envelope, the sun almost never shone any longer; in the year devoid of summer, autumn prolonged the spring; in the day devoid of noon, twilight lasted from dawn until dusk; but the opaque mantle of vapors that stopped the sun's rays in passage also prevented the chilling of nights and winters, with the result that the variation in temperature of the hours and the seasons was scarcely sensible.

Centuries-long rains fell upon the plains, while snow accumulated on the heights; already, from time to time, a few excessively heavy glaciers were breaking up on the edges of the circles, and gently but formidably, dragged by their own weight, they set out in motion with an invincible slowness.

The ages of exuberance had long gone by for the earth; the last skeletons of the giant saurians were petrifying in the soil. A less furious era was inaugurated. The supreme logic from which all harmony is born, which regulates the simultaneous transformations of heavenly bodies and their parasites, had led progressively to the epoch over which the beautiful population of the Mammals would reign. With them, a more delicate life became manifest during the Tertiary age; by virtue of successive selections, forms diversified, organs were refined, senses became subtler; a more complex and better-organized nervous system tended to produce the brain...

A few millennia ago, those young conquerors had taken possession of the renovated world, but not all of them were able to tolerate the relative cooling that was beginning to shrink the atmosphere; already, races of animals were migrating or becoming extinct, while others varied in order to adapt themselves, and less cold-sensitive species appeared in the world.

The new-born humans moved discreetly among them, still rare and denuded of everything.

Here and there on the earth, variants of that naked biped were encountered; they resembled one another in their essential characteristics—for it is important to note that the climactic conditions, under the various latitudes of the globe, scarcely differed; such a production, when it became realizable at one

¹ It was not until the late 1940s that the invention of radiocarbon dating provided a reliable yardstick for measuring the antiquity of human remains excavated by paleontologists, although radiometric dating had begun to provide information about the age of rocks, which led to the geometric time-scale, in 1907. Haraucourt's assumption that Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon remains implied a time-scale of between 100,000 and 200,000 years turned out to be broadly correct, but his attempt to accommodate that to the time scale of the Pliocene-Quaternary glaciations, which had been debated since the mid-19th century, is inevitably awkward. Although James Croll's *Climate and Time in their Geological Relations* (1875), following up the work of the Alpinists Louis Agassiz and Karl Schimper, can now be seen as a brilliant analysis of the causes of periodic glaciations, it was neither well-known nor orthodox in 1912, so Haraucourt's analysis of climate change is understandably primitive and over-simplified, but it was not lacking in enterprise at the time.

point, became simultaneously realizable at another. On several continents, several races of humans appeared almost at the same time—which is to say, within twenty thousand years or so.²

² The rival theories of polygeny (that human races had been created, or had evolved, separately) and monogeny (that human races all had a single common point of origin) were still being hotly debated in 1912, especially in the context of anthropological racial theory. The modern synthesis of Darwinian evolutionary theory with genetic theory, which effectively killed off polygeny as a plausible thesis, had not yet been completed, although the trend was clearly inclined in that direction. The distinction between the two theses is not, however, as stark as it might seem, and Haraucourt's "compromise," assuming that anatomically different proto-human types separately evolved in different places would still have been capable of interbreeding—as modern "races" obviously are—when circumstances brought them together, is not scientifically implausible, although his grounds for espousing it doubtless had much to do with his philosophical agenda and his political ideology.

III. Eden

Seen from Mars, which shines ruddily, the Earth probably seemed green, so abundant was the vegetation. Throughout Western Europe, an uninterrupted forest was displayed, from the double massif of the mountains to the triple gulf of the seas; it was so dense that the branches of one tree were entangled with those of the next, and the plants killed one another like animals in order to earn their places to live.

The cadavers of the vanquished fattened the moist soil; the successive layers of leaves and branches had accumulated a spongy carpet soaked by the incessant downpour; the water that fell onto that putrescence as rain rose up above it again in mists or flowed beneath it as streams. A heavy and murky air, impregnated with vapors, stagnated over that bed of fermentations, and the foliage enclosed it beneath its vault.

In that nourishing atmosphere, the vegetables swelled up with sap, and insects seethed. The latter were already old; some of them dated from the carboniferous period, and they had prospered. Myriads of wings were buzzing over every pond; under every leaf, bellies crawled, mouths ate and feet scuttled.

Exuded from that water-saturated ground, springs flowed down the slopes of every hill; cascades roared in every gorge; in all the hollows of the mountains, lakes were born and grew, awaiting the moment when they could break their dykes to race into the lower regions. With every storm, the streams, transformed into torrents, dragged away soil, sand, rocks and uprooted trees pell-mell, along with animals drowned in their thousands.

The rivers received and absorbed everything, and carried it all away; the feeble watercourses that we call the Rhine, the Seine, the Loire, the Garonne and the Rhone no longer resemble what they were then; through the forest of the Occident, that quintuple surge of brutal water plowed a passage, opening five streaks of brightness in the verdure and the shadow; those sinuous avenues radiated from the center toward the shores like the tentacles of an octopus the color of the sky. Immeasurably swollen by the abundance of the rain, no less than by the melting of snows, the rivers progressively gained all the amplitude offered to the invasion of their waves; our plains were covered by them, our hills emerging as islets; only their heights were habitable.

The inhabitants of the marsh, the hippopotamus and the rhinoceros, accommodated themselves without difficulty to that inundation, which characterized the approach of the glacial ages, but a multitude of other beasts were driven back toward the plateaux, climbing up to seek their shelter and their nourishment under the trees; they found both in plenty, for the thick vegetation multiplied lairs, and there was no lack of prey for carnivores, just as there was no shortage of foliage for the herbivores.

Among the fauna and flora of that Eden, the humans of our days would not have felt much out of place; to begin with, they would recognize the plants and animals of modern Europe, and those of Asia and northern Africa. At the second glance, they would be astonished to find species from hot lands and those from temperate climates brought together as in a zoological garden. But if they looked harder, they would be alarmed to discover that the cats on the banks of the Seine were twice as large as the lions of the Atlas; that, compared to the ancestor of the caves, the Pyrenean bear is a mere cub; and that our elephants of the Ivory Coast could shelter under the abdomen of their ancestors of the Pliocene era.

Over that world of colossi, the troops of nimbus clouds sent forth by the sea flowed incessantly through a low and angry sky; storms burst without respite. At every moment, beneath the vaults of the forest, green holes illuminated by lightning lightened the gloom; to the din of the thunder distant rumbles responded; from the height of the punctured clouds, water fell in cataracts.

Sometimes, however, the rain stopped and the earth saw a few shreds of azure shining through. That was when a cold wind had risen from the Alpine moraines to descend toward the Occident, driving back its clouds and tearing apart its mists. Then the Great Apes, survivors of once-numerous species, shivered in the trees and wrapped their long arms around their breasts; the felines fled, skimming the ground and mewling in distress, horrified by the mortal blast that foreshadowed for them the glacial cataclysm in which they would perish.

Every evening, at the entrances to the caves that the giant Cats disputed with the Bears, the growl of their battles filled the misty air. The malign Elephants raised their trunks and trumpeted, satisfied to hear their enemies, the flesh-eaters, killing one another on the plateau, but the Ostriches and the Horses fled fearfully in groups, while the Hyenas, the Dogs and the Foxes crouched down in the grass and licked their chops, sure of finding the carcass of the Lion tomorrow, lying with its back broken and its breast devoured by the invincible Bear.

In that immense larder of the Pleistocene forest, no creature existed save to serve the hunger of another. The human omnivores maintained their place there, naked and gluttonous, eating until they could eat no more, and having no other function.