

IV. Jean Lebris' Adventure

"The last vision that I perceived," said Jean Lebris. "Yes, Bare, I said 'vision'—you'll understand in due course—the last time I saw the spectacle of things as you see them, solid and colored, was in a marshy field north of Dormans.

"My company was retreating under shell-fire. Behind us, the fields rose up, and the exceedingly close horizon cut across the sky like a wall. In front of us, large trees limited the meadow, forming a patchy wood that extended indefinitely to the right and the left. I assume that a river must have been flowing there.

"We were running, surrounded by whistling sounds and detonations. The big trees were exploding into splinters, their foliage agitated by the wind of projectiles. The shells, falling densely, were making volcanoes spring up everywhere; the brutalized air was jostling us. It was a veritable inferno, in which we heard a mewling in the air, like a legion of invisible enraged cats, scorched and seething—for at such moments, everything seems to be alive.

"Comrades were falling down. Driven by the ancient and obsolete instinct that has survived the invention of heavy artillery, we were hurrying toward the wood. I never got there. Everything leads me to believe that there as a shell-burst behind me. I didn't see anything or feel anything. It was instantaneous oblivion—and I can't tell you how long I remained like that, lying in the long grass.

"I recovered consciousness with the sensation of an extremely painful aching. Immobility appeared to me to be the acme of happiness, and I remained in a state of weakness and torpor for a long time, from the depths of which I heard the cannonade rumbling. Then the sentiment of peril was born in the bosom of my slumber; nature, more and more imperious, enjoined me to shake off the numbness. Perhaps I was gravely wounded; perhaps my blood was running from a wound I could not feel...

"It was pitch dark, No Moon, not a single star. With a superhuman effort, I was able to find my fluid-lighter in my tunic pocket, but before I could make use of it, a terrifying idea crossed my mind: *the cannon are thundering; I can hear the trajectories of the shells overhead; I must, therefore, be in the middle of a battle—and yet, no glimmer of light is illuminating the darkness, one on side or the other.*

"With a flick of my thumb, I turned the flint-wheel of the lighter. No flame. I pinched the wick feverishly. A burn told me that I was blind.

"My eyes were causing me pain, it's true, but my entire body was aching so badly that nothing, until then, had indicated the most badly injured parts of my flesh. I felt myself, like a man in fear of having lost himself. I stood up. I took two steps; my hands recognized one another, finger by finger. I passed them over my face, and felt nothing frightful; my singed moustache, my burned eyelashes...a prickling sensation over my entire face. As for the rest: an unimaginable headache, and that fatigue, tearing at my muscles in every corner of my being.

"But was it really dark? It might be...the grass was covered in dew. It must be morning. The sharp odor of deflagrations hung over the meadow. Groans were audible. I called out to my comrades, by name. No one replied. Then, a breeze having risen, the rustling of the wood allowed me to get my bearings. Free France was that way...

"Suddenly, a dull and continuous drumming noise, about which I could not be mistaken, came from the west. I listened. It was the noise of artillery on the road, a rumble that extended from north to south. The enemy was still advancing! I tried to drag myself toward the wood, on all fours. The task was beyond my strength; even if the meadow hadn't been pockmarked by shell-holes and strewn with cadavers, I wouldn't have reached it. Having emptied my water-bottle without slaking my thirst, I lay down, with my face in the grass, and resigned myself to my fate.

"I remember coming to in a huddle, howling, after having made out some noise or other that had extracted me from stupidity. Indeed, voices were raised; men chatting to one another some distance away. One of them came. They were Germans. I was put on a stretcher and felt myself being carried away. I was placed, along with the stretcher, in an automobile; I lost consciousness again. After some lapse of time, I found myself lying in a bed, with my head swathed in bandages. The cannonade was more distant.

"The pharmaceutical odors, the surrounding murmurs and the noises from outside...

"A *field-hospital*, I thought. Although I had found the strength to cry out in the meadow, I was now too weak to say a word. Occasional questions were asked of me in German to which I could not reply, even though their simplicity permitted me to understand them. I shall not describe for you, one by one, my first impressions of being a blind man and a prisoner. You only need to know the sum, which was this:

"According to my suppositions, I must have reached the field-hospital as night fell. I had been placed, so far as I could tell, in a tent containing a large number of wounded men. From the exterior silence, and from the respiration of those who were asleep, I soon concluded that it was night. A cock chimed the hours. I lost consciousness again. At midnight, I was woken up by whispering. The words *Franzose, Augen* and *Dreitausend Marken* struck my ears. There were two people in conversation. One of them did nothing but acquiesce, repeating *So! So!* at the end of every statement. 'French' and 'eyes' was what I seemed to be understanding—but how did the sum of '3000 marks' arise from that?

“*Da ist der Kamerad!*” said one of the two voices.

“And, with a frightful accent, someone said to me in French: ‘Ow are you, old jap? Ve is goink to take you to nice place. *Also, also*, will be many kvestion...can’t spick at all? *Ach! Sehr gut! Och, Ludwig!*’

“Contentment made the man snigger. In a trice, I was bound and gagged. I was carried away from the bed on a litter. The automobile that received me on this occasion was so quiet this time that only its movement made me aware of its nature and rapidity. I had the impression that the journey lasted several hours. After that, I was embarked in a railway wagon that seemed to me to roll on forever. I’ve only retained the vaguest memory of all that. Lassitude overwhelmed my body, and indifference numbed my mind. The blast of the shell must have shaken me violently, but it’s quite possible that they administered some narcotic substance—for I’ve forgotten to tell you that the most attentive care was lavished upon me during the journey; expert hands renewed my bandages, I was made to drink drugs with all desirable gentleness and a thousand precautions were taken in my regard. But no one addressed a single word to me, and no one in the wagons spoke at all. A continuous presence watched over me, silent but helpful.

“Where were they taking me? What was the destination of that interminable journey? I can certify, at present, that it was a house lost in a forest—but in what region of central Europe? I don’t know, and I doubt that I shall ever know.

“Suddenly, it seemed that I woke up. Understand me: I had the illusion of waking up, after having dreamed the nightmare of the meadow, the shell, the field-hospital and the journey. I was in a small bed. A great calm had succeeded the rolling of the train. Someone was holding my head, and I felt a warmth moving over my eyes. *It’s some powerful light*, I said to myself, *whose beam is being moved across one eye and the other. I’m being examined.* People gathered around me were engaged in animated discussion. I found out later that that was their habitual way of talking, and that their impenetrable language—guttural, singsong and accentuated—combined the ardor of debate with a liberal dispensation of exclamations. Without seeing them, one imagined them gesticulating and grimacing. But that language had a barbarian crudity that puzzled me. Some Balkan dialect? Perhaps. Today, in spite of all the romanticism of the hypothesis, I believe that it was an artificial language, like Volapük¹ or Esperanto. I covered my eyes with my hands.

“‘What do you want?’ I asked. ‘What are you doing to me? Who are you? Tell me where I am.’

“Two affectionate hands were placed on mine, and the voice of a young man—a reassuring, compassionate, warmly inflected voice—said in impeccable French: ‘Don’t worry, Monsieur Lebris. This house is a house of science. Consider it, so far as you are concerned, as an ophthalmological clinic. I’m your physician, and—this is not said out of vanity, but to reassure you—I have a certain reputation in these parts.’

“‘But once again, Major, where am I?’

“‘I’m not in the military,’ said the stranger, with a smile that I *heard*. ‘Call me...call me Doctor Prosope.’²

“‘Are you Greek? Turkish? Austrian? Bulgarian?’ I asked, with an intuitive anxiety.

“‘Science has no fatherland, Monsieur Lebris. What does it matter? Great gods, calm down! I don’t know what you’re imagining...’

“His strong hand squeezed mine. He added, solemnly: ‘In the name of my collaborators here present, I swear to you that, in regard to you, medically speaking, we have only fraternal and helpful intentions. Everything that we can do to help you, to ameliorate your condition, will be done.’

“‘But I remembered the brutal fashion in which I had been taken out of the field-hospital and, in spite of all the protestations, the clandestine character of the adventure made me shiver. ‘Why did your...agents choose me out of all the wounded men back there?’

“‘Your case is one of those in which we’re interested.’

“‘My case...it doesn’t seem remarkable to me...’

“‘We shall see. Hope, Monsieur Lebris. And let’s be friends.’

“My dear Bare, there are tones of voice that are hardly ever deceptive. In truth, did these men not do everything possible to save my sight? And having not been able to conserve it for me, was it not in all the sincerity of an aberration that they judged it...? But let’s not get ahead of ourselves.

“I lived in that unknown part of the world for three weeks, treated and cared for admirably. I had a well-aired room. My needs were attended to by furtive and mute servants. Doctor ‘Prosope’ spent long periods conversing with me, and it was a joy to listen to him, for he saw things from a lofty viewpoint, and he knew such

¹ Volapük [world-speak] was invented by a German Roman Catholic priest, Johann Martin Schleyer, in 1879, after he received a message from God instructing him to invent a universal language; the third conference of Volapük speakers was held in Paris in 1889 but its fashionability declined rapidly thereafter, overtaken even in its own field by Esperanto, and the legacy of Babel continued to hold sway.

² Prosope is derived from a Greek term signifying “face.” As a chosen pseudonym, it is obviously intended to be meaningful, but it may be worth noting that the names of the story’s other major characters also have meaningful resonances; Lebris means “the wreck,” Grive “thrush;” Bare is not a French word, but Renard would probably have been familiar with its English meaning.

a lot, such a lot.... I had no news of the war, though; the doctor claimed to be uninterested in it, regarding it as a distant event—distant in every respect. And when I asked him to write to my mother to soothe her anxieties, he simply said that it was impossible, for the moment. I have summoned up all my memories, and I don't recall that he ever lied to me...but isn't it the same thing to remain silent, not to reveal certain thoughts? Anyway, what do I know? Who is that man, after all? He had such need of my trust, my acceptance...

"One day, after carrying out his morning tasks, he said to me: 'My poor Lebris, I'm not satisfied. They're not coming along as I'd like, those eyes.'

"I must tell you, Bare, that I expected to remain blind for the rest of my life, and that that announcement had no great impact on me.

"The best thing,' Prosope went on, 'would be to relieve you of them. They can only do you harm, in affecting their surroundings. Besides, I wouldn't want to give you false hope, but it seems to me that, one that's done, we can, to some extent, temper your infirmity.'

"What are you saying? Once my eyes have gone, it would take a devilishly clever man..."

"That depends on what we find behind your eyes. Do you understand? It all depends on the state of the optic nerves. Anyway, we'll talk about it again, Lebris. For the moment, I advise you to have them taken out. The enucleation is necessary, my friend. I insist. We'll operate tomorrow morning, shall we?"

"I consented with a good grace. For some time, my useless eyes had become heavy and excruciating. They seemed to me to have swollen, and that pain had sometimes made me desire what he had just proposed. In the meantime, I repeat, Prosope had inspired trust in me. And the house was so peaceful! Never a scream, never a suspicious noise. During my hours of idleness and nostalgia, when I dreamed of the beautiful France that my eyes would never see again—save for some miracle in which I could scarcely believe—and even when I listened to the sounds of my prison in order to try to divine what was going on there, I could only make out the rumors of work and leisure. Often, machines were operated; the hum of a workshop reached me through the walls—but everything was placid, inoffensive, restful...

"The next day, I no longer had eyes. As I came out of the anesthesia, giving way to an instinctive sadness, Prosope told me with a strange enthusiasm that the operation had been accomplished in the best conditions, and that everything favored the experiment that he had mentioned to me. 'The optic nerves are intact! Let's heal them. Lebris, you were born under a lucky star! You'll be associated with some sensational research!'

"He told me that he had no idea whether the experiment in question would be successful. I think he was only hoping for an indicative result, but he had to encourage me. In any case, although I overwhelmed him with questions, I didn't obtain any clarification from him regarding the basis of the enterprise—and you can imagine how many conjectures were crowding my skull! I paused successively at the idea of a graft, then the idea of an optical invention; I sometimes saw myself provided with the eyes of some animal, sometimes in possession of artificial pupils, the works of some optician of genius. But, in whatever fashion, *I saw myself seeing!* Had not Prosope certified the integrity of the optic nerve?"

"You will probably think me very credulous, my friend—but if you only knew everything that the little word 'see' implies, for a blind man! Besides isn't that which has been effected even more extraordinary and magnificently prodigious than artificial sight would be? If you wish, some other day, I'll describe—at least to the extent that I was able to take account of them and remember them—all the preparations to which I was subjected: the various cares, measurements, orbital molds and, finally, the presentations of two perfectly smooth objects that were neatly fitted into their lodgments.

"They were taken away almost immediately. Their trial placement had taken place in the presence of several people, who did not hesitate to talk abundantly in their strange gibberish—and that day, it wasn't Prosope who interrogated me with regard to my impressions, but an old man whose shrill voice seemed to emerge from a bird-caller. In French? Naturally, but without purity and with all the intonations of the mysterious *Volapiük*. I told him that I hadn't experienced any painful sensation by virtue of having the two balls that had just been put into me, and I understood that my reply filled him with satisfaction.

"A few days later, I was put to sleep for the second time. The first time, my nauseous awakening had been accompanied by phenomena with which you're doubtless familiar: dazzling, fulgurance and other tricks determined by the reaction of the optic nerves, since that's their fashion of feeling pain and since their separation had just been effected with my eyes out of use. So, that second time, when the ether vapors began to dissipate and luminosities appeared to me in the form of streaks and blurs, I simply thought that a similar cause was giving rise to analogous effects.

"Gradually, though, as I emerged from the artificial oblivion, my own materiality reappeared to my senses. I felt myself lying down, with my eyes closed, beneath a thick bandage. And yet...

"No, no! I said to myself. *I'm not awake! I must, on the contrary, be plunged into the utmost depths of the operational sleep! I'm the victim of a phantasmagoria, and this...this can only be the result of the displacement of a pain...of a pain that the anesthesia is preventing me from feeling. It's the nervous repercussion of a surgical action: an injection, or a section, translated into a hallucination! Of course. Aren't my eyes shut? Don't I have a bandage over them?*

“Wrong. I was indisputably awake, conscious, lucid—and in front of me, upright and luminous, I could see a frightful and fantastic creature.”