

THE FRENETIC PEOPLE

PART ONE: HARRISSON THE CREATOR

I. Averine's Century

As seven o'clock was chiming on the nearby meridian, Harrisson appeared on the terrace. After that day, entirely spent in the terrible atmosphere of the subterranean laboratory, the young scientist experienced a keen joy as he breathed in the fresh air laden with inexhaustible vegetal odors.

Having taken off his the outer element of his working clothes—a natural silk smock lined with insulating pellicle—he held the vulgar garment at arm's length momentarily, then pirouetted, and, with a childish gesture suddenly threw it to his right. The smock floated in the air for a second and landed on top of Samuel, a young mulatto, who was crouching down and playing with a kitten.

Harrisson burst out laughing; the cat mewed and Samuel cried out while struggling in the folds of the fabric.

"Damn it, Sam! Now you're trampling on my smock with the thousand glorious stains! Does respect never enter your bird's brain?"

"Bad! Bad!" cried the frightened adolescent. Disentangled from the smock, he retreated, clutching his pet in his arms.

"Bad boy yourself!" Harrisson went on. "When you've torn my ceremonial garment, how can I go abroad in society? What will our great poet Lahorie say, who compares me to a Beast of the Apocalypse? What will the Academies say...?"

He was speaking in a loud and joyful voice. Suddenly, he fell silent and stood still, seemingly confused.

Then, in the silence that had fallen, a soft and serious voice was heard: "Play, my sons!"

Harrisson advanced to the front of the terrace, where an old man was reclining in an old-style armchair. "Master," he murmured, "I'm sorry for having interrupted your nap with these noisy and stupid capers."

A powerful white-haired head detached itself from the high back of the chair: a fine patriarchal head with eyes of infinite softness.

"Play, youngsters! You, grown-up Luc, with your head full of light, and you, little Samuel with the sparkling laugh, play without constraint. The sight of your gaiety is soothing to my feeble eyes."

"But you were asleep, Master, and we woke you up!"

"I was asleep? And you woke me up? I'm not sure about that. For me, there's no longer anything but uncertainty... Sleep...life...death...it all gets mixed up, But gaiety is a sure and good thing. I understand your gaiety. I like your gaiety."

The voice became softer still, more veiled and more distant. "I believe I thought...yes, thought clearly...during my long, prideful life...a hundred years long, soon! A hundred years, flowing by like a stream...like the wind. I said: this is true; that is false! Here's the just, and the unjust! I weighed the exact measure, with harsh honesty...but my soul no longer distinguishes reliably between light and shadow...my mind is pale and smooth...here's the evening, miraculous and soft...here's the dream!"

The old man closed his eyes again.

Already, Samuel had resumed playing with his pet. He had not been listening. He was a curiously backward child, but without any morbid symptoms; expert psychologists saw him, not as ill, but as a specimen of Neolithic humankind. In his obscure brain, the simplest words only awoke fugitive images. Perfectly beautiful, the natural harmony of his gestures was a joy to watch. When he was resting, Harrisson let him play nearby. This evening, however, annoyed by his routines, he sent him away.

Samuel, who liked the scientist's presence, pleaded with him.

With a gesture, Harrisson showed him the door. "Go!"

The child drew away sadly, his cat in his arms.

The old man seemed to be asleep. In spite of the approach of dusk, it was still warm. Sure of not being disturbed, Harrisson took off his tunic with a sigh of discouragement. Then he took off the thin insulating pellicle that protected his arms and wrists.

For a month, he had been living in his private laboratory, spending all day and part of the night there. He lived there alone, because of the infernal atmosphere, to which the assistants could not accustom themselves, and, most of all, because of the unknown dangers. Against ordinary dangers, of course, all precautions had been taken. Harrisson did not fear those dangers; he had proved to himself the impossibility of presently-explicable accidents—but it was necessary to anticipate considerable and terrible surprises. The domain that the young scientist was exploring, the extravagant domain of the imponderable, was inconceivably various, and, in spite of numerous endeavors, it still remained a fearful novelty.

Harrisson likened himself to some adventurous pioneer of primitive eras, leaving the horde to penetrate alone, always further forward, into the mystery of an unknown forest. The forest was limitless, populated by unimaginable forms, and possessed of a mobility such that the fugitive images of an absurd dream would have seemed stable, clear and admissible by comparison: a realm of madness, full of an immense confusion of chimeras.

Madness! Scientists of previous centuries, and even of today, thinkers overly accustomed to the old rules, might perhaps have felt the wind in their face—but he, Harrisson, was untroubled as he watched idols totter and theories collapse that had formed the foundations of human mentality for centuries. He observed, measured, counted; he noted alarming results, and shrugged his shoulders whenever a philosopher, speaking from the height of his ignorance, accused him of merely rejuvenating old utopias and propagating elementary absurdities.

A virile joy swelled his breast; once again, his research was about to reach a conclusion: not a definitive result, such as only exists in the minds of poets and the ignorant, but a result that would count for something nevertheless in the history of human trial and error.

Thanks to him, a new combination of forces had come into play. He had just done something that no human had ever done before. For a brief moment, at a singular point, he had genuinely *created* something.

How would that discovery be welcomed? It was a strange new fact: a disconcerting, anarchic fact. Undoubtedly, it would bring forth strong resistance. Physicists attached to the old methods would smile; philosophers would butcher the ears a little more; orators would swing like purring pendulums; jokers would make quips; breathless poets would exhale once again the eternal hymn of the past, covering the tottering idols with flowers.

"And tomorrow, I'll have to reckon with all those chatterboxes!"

Harrisson was stretched out on a low divan at the back of the terrace. The countryside extended before his eyes, calm and sumptuous; a warm breeze was blowing in odorant gusts; the daylight was fading in languorous contentment. Harrisson felt his fatigue dissipating. The old man's last words came to his lips: "Here's the evening...the miraculous and soft evening..."

The young man's gaze settled with respectful affection on the noble pale face with the closed eyes, and he murmured: "The most beautiful brain there ever was! There are dreams in it, miracles...but how weak he is! A hundred years old, alas!"

He recalled the astonishing history of the great Averine, who had already, in the eyes of the masses, taken his place among the figures of legend. Born at the beginning of the fifth century of the Universal Era, abandoned by his parents, completely illiterate at the age of twelve, a kitchen-boy at fifteen, then a cleaner, and then a mechanic, going around the world three or four hundred times aboard the great aerial expresses, he had found himself, at twenty-five, a laboratory assistant in a Peruvian research institute. People had begun to talk about him in 452; he attracted the attention of the scientific and industrial world by virtue of his discovery of a method of synthesizing albumins a thousand times simpler and more rapid than those previously known. Other discoveries had followed, always presenting the same character of surprising simplicity. Then, in 457, a thunderbolt: the problem of the ether was resolved!

For centuries, the human elite had felt becalmed there, lost in dense mist, at the limits of science and metaphysics. And now a young scientist—well-known, to be sure, but not one of the most

famous—had boldly projected an elegant bridge of light toward the inaccessible shore! The ether became a tangible reality, within the jurisdiction of the ordinary procedures of scientific investigation.

All thinking humankind had been shocked by surprise. And then, immediately, passionate and fecund discussions had arisen; theories were confronted, and had crumbled one after another, with a hitherto-unknown rapidity. Since that epoch, a disorderly seething of curiosity had been seen; any audacity had seemed legitimate; the human mind had launched forth into a new and marvelous phase.

Although the work of scientists was disinterested and pure speculation was in honor more than ever, considerable changes nevertheless took place in the march of civilization. Fantastic possibilities appeared on the horizon. There was some anxiety, and even a certain amount of psychological disturbance, but humankind, as a whole, advanced at a brisk pace, with increasing speed, toward an adventurous tomorrow of which no past history could give any idea.

For some time to come, the principal artisan of that formidable evolution would doubtless be that motionless old man, burdened by years, to whom all the scientists on the planet were preparing to pay tribute one more time, on the occasion of his hundredth birthday. The fifth century of the Universal Era would be known as Averine's century. It already was.

Harrison, the master's favorite pupil and his veritable spiritual heir, was ambitious to continue the great work. He was the director of the Averine Institute, in the former nation of France, celebrated for the richness of its memories, the delicate light of its skies, and the softness of its restful horizons: that charming old nation whose clear language had ended up, after many vicissitudes, imposing itself on the human elite, while English, the first universal language, had rapidly lost its purity and given birth to unstable patois.

Averine lived on the side of a hill, in a rustic house of a frankly archaic style, with a wooden frame, stone walls and a roof of red tiles: a villa to the taste of a modest bourgeois of the decline of the Christian Era. The buildings were surrounded by beautiful grounds. To the right and left, strictly aligned, were other buildings separated by grassy meadows and odorous orchards. For the most part, they were the houses of agriculturalists, very modern and very plush; their metallic roofs gleamed like as many multicolored mirrors. A few artisans or functionaries employed in the industrial power-stations also lived in the area; their more modest houses were aligned perpendicular to the slope or grouped in a fan around the airport that served the locality.

In the depths of the valley a river sparkled. For hundreds of years humans had utilized the eager force of its waters, but modern science had liberated nature. All the hydroelectric installations had disappeared; at least, nothing more remained of them but sparse vestiges, saved by the piety of archeologists: sections of wall invaded by ivy; turbines and dynamos corroded by oxidization; a complicated machinery, puerile and charming, about which poets short of inspiration sang untiringly. The river ran freely between the flowering poplars and enhanced willows whose enormous catkins furnished an inimitable perfume, much sought-after by the elegant.

Before that calm and beautiful landscape, Harrison daydreamed. An increasing noise caused him to raise his eyes. Among the rapid and silent aircraft, two antique aerobuses, whose silhouettes were vaguely reminiscent of those of birds, were flying low beneath a ceiling of clouds. The *tac-tac* of the electric propeller of the first was audible; the second, even more ancient, which one might have believed to have been taken from a historic museum, progressed thanks to an explosive engine, whose roar filled the air. Luminous banners floated behind the two aerobuses.

Suddenly, as they were passing over the valley, they released fireworks that burst with a soft sound, and a rain of multicolored fire descended.

Averine had raised his head in his turn.

"What's that?" he demanded.

Harrison went over to him. "I think they're students playing pranks, Master...careless scatterbrains who have unearthed—I don't know where—those hazardous rattletraps in order to startle peaceful people. I've done worse in my time!"

The old man smiled indulgently.

While speaking, Harrison had flicked a switch and turned the funnel of a receiver toward him. The noise of the motors was muffled, and then suddenly stopped; the two aerobuses were drifting in the wind. Then juvenile voices were heard: songs, and also—which displeased Harrison—bursts of staccato laughter, abnormal and inextinguishable. It proved, alas, that the new vice, the abuse of exhilarants, had already attained that beautiful youth.

“The fools...the poor fools!” he murmured.

A further rain of sparks was scattered in mid-air, not far from the airport.

Again, Harrison said: “The reckless fools! Just as long as they don’t cut off the aerial energy-field with their antediluvian motors and all their scrap metal!”

As he said it, a signal rose up from the neighboring airport; a watchman had spotted the excursionists, and was forbidding access to the danger-zone.

The aerobuses continued to advance, however—and the stop signal appeared again, repeated three times. The watchman was getting annoyed and issuing a threat. Then, there was a storm of jeers from the two aerobuses; whistle-blasts could heard, and animal cries, and then a mocking verse sung in chorus. To the tune of a popular song, in the Old French of the decadence, the students proclaimed the conjugal misfortunes of the airport manager to the face of the heavens.

The aerobuses, rising up ponderously, headed for the clouds.

Darkness had fallen completely. In the heights of the sky, the beacons of isolated aircraft lit up like stars. A long aerial express, bringing yellow workers home, flew eastwards, all its portholes illuminated. On the ground, finally, fluorescent ramps were already festooning a few houses and, at the tops of the tall trees and in the agriculturalists’ grounds, photophoric networks disposed like feathers spread a soft blue-tinted light.

Averine got up for dinner.

In the rustic dining-room, the children occupied the places of honor around the master. Samuel was there, and his habitual playmate, Flore, a black girl with enamel-like eyes. There were also local children, round-headed Gauls, noisy and easily amazed. The staff of the house—except for the kitchen staff, who would eat a little later—came immediately after the children. Averine liked young people and working people, simple and ingenuous conversation. For a long time, he had taken pleasure in serving them himself; now he contented himself with gathering them around him, and smiling at their joy.

Harrison occupied the other end of the table, with his companions in labor: two scientists of mature years and a young woman who was scarcely twenty-five, Lygie Rod, already famous for her work on the role of turbulent attractions in the evolution of tumultuous protoplasm. The previous year, Lygie Rod had lost two fingers in a laboratory accident; in her pale, symmetrical face her calm eyes resembled profound wells.

There were only two new guests: a couple passing through who were distantly related to one of the scientists. The man, something of a socialite, was getting bored next to Lygie. The woman, dressed in an antique style, wore her hair long; her dress, generously fissured, allowed the sight of beautifully curved shoulders, painted periwinkle-blue in accordance with the atrocious fashion launched at the beginning of the week by a celebrated Japanese courtesan. Suspended from her left wrist by platinum wire she had a little box containing exhilarating pills. From the start of the meal she had been dipping furtively into the box and, excited by the slight dose of poison, was already laughing at everything, her eyes shining and cheeks red, lovely and disquieting.

An archaic simplicity reigned at Averine’s table, and the two strangers, used to the luxury of modern caravanserais, could not believe their eyes. Nevertheless, the fare was abundant and healthy. Save for the enhanced vegetables with transient aromas, which were cooked under pressure at low temperature, the old traditions of French cuisine were maintained in Averine’s house.

Fruits covered the table; fruits were a luxury permissible for the humblest. In every country, they arrived from the four corners of the world. In Averine’s house, preference was given to the indigenous fruits of the season, furnished by the rich orchards of the neighborhood: enormous brightly-colored fruits with perfumes so varied and so sweet that the ingenuity of chemists had not yet succeeded in imitating them perfectly. There were not only the fruits appreciated by the ancients, but new species obtained by processes of ultra-rapid selection, which produced marvelous results in only a few generations.

Almost all wild fruits, including the most insipid and bitter berries, had attracted the attention of horticulturalists. Even poisonous berries had become large and tasty fruits, keenly sought by gourmets. The hawthorn berry, that of the nightshade, the fruit of the sweet-briar, the pine-cone and the horse-chestnut figured on the best tables as well as the poorest.

For a week, Harrison, whose work had occupied him to the point of making him forget meals, had been living on beech-nuts in the depths of his laboratory. This evening, by contrast, the scientist,

filled with joy by his victory, appreciated the food as a connoisseur; he relaxed, displaying the joviality of insouciance.

Lygie's eyes met his; he divined their mute interrogation. Leaning toward the young woman, he murmured: "Yes! I think success is within our grasp."

In a low voice, Lygie replied: "Congratulations! It's a great accomplishment!"

"It's as much your accomplishment as mine, Lygie!"

A flicker of joy lit up in the calm eyes, but it was brief. The young woman lowered her pale forehead, and only a slight tremor in her hands still revealed her emotion.

In the same confidential tone, Harrison went on: "For the moment, please be discreet...especially in front of that crackbrain..."

The female stranger was laughing, her head tipped back, her gaze intoxicated. Anticipating a further gesture toward the box of poison, Harrison offered her the first slice of an enormous and appetizing Breton acorn that had just been served—and he recited, in a joyful voice, the lines of a gourmand poet who had celebrated that modern fruit, the bread of the poor and the banquet of the rich, the preferred aliment of the very young and very old alike. All the guests applauded and raised their glasses to Harrison. Myrtle wine, sparkling and perfumed, quivered in rustic goblets of rose crystal.

At a stroke from the kitchen bell, the meal concluded. The two laboratory assistants and Lygie immediately rose to their feet in order to go in their turn to serve the kitchen workers.

Having taken their leave of Averine, the two guests withdrew. The young woman wanted to visit an exhibition of hats and then go to an aerial rally above the Archipelago. The man grumbled, saying that he had just gone almost all the way around the world, which seemed to him to be enough for one day, and that he felt no need to spend half the night in the clouds. He would have preferred to go directly back to the Azores, where they lived. He ended up giving in.

Harrison accompanied the guests to their aircraft. It was a luxury two-seater, elongated in the form of a cigar and quilted with compressed oxygen. The disintegration of a potassium salt provided heat, lighting and motive force; slowed down or accelerated at will, it permitted nonchalant strolling as well as meteoric speed. Thanks to an exceedingly simple mechanism, one could also utilize the energy of the public lines.

Having raided her little box once again, the young woman extended her hand to Harrison, then stretched out on her cushions. The man, lying down in the prow, was already maneuvering the delicate levers. The hood came down and the apparatus rose up vertically, between the trees in the grounds; after a few seconds of slow oblique progress, its speed increased rapidly. The aircraft flew eastwards, passing like a meteor over the zone of the large expresses.

Harrison went back to the villa and went into the library. After a few moments, the two laboratory assistants joined him there. Harrison's success was also theirs, to some extent; excitement and fatigue made their faces pale. Wearing by the work of the preceding days, they soon retired to bed.

Left alone, Harrison opened a window. It was still warm; a mild night enveloped the world. Devoid of photophoric networks, the trees in the grounds interlaced their dark branches. At dusk, the birds of the neighborhood came to take refuge there, while disquieting lights came on in the orchards, the greenhouses and the agriculturalists' fields. Facing the window, in an old wild oak, a nightingale began to sing. The villa was at rest; all the receivers were switched off; distant noises no longer reached it. Alone in the midst of the silence, that little song spread out like an ardent flower from a calyx of shadow.

The foliage of the rustic garden masked the horizon, and only a diffuse light rose up from the surrounding countryside. High in the sky, rare and silent aircraft were passing over, their lights scintillating like stars. The serenity of the moment was such that one might have believed that one had gone back in time. Ten centuries before, in the twentieth of the Christian Era, there might have been a house like Averine's at that point on the earth's surface, and large wild trees in which, on beautiful summer evenings, nightingales came to sing...

In spite of human industry, in spite of the immense efforts of human beings, certain aspects of the world remained the same; certain scenes were renewed, little different from one era to the next.

Harrison smiled, and thought: *There's a theme as banal as one could wish, which I might suggest to our Lahorie...but he's already used it a hundred times!*

He closed the window and started thinking about the life of the people who had inhabited the region a thousand years before...

His thoughts did not linger long in that vague reverie. The sudden flickering of a malfunctioning photophore brought his attention back to a precise question. He wondered whether, in the twentieth century of the preceding era, the ancient phosphorescent lamp—the first attempt at rational lighting—had been in current use. Several scientific works, rapidly consulted, did not clarify the matter. He searched the bottom shelves of the library, to which were relegated the principal contemporary works and a few works of philosophy and history.

His eyes lighted upon *A General History of Civilization, from the eighteenth century A.D. to the fifth century U.E.* It was a considerable work, printed in violet on unoxidizable metal, counting no less than two thousand pages of densely-packed text. In spite of the extreme thinness of the pages and the lightness of the porous aluminum binding, it weighed about as much as an ancient pocket-book printed on thick paper.

Harrison opened the book. The historian was no more explicit than the scientists. He mentioned “electric lighting” several times, but that vague term, which could be applied to mercury lamps, might as easily describe various more primitive methods of lighting—such as, for instance, simple incandescent lamps with metallic filaments.

Nevertheless, Harrison continued leafing through the book, the tone of which pleased him. Writing the history of humankind in the scientific age, the author, with implacable logic, demonstrated that, at the origin of every change in the progress of civilization, a discovery was found of which, very often, no one had at first perceived the importance. Contrary to several of his colleagues, the historian maintained that neither philosophers nor moralists, poets, warriors and legislators guided humankind, their personal actions being only secondary, temporary local and short-term. The true directors were the modest seekers of whom their contemporaries were scarcely aware, and who were pursuing their disinterested research in the silence of laboratories. Each of their deeds echoed to infinity; the most seemingly-insignificant discovery had the potential to shake the entire social edifice.

The Author classified events in a new schema, according to their true import. Thus, in the nineteenth century of the Christian Era, he placed little emphasis on the emancipation of the masses and the sentimental rivalries of peoples; the major occurrence was the scientific awakening of the more powerful nations, the utilization—still very primitive—of steam and electricity. An important date in human history was also to be found in the nineteenth century; in the year 1867 the French scientist Niepce de Saint-Victor had discovered, by chance, the radioactivity of uranium salts, and that discovery, which passed completely unnoticed at the time, now appeared at least as important as the discovery of fire by the primal horde.¹

The beginning of the twentieth century also marked an important date. A millenarian dream was finally realized: aerial navigation commenced—a dangerous and costly navigation, it is true, only utilizing primitive means, and which, in spite of rapid progress, only played a secondary role in the European war of 1914-1918.

The historian briefly mentioned that long and bloody skirmish, whose causes seemed, at a distance, puerile and extremely confused. Nothing new, in any case, had emerged during the war—only a few timid excursions of aircraft in the background, and a few ferocious but maladroit deployments of poison gases. As in the remotest times, the belligerents had sent their most vigorous young males against the enemy, confiding firearms to them, resulting in a terrible negative selection. That war, pursued for long months with a terrible obstinacy by numerous armies, marvelously disciplined and provided with murderous engines, had severely shaken the old world.

The magnitude of the catastrophe should have caused the scales to fall from the blindest eyes, but it had not. People had not understood that a new era was beginning, in which prudence, for want of generosity, would become an essential virtue. As soon as the armed conflict was over, the conflicts of

¹ The photographic pioneer Abel Niepce de Saint-Victor did indeed observe, in 1857 rather than the 1867 quoted by Pérochon, that photographic emulsions could be exposed even in complete darkness in proximity to certain salts, and eventually fixed the blame on uranium salts, to which he attributed a hitherto-unknown form of radiation. His employer, Michel Chevreuil, hailed the discovery as fundamental and Niepce was in no doubt about its importance, but no one else took the slightest notice, and it was not until the sensation following the discovery of X-rays in 1895 that Henri Becquerel “discovered” the radioactivity of uranium for a second time, in 1896.

pride or self-interest had enfevered hearts again; again, hands that were still bloody had clenched into threatening fists. Never, perhaps, had humans been so lacking in clear-sightedness and good will than at that point in time.

Science was progressing rapidly, but few people thought of being surprised or mistrustful. Intelligence seemed somewhat dazed or disorientated. Military leaders were seen gravel drafting treatises on strategy imitative of antiquity for the use of the warriors of the future. Philosophers ratiocinated; poets stammered; squadrons of myopics occupied the sentry-boxes and blockaded the crossroads of thought. In more than one country, vulgar demagogues hoisted themselves on to popular stages; semi-madmen brandishing clubs succeeded in finding an audience. The masses, still numbed by shock, and sensing confusedly that the world was changing, were hesitant. Uniquely concerned with the immediate future, they lost their ancient virtues without acquiring new ones, and let things happen with a sort of disenchanting fatalism. No nation knew exactly where it wanted to go.

The end of the twentieth century and the first half of the twenty-first were an epoch of disorderly social experiments. One after another, powerful collectives fell apart. Civil wars succeed national wars. A summary conception of justice rendered them frequent and fierce. They broke out for absurd or futile reasons. With the intention of avoiding some insignificant malaise, people did not hesitate to unleash the worst catastrophes.

Properly speaking, there were no longer any armies or fronts in warfare. The entire population was afflicted, the entire country ravaged. Delicate and powerful engines, which could easily be handled by women or children, dealt death at long distances. Firearms were still utilized, but gradually lost their importance. Toxic gases were killing many people; aircraft carrying explosives or various poisons flattened cities or rendered them uninhabitable. Several times over, microbial disseminations depopulated vast regions, and the scourge threatened the entire world.

In spite of all those upheavals, humankind seemed to be making progress. Science, which armed people so terribly for evil purposes, also armed them for virtuous ones. The masses were less harshly subjected to the law of toil. The satisfaction of primordial needs became increasingly easy. The most humble rarely knew great deprivation; in periods of peace, even though rusticity diminished and new artificial needs were generated, a certain economic ease was within the range of everyone. Humankind evolved in fits and starts toward a future of practical median contentment—and individual morality, in the more powerful nations, seemed to improve gradually.

In the twenty-second century, in the old countries of Europe and America, where in spite of the mixture of races, white men were still dominant, a new order was finally established. No one there dared to adopt an aggressive chauvinism or spitefully extol class struggle. For want of warm sympathy between different groups of human beings, the instinct of self-preservation muffled impacts, promoted tolerance and reciprocal concessions. Although equality did not exist anywhere in actuality, at least appearances were very nearly saved, between individuals and between States. The population of the white race formed a vast federation of egalitarian republics, with common interests and conciliatory tendencies.

Facing them was the bloc of yellow peoples. Science, like the flourish of a magic wand, had extracted them from a long torpor. The awakening had been prodigious. Their scientists were equal in reputation to the scientists of Europe and America; their industrialists, businessmen and bankers invaded all the markets of the globe; at the same time, an unprecedented artistic renaissance coincided among them with a moral depravity that astonished the old world. Arrived too rapidly at scientific civilization, also afflicted with powerful xenophobic associations, those audacious and turbulent peoples brought the perpetual threat of grave disorder.

At the beginning of the twenty-second century war broke out. A Manchu physicist had discovered a rapid method of manufacturing gold, and the Asiatic bankers profited from the temporary disturbance of commercial relations to reduce certain collectives in Africa and Asia to virtual slavery. At the Council of Nations, the prudence of diplomats pacified the conflict, but the whites were obliged to concede great advantages to their adversaries.

Fifteen years later there was a further alert, again occasioned by an important scientific development capable of immediate application. It was a matter of the discovery in certain strata of the Orinoco basin of a metal akin to lead—it was initially named Lead Z—which had the property of disintegrating at an easily-regulated rate under the influence of appropriate radiations. There was a

possibility of obtaining in the near future, among other things, explosives of perfect stability and formidable power.

The Asiatic financiers, immediately alerted—and more ambitious and arrogant than ever—employed intermediaries to buy the totality of the mineral deposits. The danger seemed so great, however, that the entire world was troubled. Once again, the Council of Nations found a compromise: the mines would be nationalized. In reality, the Asiatics kept the lion's share; supervising the production and dominating the market, they even set out to establish clandestine stocks before other deposits were discovered, or further scientific discoveries averted the threat. These advantages did not seem sufficient to them. A minority of nationalist megalomaniacs provoked violent troubles in southern China. The regional diplomats who had signed the accord sat in judgment, and a number of people were executed.

A female Laotian poet, as famous for her pride and debauchery as for her extravagant lyricism, set herself at the head of the discontented. At her instigation, a semi-secret society was formed—the Cut-Cut—which soon brought together a hundred million fanatics. Propagated by writers and orators of barbaric eloquence, the worst insanities of ancient chauvinist and bellicose literature became articles of faith for its initiates. So, although the great majority of people remained peaceful, abominable adventures seemed inevitable.

The war broke out in 2145, with no other immediate cause than an immodest act by a woman.

One evening in May, the female poet Lia-Te, having had a whim to appear in the nude, riding a goat, at a sermon given by a clergyman in San Francisco, was escorted back to her aircraft amid a storm of jeers.

Scarcely was she aboard than she raced to the telephone, and, in grandiloquent phrases uttered in a furious voice, informed the Cut-Cut of the insult suffered by its president. Immediately alerted, five hundred aircraft took off and crossed the Pacific. A few hours later, San Francisco woke up beneath a deluge of asphyxiating and incendiary bombs. Only ten thousand inhabitants survived the attack.

There was a moment of stupor throughout the world.

At the Council of Nations, the Asiatic diplomats, receiving contradictory instructions from their respective countries, hesitated. When a decision was finally taken to punish the guilty and dissolve their organization, precious time had been lost; the Cut-Cut were masters of the situation. The whites in Asia were already being hunted down; many of them, delivered to the fury of the populace, found death in tortures of unprecedented cruelty. The old leavens of martial madness boiled over, rising up in bloody foam. Menacing clamors flew from continent to continent; all the telephones on the planet resounded with Homeric insults.

Finally, attacked by an airborne squadron from Indo-China, the whites of Australia riposted energetically. The real war began.

The historian distinguished three acts in that great drama of the twilight of the Christian Era.

In the beginning, the Asiatics, provided with powerful factories and superbly-equipped laboratories, had the clear advantage, but not without suffering serious damage themselves. That initial period was marked by the destruction of great cities. No defenses could provide efficacious protection for New York, Buenos Aires, London, Paris, Melbourne and Cape Town against the aerial squadrons of the yellow peoples. In the other camp, Peking, Canton, Hai-Phong and Calcutta fared no better.

After a year of conflict, a large number of Chinese, Japanese and Indian factories were still intact, while the strength of the whites was diminishing rapidly. The Asiatic aircraft had begun the methodical destruction of secondary nuclei of resistance. The whites and their allies, the blacks, seemed doomed to total defeat and enslavement.

Then the face of things changed abruptly.

A young French physicist, Noelle Roger,² had just perfected, in the greatest secrecy, an elegant and simple means of defense. Directing over long distances a beam of parallel waves hitherto unknown to nature, it provoked the deflagration of any and all explosives.

² The choice of this name might not have been accidental; "Noelle Roger" was the pseudonym of H el ene Pittard (1874-1953), a notable Swiss writer of *romans scientifiques* who had published an apocalyptic novel of her own, *Le Nouveau d eluge* [The New Deluge], in 1922 and a significant novel of superhumanity, *Le Nouvel Adam* (tr. as *The New Adam*) in 1924. The generally alarmist tone of her works is not dissimilar to that of the present novel.

Immediately after the first trials, a battery of emissive apparatus and projectors was constituted and entrusted to a crew of specialist electricians commanded by Noelle Roger in person. The effect of the surprise attack was formidable and unprecedented.

The historian placidly reported that first appearance of Roger projectors as it was mentioned in contemporary chronicles.

Coming from Asia Minor, an immense squadron of sweeper aircraft was flying over the archipelago at the fortieth parallel, advancing toward Mount Olympus, the point of separation. It was intended to administer the *coup-de-grâce* to the whites of southern Europe. The Asiatics were flying in broad daylight, in tight formation, sure of their force, taking no precautions. Behind a small hill in Thessaly, not far from the coast, ten electricians were waiting, lying in the bottom of a trench beside their batteries of projectors. Standing in the middle of them, Noelle Roger scrutinized the sky.

Suddenly, she raised her hand. The electricians to her left and right unmasked their projectors. Instantaneously, a mighty explosion rent the air; all the aircraft on the right flank had blown up at the same time. The aircraft in the center, blown sideways by the blast, fluttered like dead leaves; surrounded by a sudden fog, they switched on their searchlights and launched rockets, seeking the invisible enemy at random.

Then the young Frenchwoman, emerging from the trench, advanced toward the top of the hill. Half-turning to her companions, her eyes excited and her mouth grim, she pointed to the horizon with an ardent sweeping gesture, and shouted at the top of her voice:

“From north to south, mow them down!”

A thousand aircraft, each carrying a ton of explosives of terrible power, were annihilated simultaneously. The earth trembled. A whirlwind descended upon the land and threw the sea to assault the shore. The electricians, plastered to the floor of the trench, saw Noelle Roger lifted from the ground, her arms still raised. They found her a hundred meters away, lying dead, face upwards, her mouth still howling, with an indescribable horror in the depths of her inhuman eyes.

Of the immense air-fleet nothing remained but a vast and vague cloud on the horizon.

From that moment on the fate of the war seemed to be settled.

The Antipodeans were not discouraged, however. Their constructors were working feverishly; for every aircraft destroyed ten emerged from the factories. At the same time, the offensive tactics changed; they no longer attacked except in darkness, in widely dispersed order, seeking surprise everywhere. All their scientists devoted themselves to the problem of the Roger waves. In vain, on their advice, attempts were made to bury stocks of explosives, to sink them under water, to protect them by continuous metal envelopes; the new radiations seemed to be endowed with universal penetration. Then the Asiatic physicists studied and perfected methods permitting the utilization of lead Z, on which the Roger waves had no effect. The near-instantaneous disintegration of the metal permitted the shortage of explosives to be compensated, but the meager stocks were soon exhausted.

The whites took the offensive in their turn. Their offers of peace having been disdainfully rejected, they assembled their last remaining aircraft and submarines and mounted destructive raids. Reflectors of great power swept considerable area, destroying ammunition depots, shattering loaded weapons and annihilating police forces, whose cartridges exploded. Ahead of the invaders they created a zone deprived of explosives, in which only toxic gases were still to be feared; soon, the centers of production had been located, and that danger too was nullified.

One after another, the Asiatic factories were blown up, set ablaze or pulverized.

Again, the whites offered peace; their enemies replied by torturing to death the prisoners they still had hidden in the depths of mines. That was the signal for violent reprisals.

The last Asian cities went up in flames; one night, Anglo-Saxon engineers smashed the dams of an immense reservoir on the inferior stream of the Hoang-Ho, and the river, immediately changing its course, devastated the most heavily-populated region in the world.

The second phase of the war was completed by that terrible drowning.

At that point, perhaps a hundred million people had already perished. Reserves of every sort were exhausted; the specter of famine loomed large—and yet, the bellicose fury did not die down. The Asiatics, especially, were prey to an insensate rage. Their scientists were still searching for the secret

Her later works included *Le Soleil enseveli* [The Shrouded Sun] (1928) and *Le Chercheur d'ondes* [The Wave-Seeker] (1931).

of the Roger waves or, at least, some efficacious response; their demagogue exalted the pride of the race; moribund poets gave voice to demented songs.

When all hope of victory was lost, the yellow races unleashed microbial warfare. Siberian aircraft with their armaments removed, disguised as ambulances, sowed Europe, Africa, America and Australia with carefully-selected pathogenic species of unprecedented virulence.

And that was the third phase of the war, much the most terrible.

Until then, every time a microbial attack had been launched, humankind had easily localized the scourge, but this time, all the races were at the end of their tether, breathless and bloodless. The general destruction of cities, the annihilation of hospitals and principal laboratories had been sufficient to render any methodical plan of defense inapplicable. In addition, rapid means of communication were lacking. Railways, in effect, no longer existed; roads, cut at many points, were only of use to old short-range automobiles; steamships lay at the bottom of the sea; even aircraft were scarce. Finally, the radiotelephonic stations, targeted at the outset of hostilities and soon destroyed, had only been replaced by ramshackle installations of limited power.

Humankind, out of breath, was like a huge exhausted body, its reactions confused and awkward.

The scourge rapidly infected the entire world. Soon, no further conflict was possible. New diseases made their appearance; other, reputedly benign, assumed destructive forms. Some regions lost almost all their inhabitants. Everywhere, decomposing corpses strewed the countryside.

The war was over; death alone had triumphed. Ten years after the outbreak of the first epidemic, the Earth had lost more than a third of its population; six hundred millions human beings had died. The survivors were battling against famine and reverting to primitive forms of life. Here and there, tribes were living by hunting and fishing; others were beginning to drive flocks from pasture to pasture. Marauders gathered around petty chiefs sowed terror. The strongest, the wildest and the cruellest were already beginning to form a proud and cynical aristocracy of sorts.

Civilization seemed to have disappeared for centuries. The Christian Era concluded with a confused twilight overhung by an immense odor of cadavers.

And yet, three hundred years later, a new dawn appeared...

The historian emphasized the cause of that astonishing renaissance.

In spite of appearances, the final epoch of barbarity different from the earlier epochs. It was a kind of coma succeeding a grave illness, a formidable crisis provoked by the revolutionary appearance of science. Science was not dead, however; the flame had flickered without going out. Soon, all the lights began to reignite. The scientists had only to search the past and reconnect the broken threads.

Finally instructed by recent and frightful experience, however, humankind was about to take a new path and make a great effort of adaptation.

Humans remained egotistical and cruel; even though a great deal was expected of science, no one could yet nurture the hope of rapidly modifying the nature of the individual. In order to render martial adventures less probable, a clear-sighted elite admitted the necessity of artificially forming broad currents of opinion, creating a new moral atmosphere—even if it were necessary, in order to do that, to sacrifice some precious living strength.

At any rate, obedient to a profound instinct of self-preservation, humankind rejected concepts that had once been tutelary but had become dangerous to the species in an epoch of scientific civilization.

The idea of nationality was no longer found in the heart of the masses, having become somnolent; pride of caste was a capital sin. Historical studies, creative of troubled states of mind among the humble, were only permitted to a small number of mature individuals, who had to undertake never to seek any public office.

A new classification of virtues and vices came into effect. The necessity of generosity took on the evidence of a mathematical verity. Urgent apostles preached prudence, tolerance and moderation, and innumerable radiophones repeated their sermons.

The doctrine of courage raised a few debates, but the majority of moralists agreed in recognizing, in that great virtue of the Christian Era, a mild form of ancestral ferocity. In the same way that ferocity had seemed dangerous since the dawn of historic ages, certain forms of courage seemed obsolete, redoubtable and bound to disappear in the scientific epoch. On that point, evolution was not only to continue but to accelerate rapidly.

They circled around the instinct of justice delicately. That was a matter of a recent acquisition of the human mind. Prehistoric humans would probably have derided the idea of law, or been unable to

conceive of it. By contrast, in spite of appearances, the people of the Christian Era headed directly toward what they called justice. They went by hazardous routes, in which abrupt detours were by no means rare, but they went passionately, and it was almost always in the name of justice that they killed.

That instinct, in its full growth, returned forcefully after the catastrophe; the young god conserved his worshipers. Meanwhile, ideal justice, a white summit raising its vague silhouette in the mist, still seemed inaccessible, as far away as ever from vulgar reality. Of that discord between human aspirations and facts, danger might be born. Great efforts were made to organize a society in which all the appearances of law were preserved, and which nominally satisfied the universal need for equality, a summary form of the desire for justice among the masses. There could no longer be any question of superior peoples, privileged races or governing classes. Only the supremacy of wisdom was recognized and tolerated, by means of numerous real and illusory guarantees.

Humankind gave itself willingly to experienced leaders of proven prudence, whose primary role was conciliation. In anticipation of disorders, these chiefs also had that their disposal powerful mean of coercion. After several premature and fruitless attempts, three hundred years after the destruction of San Francisco, the Supreme Council of the planet met and held its first session on the very location of the obliterated city.

The Universal Era began.

Harrison closed the book. He knew the rest: the history of the humankind of the Universal Era was, in effect, nothing other than the history of science. The only important dates of that era were marked by resounding discoveries.

In the first two centuries, the efforts of researchers had been primarily devoted to artificial disintegration. The second century had seen important realizations: the substitution of formidable intra-atomic energies for ordinary sources of heat, light and electricity, and the production of new radiations facilitating the transmutation, perfection and vulgarization of the cinetelephone.³

The third and fourth centuries had been marked by the considerable progress of biology, medicine and experimental psychology.

The fifth had been illuminated by Averine's endeavors. The sixth was finally opening on vast horizons. The old theory of the degradation of energy was giving way to infinitely audacious concepts; the possibility of creation had appeared. Curtains that had previously been utterly opaque were being ripped apart; humankind appeared to be approaching the metaphysical era.

During those five centuries, the march of civilization had been narrowly determined by the progress of the sciences. Social organization, in the year 525, bore little resemblance to that of the later Christian ages. In that distant epoch it had seemed that cities would gradually absorb the whole population of the planet. The cities sacked during the final torment had not been rebuilt on their ruins, however; the words "city-dweller" and "country-dweller" no longer had any meaning in the Universal Era.

Atomic disintegration having put a prodigious quantity of energy at the fortunate disposal of humankind, engineers had surrounded the Earth with a network of zones of force almost corresponding to the ancient system of meridians and parallels; between the principal lines, secondary lines were found at one-minute intervals. That immense public network furnished the necessary energy gratuitously to the aerial, terrestrial and maritime transportation serves, to the radiophone and television services, and, in general, to all the ordinary means of existence. Agricultural and industrial enterprises, which required considerable energy, also profited from the proximity of the zones. All the motors currently in usage were regulated by the public motors, producing or utilizing the same forms of energy and only differing in power.

³ The word "television" did exist in 1925; indeed, Pérochon actually uses it a few paragraphs further on, but only once, probably not intending the meaning we now attach to the word. The possibility of broadcasting pictures was more often envisaged in the early 1920s as a potential improvement of the already familiar telephone rather than an augmentation of not-yet-familiar broadcast radio, hence Pérochon's slightly eccentric neologism for a hypothetical system that combines the functions of our televisions and telephones. That might seem more appropriate and far-sighted now that mobile phones have televisual capabilities, although the miniaturization of the technology is one thing that he did not anticipate.

Thus, humankind had been invincibly led to build according to a linear plan, with no great city comparable the monstrous cities of the anterior epoch, but only a few smaller agglomerations, routinely build in a fan around airports. There were interminable files of habitations everywhere in proximity to the major lines, generally more widely-spaced along the secondary lines. Within the general repertoire of the planet, every house and establishment had a number that immediately indicated its exact position. Thus, the Averine Institute—the laboratory and the house—bore the number 1.47.12.32.007. Known throughout the entire world, it was commonly known as 1.47.⁴

For five centuries, no serious disturbance had posed a serious threat to civilization. The vigilance of the Supreme Council generally prevented conflicts. When wars broke out in spite of everything—that had happened several times in the early centuries—they were stifled immediately, no matter what the cost, by the universal police.

The human elite, in its entirety, had become resolutely hostile to any kind of martial adventure. The Earth was repopulated fairly rapidly. Wise people led the new generations prudently toward a tranquil and reasonable future.

And yet, people were unacquainted with happiness!

The curse of the era was a profound sadness that took the form, among the elite, of an incurable pessimism, and which struck the masses, perhaps even more cruelly, with a kind of senility of the heart. True joy—warm, creative joy—was scarcely encountered, except in certain scientists. Literature and the arts were in complete decadence. The semi-barbaric epoch of the Christian twilight had seen the production of incomparable poems, undoubtedly the most beautiful that had ever soothed human suffering. Those poems were repeated and imitated without understanding then—or, rather, in the guise of refinement and delicacy, poets descended into obscure complication.

The outmoded virtues—the virile religion of effort, the peevish religion of honor, the brutal love of justice, the contrary and no less brutal desire for domination, an irrational appetite for risk and adventure; all the dangerous virtues rejected by the instinct of conservation—were cruelly lacking in the new humankind. Souls deprived of anxiety languished, like plants transplanted from the open air into the tranquil atmosphere of a greenhouse. Exactly like the artists, the populace, whose life was easy, slipped into a profound *ennui*, into morbid passions and sentimental monstrosities.

The harmful use of exhilarating pills had spread in spite of all imaginable regulations. Semi-secret associations devoted themselves to the most wretched debaucheries. A frightful sadism appeared in some individuals. Elsewhere, by virtue of a singular regression, explosions of collective brutality often occurred among the masses. The most popular spectacles were those of the arena; for those games, carnivorous species that would otherwise have disappeared long ago were carefully conserved, at great expense, in the parks of Africa and Asia. Some gladiators rapidly became the idols of the public. When they confronted the wild beasts, a simple wooden club in their hand, radiophones carried the frantic acclamations and howling of delirious crowds to the four corners of the earth.

For more than half a century, however, a new and rapid evolution of mores had been manifest. Averine's discoveries had had unexpected repercussions. They had given the mind an abrupt jolt; with a sharp shock, they had broken the panes of the greenhouse. Thanks to them, the world would perhaps know once again the torment of hazardous horizons; once again, alas, clouds might accumulate, heavy with unforeseen storms.

The danger was obvious to the thoughtful Harrisson.

Humankind, artificially moderated and artificially aged, had gradually recovered its imprudent youth during the last fifty years. Recent philosophers had denied the pessimism that had darkened the previous ages; poets were reigniting the flames of enthusiasm. A muted process of renewal was operating within the masses. Without renouncing the vices they had recently acquired, the people were listening in their hearts to the hot and troubling voices of repressed instincts. Confused and fundamentally brutal aspirations were aggregating in vague and simple ideas. The words *justice*, *honor* and *liberty* were beginning once again to flap like flags, in arrogant speeches. All kinds of regionalist concepts were attracting the adhesion of crowds. On the margins of the law, corporations were

⁴ The region where the author was born and lived is just to the south of the 47th parallel, but much closer to the Greenwich meridian than one degree of east longitude. It is conceivable, however, that the novel's zero meridian is the Paris meridian rather than the Greenwich meridian.

organizing themselves combatively; partial strikes were breaking out—not, for the most part, for economic reasons, but with regard to paltry questions of precedence.

The inhabitants of the southern hemisphere—less numerous than those of the northern hemisphere, and consequently drawing less from the public reserves of energy—were claiming and demanding honorific compensations. Within the same region, competitions of self-regard or self-interest were giving birth to analogous conflicts between the users of the secondary lines and those of the major lines. Furthermore, in all the countries in the world, a muted rivalry that was growing incessantly was setting the inhabitants of latitudinal zones against those of longitudinal zones—a rivalry so absurd that no one, to begin with, had attached any great importance to it. The word, however, had gradually created the thing.

Without any serious reason, the workers in the power-generating industries, the functionaries of businesses or manual enterprises, building workers, meteorological contractors and those in aerial transport were installing themselves preferentially along lines of latitude. On the other hand, the great agriculturalists, engineers, organizers of transport by land and sea, civil servants, domestic workers and those involved in warehousing and distributing goods were mostly on the meridians. Increasingly clear differences were appearing between the two groups. The appetite for conflict, an unadmitted but profound cause, was creating a schism and heterogeneity, and the formation of opposable camps. In spite of all the efforts of the supreme power, the movement was increasing rapidly.

Finally, the idea of fatherland was reborn, with all its ancient force.

At the apogee of Christian civilization, the increasing rapidity of means of communication had seemed bound to lead eventually to a complete fusion of races. That had not happened; the mixture remained entirely superficial. In the modern epoch, one could even observe an inverse and apparently paradoxical phenomenon. Traveling around the planet with a previously-inconceivable rapidity and in conditions of perfect comfort and security, people returned faithfully to their home ground. Every evening, the great aerial expresses took innumerable workers home from one continent to another. No one any longer experienced the need to move abroad; the extreme facility of communications impeded the slow migrations that had had the only durable effects of the intermingling of races.

Thus, the different human groups were separating again. As in the Christian Era, white people lived in Europe and America, yellow people in Asia. Turbulent republics were forming in Africa. Some peoples had begun to elect particular assemblies as well as their delegates to the World Parliaments. Experiments in national legislation of a disquieting disparity were being superimposed on universal legislation. Ancient local customs were reemerging from forgetfulness. The Minister of Public Festivities, whose role had been very important in previous centuries, was seeing his efforts annihilated by general indifference; only regional festivals were celebrated with gusto.

Legends of obscure origin delighted the masses. Among the whites of Europe, *The Heroism of Noelle Roger*, a long barbaric and naïve poem, was enriched on a daily basis by anonymous supplements. In the same way, among the Asiatics, popular sentiment took to heart the mysteriously-born *Epic of Lia-Te*, the primitive poet of the heroic era.

It was in this fashion that a dull seething of souls was manifest everywhere.

The disconcerting character of recent scientific discoveries rendered a new effort of adaptation indispensable—but it was precisely at the present moment, when prudence was becoming increasingly necessary, that humankind seemed to want to fall back into ancient errors, and to set off recklessly along the old paths of adventure.

To be sure, modern society had proved itself. It was a complicated and robust organism, richly innervated, all of whose parts put themselves on the defensive at the slightest alert. Thus far, wars had been immediately localized and stifled—but would that always be the case in future?

One could hope that humankind, in case of trouble, would avoid the known dangers, would resist primitive forces without too much difficulty—but there was no proof that it would not be exposed one day to the threat of new and prodigiously subtle elements.

That was not a gratuitous hypothesis. Scientists of Averine's school were studying such elements. They were witnessing miraculous syntheses, the birth of theories escaping ordinary laws and anticipating magical periods when energy would increase to a higher degree and in which the progress of phenomena might be disrupted in defiance of all logic.

Starting from what had once been conventionally known as the etheric void, Harrisson had been the first to obtain, at the price of an insignificant initial stimulus, rapidly-rotating regradatory⁵ vortices, whose ultimate term was a mixture of unstable gases or an impalpable and spontaneously radioactive metallic dust. For several years, Harrisson had been studying the radiation of these artificial systems and its action on colloids. Ingeniously isolating each radiation and eliminating antagonistic actions, he had observed the appearance of numerous living organisms, almost all of which seemed to react to unknown astronomical influences.

The life thus created offered extremely diverse characteristics. The ordinary life of terrestrial beings only represented one variety, and a mediocre one at that, much less interesting for a scientist than those grouped under the general headings of intermediary life, uniform life and tumultuous life. Tumultuous protoplasm, of which Harrisson had made a particular study, exhibited disconcerting properties, reacting with prodigious vivacity to the influence of ordinary physical agents, bringing about strange transmutations productive of energy, and, finally, provoking profound disturbances in organisms endowed with ordinary life: rapid agglutination, or the unexpected proliferation of certain cellular elements.

New sciences were about to be born; great and numerous problems were arising—and Harrison wondered whether he might be about to confront some immense danger. Already, in the third and fourth centuries, biology, medicine and psychology had reached dead ends several times over. Might the audacious enterprises of the physicists of the sixth lead humankind to the edge of the precipice?

At the beginning of the new century, science appeared yet again to have a disquieting revolutionary face. Would the necessary adaptation have time to occur?

It seemed pointless to count on an interruption of scientific progress; curiosity would never step back the threshold of the unknown. On the other hand, experience proved that neither was it necessary to rely too much on the great artificial currents of opinion to precipitate the evolution of popular sentiments. Whatever was attempted, the heart lagged behind the mind; discord was doubtless as old as the world, but it might become fatal if it were accentuated.

For humanity to be able to endure, sheltered from storms, it required an ever-increasing prudence and an ever-present vigilance. Modern society ought, before anything else, to maintain close surveillance of scientific research, but nothing was being done. Under the pretext of individual liberty, scientists remained masters of their actions, just like the most inoffensive of mortals—and there was nothing to prevent the action of an imprudent individual or a madman from unleashing some terrible catastrophe.

Harrison thought about his earliest endeavors; he too had made his discoveries known without envisaging all the possible consequences. Since then, numerous scientists had taken the hazardous path that he had traced prematurely.

Harrisson reflected further, and grave anxiety tarnished the joy of his recent success. He promised himself to be more prudent than before, and congratulated himself on not having said anything at dinner in the presence of the socialite with the periwinkle breasts.

So long as that is produced before my eyes on a small scale, he thought, the danger isn't very serious!

Although it was already late, he stood up, with the intention of going down to the laboratory again.

At that moment, a bell rang faintly. Harrison went to the back of the room and pressed a small metal lever; immediately, on the screen of the unmasked cinetelephone, the dancer Sylvia appeared. She was an Egyptian, famed for her beauty, her talent and a few resounding adventures, notably with the poet Lahorie and a famous gladiator, for whom she had fought a duel. For several weeks she had been pursuing Harrisson, and not seeking to hide the fact.

The young scientist bowed gallantly before the apparatus and murmured a banal compliment.

⁵ I have anglicized the improvised term *regradeurs*, which evidently derives from *grade* [rank]. The theory of matter tacitly developed here is essentially Cartesian, imagining centers of gravity as disturbances of a fundamental ether, analogous to whirlpools in water, but it modernizes such notions by adding on a more complex theory of radiations associated with different kinds (or “grades”) of matter, each associated with a different kind of life.

“Do you know,” demanded Sylvia, immediately, “whether I shall be asked to dance at Averine’s hundredth birthday party?”

“Can you doubt it?” Harrison replied. “You’ll be the queen of the celebrations. You’ll dance before the eyes of innumerable crowds—for the entire world. And all the white-haired old scientists...”

“Enough!” she said. “No impertinence. I scorn crowds, and white-haired old scientists even more so...let’s talk seriously. It’s you who’ll have the honors of the day, for the miraculous work that you’ve mentioned to me vaguely. Yes, yes! Don’t shake your head! You’ll be triumphant. I want that! I do!” With a rapid gesture, she cast off the scarf that was covering her admirable blue shoulders. “So,” she said, “I can count on you not to forget me?”

“Don’t worry! Not if they postpone the festival for a hundred years!”

“Thank you. You’re an adorable great scientist! I shan’t dance for the entire world, but for you—for you! Goodnight!”

Harrison had blown a kiss from his fingertips. Sylvia disappeared.

In a laboratory next door to the master’s, Lygie Rod leaned over a microscope. Harrison saw her through a window in the partition wall. He tapped it lightly, and the young woman raised her masked face.

“Still at work!” Harrison exclaimed. “You won’t be demanding a one-hour day, like our friends the domestic functionaries and the transport workers...”

Lygie emerged into the corridor and took off her mask. They talked about the new discovery. The young woman’s calm voice became slightly more animated; on her lips, the harsh consonants of technical terms took on an unaccustomed softness.

“This tumultuous protoplasm,” she said, “is quite something...magnificent and crazy! A crazy thing...”

“And perhaps a terrible thing,” Harrison added.

“Perhaps terrible...yes.”

They were momentarily thoughtful; then Lygie asked: “You’re going to publish a paper, of course?”

“No...not immediately, at any rate. I have anxieties. The Academy will publish without sufficient examination. Let’s wait until after the centenary celebrations. Afterwards, we’ll consider it, and we’ll see...”

“Not everyone has your scruples,” Lygie observed. “I was listening to the General News a little while ago. Lahorie’s cousin, Roume, the geophysicist, has stirred up a lot of noise with his claim to have discovered a tertiary civilization far superior to human civilization. According to Roume, the Earth must have been inhabited for hundreds of thousands of years by beings endowed with immense knowledge, whom our distance ancestors would have served as domestic animals.”

“Very good!” said Harrison. “There’ll be no lack of subjects for discussion at the centenary congress. In that regard, Lygie, given that you pay attention to the press and are up to date with the news, can you tell me whether the program has been finalized? Someone was asking me just now. Will there be a dance performance? I’d like it if there were dancing...”

Lygie turned her head away. Her left hand leaned on the wall.

“I don’t have any information about that,” she replied, “but dancing seems to me, in fact, to be inevitable.”

Harrison was surprised by her ironic tone. He also noticed the sudden pallor of her face and the trembling of her mutilated hand.