

CHAPTER EIGHT

I asked to see the doctor one morning. The painful impressions felt during my first visits assailed me once again as soon as I went into his study. Every object was occupying its immutable place, and if the stained glass panels in the windows were not projected their colors on to the carpet, it was because that morning's leaden sky was becoming stormy.

"It's some time since we've had the pleasure of meeting up," the doctor said, cheerfully. "One only needs to be neighbors not to see one another." I wanted to get to the point of my visit as rapidly as possible, but the doctor did not give me the opportunity. "Is your dwelling suitable for work? As for me, I haven't been wasting my time." He paused deliberately before announcing to me, with greater emphasis: "Dirk is 48 hours in advance..."

Everything that I had intended to say suddenly stuck in my throat, unable to compare with this extraordinary declaration. Having wanted to forget that entire frightful experience, I found myself brutally plunged back into it, and was gripped, my breath cut off as if by a jet of cold water.

"We weren't going to stop short after obtaining the first encouraging results," the doctor continued, apparently desirous of taking advantage of my surprise to proffer his confidences. "The treatment by artificial excitation seems to be acting more and more rapidly as we progress further. The difficulties encountered, would you believe, are of a much more trivial order—they relate to the measures that have to be taken to remain in contact with the subject. I anticipated the measures in question, but I did not imagine that they would have to be applied so delicately. In fact, not only can Dirk only talk if his surroundings are identical to those in which he will find himself 48 hours later, but it's also necessary that the situation of his interlocutors be that which will be reproduced the day after tomorrow. Only in these conditions is the connection made between the two components of his person, between his body and his mind, and, in consequence, the possibility of expression. Otherwise, he's out of phase, if I might put it thus, and says nothing.

"Do you understand now the importance I attach to the permanence of the décor around us? A simple bouquet of flowers on my table would suffice to paralyze Dirk. Moreover, as the questions that I ask him must be those that I will ask him the day after tomorrow, I'm constrained to keep a very strict timetable, scrupulously repeating myself every day—otherwise I could only rely on fortuitous connections.

"You seem incredulous, but I'll convince you. It will soon be 10 a.m., the time of my first daily interview with Dirk. In order that he will accept you as an interlocutor it's necessary first of all for you to promise to come and see me again the day after tomorrow, at the same time, dressed as closely as possible in the same manner. On that condition, he will tell you today what he ought to tell you in two days' time. Do you promise?"

Mechanically, I nodded my head.

"In any case, I'll find out immediately whether you'll keep your promise. If he recognizes you, it's because you'll come."

He got up, went to the door at the back of his study, and, with his eyes glued to his wristwatch, waited until it was exactly 10 a.m. to call out: "We're going to work, Dirk—will you come down?"

"Yes, Monsieur," said Dirk's voice.

"Those are our ritual phrases," the doctor explained, as I heard the noise of footsteps on an interior stairway.

Dirk appeared, calm and casual in manner, more at his ease than during our last encounter.

"Bonjour, Dirk," I said, in a slightly strangled voice.

"Why, Monsieur Delambre—I'm glad to see you."

The doctor addressed a glance of satisfaction to me, doubtless to thank me for the visit that I would pay him in two days' time. Going over to a window he opened it to the sky.

"What do you think of the weather, Dirk?"

"Bright sunlight," said Dirk. "A glorious day."

It had never been so black; the storm seemed to be about to break.

"Now you know what the weather will be like on the day after tomorrow," the doctor said to me. "Have no fear of thinking aloud—Dirk might hear you, but he won't make it manifest if it's not in the day after tomorrow's sequence."

“Do you really think it’s fine?” I asked Dirk. “Don’t you see any clouds?”

“You’re joking,” he replied. “The sky has never been so blue.”

At that moment, there was a lightning flash; thunder reverberated, and I observed that Dirk had shivered.

“Did you hear that?” I asked him.

He didn’t reply.

“Your question isn’t one of those that will be asked in two days’ time,” the doctor explained. “The subject is disconnected—but my dear Monsieur Delambre, you must be aware that if I’m pushing this young man into the future, it’s not merely to find out what the weather will be like, in order to get my umbrella ready in good time. As we have no more secrets from you, we shall continue the sequence of our daily labors in your presence.”

He placed in Dirk’s hands a long, rather narrow strip of paper, then went round to the other side of his desk and sat down, with a pencil in his hand. “You can begin, Dirk,” he said. “Don’t go too quickly.”

“Central Mining 4215. Geduld 1700. Union Corporation 1,80. Areas 355. Anglo-American 511. Goldfields 698. Royal Dutch 6957. Rio 2486...”

I realized then that the paper strip from which was reading was one of those sheets that are unrolled by the apparatus recording share prices on the Bourse. The doctor noted down the figures.

Imperturbably, Dick continued: “Rosario 4250. Quilmès 5390...”

After a quarter of an hour, Dirk stopped reading.

“Do you understand?” the doctor asked me, then. “The figures on the roll are yesterday’s share prices. This morning, as on every other morning, they were brought to me from the local branch of the Crédit-Lyonnais at Nice. I have them read by Dirk—who, in his former capacity as a stockbroker’s clerk, never ceased to interest himself in financial matters. What he reads are not yesterday’s prices, however, but tomorrow’s. The consequence is easy to grasp. In a little while, I shall telephone my instructions. I can’t say that I’m gambling, because I’m buying and selling on a basis of certainty. And my dear Monsieur Delambre, in the share market, we no longer find inspectors to forbid us entry into the gaming-halls!”

A diabolical flash of lightning made his gaze glitter behind his spectacles. He seemed to be waiting for some exclamation on my part. I refused him that pleasure.

The session was concluded. Dirk came to shake my hand. I felt an enormous pity for the poor devil.

“Au revoir, Dirk,” I said, squeezing his hand for a long time.

His lips moved, but no sound came out.

“Evidence that the day after tomorrow, at 10:35 a.m., you’ll already have left my study,” the doctor said. “Your visit will be briefer than today’s...”

I got to my feet and went out without saying a word. As on every other occasion that I had paid the doctor a visit, I found myself at first in the same state as a compass crazed by a magnetic storm. I no longer knew what to think or do. “Oh, if he thinks that I’ll go back, he’s mistaken!” I began by exclaiming. To thwart the assault on my liberty, it required no more than that. To start with, I would go away...

Extrapolating the hypothesis of a precipitate flight, however, I asked myself where I was going to go. I could pay a visit to my brother-in-law in Cairo, or go in search of an old girl-friend in Cambo—a souvenir of my last leave—but neither of these prospects seemed very inviting. As for resuming the vagabond life that I had led previously, that would seeking adventures that would certainly be less strange than the one I had found here...

The deluge of rain that began to fall cleared my head somewhat. In spite of its scientific pretensions, this entire story was shady. The fashion in which Dirk was being treated made me particularly indignant. Not that I had any particular sympathy for the poor fellow, but it’s difficult to see a human being treated as a guinea pig without raising a protest. I had not been forceful enough. Of all those living in the doctor’s entourage, I was the only one who could stand up to him. If I were gone, who knows what his tyranny or influence might do to those who were abandoned to him? But who knew, too, whether he might be using his stepdaughter to lure me into a trap, in order to attempt some other experiment on me?

Well, I would not retreat—and, since I was in the game, he would have to reckon with me. To begin with, would tell him that I would not tolerate a man being crippled in order to make money on the stock market...

I mulled over reflections of this sort throughout the following day. Yvane was absent. Grippled by a fit of energy, she had gone to Marseilles to obtain customs clearance for some packages that had arrived from Holland.

I was ready for anything when I found myself, at the appointed time, in the doctor's study.

The scene was repeated with a haunting fidelity.

"We're going to work, Dirk—will you come down?"

"Of course, Monsieur."

Dirk appeared,

"Bonjour!" I cried.

He did not reply.

"Which shows that your visit will not be repeated in 48 hours' time," said the doctor, mockingly.

Then there was the scene at the window.

"What do you think of the weather, Dirk?"

"Already very hot for the time of year."

"So the weather won't be any different the day after tomorrow," the doctor concluded.

"So you don't see any clouds, Dirk?" I said, glad to find that he saw the sky as blue as it really was—but I had forgotten that he couldn't reply to me, since I wouldn't be there two days later.

The doctor put the Bourse prices into his hands.

No sound emerged from his lips.

"It's Friday," he doctor explained. "Tomorrow, Saturday, the Bourse will be closed—therefore, he can't say anything. I'll leave the paper in his hands, however, in order not to lose the rhythm of our regular employment."

Familiarized with the atmosphere, I was less affected than before. That was the moment that decided to intervene. I took the doctor to one side and began point-blank: "Have you not abused your powers by constraining Dirk to engage in this horrible adventure?"

The doctor raised his head in surprise, to stare at me through the lenses of his spectacles. I met his gaze resolutely. He could see that I was firmly decided.

"I might ask you what right you have to interfere?" he replied, dryly.

"I can't tolerate someone being tortured in front of me, whatever more-or-less scientific motives are invoked."

The impassivity affected by the doctor finished up making me angry. My fists clenched involuntarily. The doctor uttered a sigh.

"My generous impulse," he began, "has betrayed me, as is generally the rule. You want an explanation; here it is, although it will pain me. The man to whose defense you are leaping took advantage of the hospitality that he found at my hearth to seduce my wife. Yes, Monsieur, this young rascal has dishonored me. Not for the sake of love, but out of vanity. Furthermore, he dared to plot my own demise. His criminal conduct was the cause of Gabrielle's death. He knows that one word from me, and he would be in the hands of the Law. Over him, I have the right of life or death, and I could legitimately dispose of him according to my whim—but I have not imposed any conditions on him. He was the one who, in order to redeem himself, demanded that I use him as an experimental subject. I would have preferred to send him away, never to see him again..."

"Oh, I don't know whether you have ever loved, Monsieur Delambre, whether your confidence has ever been betrayed. As for me, I have loved, loved stupidly, blindly, faithfully...but let's get on..."

"The frightful revelation left me a wreck. It was an internal collapse, a visceral laceration, a desire for oblivion that submerged me. At 40 years of age, Gabrielle had conserved all the naivety of childhood. Even motherhood had not succeeded in weighing her down with gravity and anxieties. She was like an incarnation of eternal youth; her candor was prodigious...that was why I loved her. Perhaps I astonish you. It's extraordinary that the equilibrium of our serious and diligent lives should rest on such slender supports, so delicate that the slightest tempting voice can cause them bend. Conceivable or not, that's the way it is. She...she was not guilty; she couldn't understand; she abandoned herself to some sort of game. When she understood, she died of it. But him, the wretch..."

“And at every hour of the day, it’s necessary that I have before me the face of that man, the lips that were placed on...the hands that have...oh, it’s frightful. In jealousy, the precise images that flesh retains are particularly tormenting. The source of those images is there, constantly before my eyes. Between him and me, the one who has more grounds for complaint is not the one you think. It was three years ago, and I haven’t yet forgotten any of it...”

“After that blow, what remained to me? My work. My research. I threw myself into it with the ardor of desperation; it was the sole link that attached me to life. And it is also to distance myself from that man, the constant reminder of my misfortune, that I drive him in front of me into the future, further and further still...”

This confession left me nonplussed once more. The entire offensive that I had planned was overturned. Instead of finding myself in the presence of a more-or-less obscure machination, I merely discovered a lamentable and banal story of marital misfortune. For the moment, I could find nothing more to say. But from these confidences, I retained especially, with an egoism that was a match for the doctor’s sentimental deceptions, that which concerned the mother of the woman who had captured my heart. In the brief portrait that the doctor had painted of his Gabrielle, I was surprised to find the moral equivalent of her daughter, and even more astonished that the reasons that had motivated the doctor’s attachment—the charm of a certain innocence, a certain candor—were the same as those that had seduced me in Yvane. Such an identity of sentiments prevented me from smiling at an unfortunate and rather comical coincidence between the two experiences. More than that; in that replication, produced over successive generations, and in that commonality of instinct which ensures that men are always moved by the same thing, I found a certain mechanical, obligatory quality that diminished, it seemed to me, the scope and value of my inclination toward Yvane. Whereas I had believed, naively, that I had chosen her because of what she was, and because of what I was, and our meeting had appeared marvelous because she seemed unique, I had only been yielding to the obscure solicitations of heredity and general instinct that govern the heart of every male. I had been nothing but a plaything, a cog-wheel. Was the doctor right, then, when he claimed that everything is ineluctably inscribed in advance in the material depths of the flesh?

It also seemed to be a kind of rule that, after each of my interviews with the doctor, the feelings I had for Yvane were seemingly undermined, and that it was necessary for me to see her again, and spent a few days with her, before all the mysterious little threads that attached us to one another were woven together again.

Was she aware of it? Probably. Never was her presence more discreet, more delicate, than at those times when I distanced myself from her in thought—as if she had divined that that was the best means of getting me back.

I had decided not to interrogate her straightforwardly about the doctor’s confidences. It seemed to me that precise questions would have broken the charm and delicacy of the atmosphere in which our relationship was unfolding. What happened between us ought only to be concerned with ourselves. I also decided—and perhaps that was my greatest error—to keep our intrigue completely separate from the thoughts that continued to occupy me at other times, which were concentrated on the doctor’s activities. When I was with Yvane, I was with her exclusively; I did not want to see in her any but the person that she wanted to be for me, detaching her and cutting her off from her connections and roots—from the entire frame within which she had lived. I regarded her as a sudden apparition, which one does not seek to explain, in order to allow myself to be more completely seduced by the magic of her gratuitous presence. In her, too, it must be admitted, there was something that invited that manner of procedure. It seemed that she demanded, in order to be fully herself, not to be attached in any excessively narrow and precise fashion to the world that surrounded her. It was in her destiny to play the fairy, and one should not lift the veils of mist the float over the heaths of fairyland.

I still had hours of solitude, however, in which to reflect in a more down-to-earth fashion on the doctor’s confession. Once the initial surprise was past, it appeared to me that I had only heard his version of events—a version that seemed to me to be suspicious in more than one respect. Another testimony was necessary, and I could only obtain that testimony from Dirk—who had become invisible, maintained in strict secrecy. By dint of thinking about it, I eventually persuaded myself that a meeting with Dirk was indispensable, and I gradually formulated a plan to achieve that end.