

THE INVISIBLE SATYR

BOOK ONE: THE MYSTERY OF A SPRING NIGHT

I. A Walking Corpse

Two o'clock in the morning. Over Paris, a splendid moonless night. The overlapping crowns of the leafy chestnut trees in the Avenue Henri-Martin formed a kind of long opaque vault covering the roadway and the bridle path. Thick darkness and an oppressive silence reigned within that tunnel.

At intervals, gas lamps projected their timid gleam, but their wan light did not extend beyond the sidewalk and the railings of the little gardens that border the entire length of the avenue. No nocturnal strollers. At that hour, life has long since gone to sleep in that aristocratic quarter. On evenings of mundane celebration, the windows of small town houses and magnificent edifices are luminous, and an elegant activity surrounds them, but on the night in question, no file of carriages and autos was parked in front of any façade.

A manservant went by, with his arm around the waist of a soubrette, and then a taxi, traveling toward Muette. Then everything fell back into calm and silence.

On the third floor of a large building, a window opened slowly—hesitantly, one might say—and the silhouette of a man leaned out.

Soon, the window closed again.

In gaps in the verdure of the chestnut trees, stars were shining, strangely luminous in a sky like purple ink. Their yellow, green or red scintillation made them resemble thousands of gems hanging from the celestial vault, like precious stones sown into the robe of an enchantress. The nebulous phosphorescence of the Milky Way evoked diaphanous scarves unfurling in the immense expanse, or distant opal islands in a black ocean.

Beneath the splendid enchantment of the moonless sky, the door of the building in which the window had opened a little while before creaked. The same silhouette emerged through the narrow gap, traversed the garden and opened the door to the avenue. The man hesitated, darting anxious, seemingly anguished, glances to the right and the left. After having scrutinized the thick shadows under the spring foliage, he went back into the building. He came out again almost immediately, his shoulders slumped by a large packet, and set off, almost running, beneath the trees of the bridle path, in the direction of the Bois.

His burden must have been very heavy, because the individual had scarcely covered fifty meters when he seemed to totter beneath the load. He stiffened himself nevertheless, leaning against the trunk of a chestnut tree, and when he had recovered his strength, he resumed walking.

Soon, in spite of his physical resistance, it was necessary for him to stop. He breathed out noisily and looked round to see whether anyone had seen him or was following him. After another brief hesitation, he crossed the avenue, walked along the sidewalk of the even-numbered dwellings, and finally collapsed with his singular burden onto a bench placed at the corner of the Rue des Sablons.¹ He mopped his forehead with a handkerchief, because he was sweating copiously, and his haggard eyes explored the surroundings again.

Feverishly, he tried to install the long, heavy parcel—which had a vaguely human form in the gloom—on the bench. After that, he drew away very rapidly, recrossing the avenue. Soon, his silhouette, rather tall and bulky, was lost in the thick darkness of the tunnel of leaves and branches.

¹ The Rue des Sablons no longer connects with the Avenue Henri-Martin because the name of a section of the latter thoroughfare was changed in 1941 to the Avenue George-Mandel, and it is in that section of the avenue that this scene is set.

In the splendid sky, new luminous dots lit up at intervals: shooting stars passing rapidly through the constellations like rockets.

On the sidewalk of the avenue on the side of the even numbers, two policemen now advanced slowly, chatting. Suddenly, at the corner of the Rue des Sablons, they came to an abrupt halt in front of the bizarre mass lying on the bench.

“Look!” said one. “What can that be?”

“A drunkard,” the other replied, placing a hand on the shoulder.

But the human package, poorly equilibrated, fell to the ground and the two policemen uttered an oath. Having leaned over the individual to seize him and bring him to his feet, they suddenly straightened up, their eyes haggard and their legs unsteady; they had perceived that the unknown man was dead.

The tremulous light of a gas lamp fell directly upon the man’s pale face: it was livid, the features contracted, and their eyes retained, in the depths of vitreous irises, a kind of tragic reflection of fear.

The adventure disturbed the two policemen considerably. New recruits to the service, allocated to the surveillance of a wealthy and tranquil quarter, they had not yet had occasion to encounter a murder. Contemplating that dead face, retaining the imprint of fear, they were under no illusion about their sinister find. Until then they had scarcely accomplished any other tasks that giving directions to strangers, stopping cyclist driving without lights and picking up drunkards incapable of finding their way home, and this first contact with drama had horrified them.

“Jules,” said one of them, timidly, “we need to figure out what to do.”

“Yes, Hector.”

They looked at one another, palely, and agreed that they ought to pick up the corpse and carry it to the commissariat. When they tried to lift it up, however, one by the feet and the other by the arms, they found it to be overwhelmingly heavy, and they were trembling so much, that they were unable to advance. Then, abandoning the dead man on the sidewalk, they conferred. Was it not better to leave the “stiff” where they had found it, in order that all the necessary observations could be made on the spot?

Their final decision was that Jules would go to inform the Commissariat while Hector stayed to guard the murdered man.

“Poor fellow! My God, he was young and handsome! Rich? Yes, for he’s well-dressed. It’s to rob him that he was killed, then!”

He leaned over to look for a wound. No trace of blood. No stains soiling the garments. And the body was still warm! One might have thought that he was only unconscious, if the eyes had not had that poignant expression of terror, betraying a dramatic end.

“Why was he on that bench?” he agent muttered. “It’s an important affair; the newspapers will talk about it.” Immediately, the policeman saw himself involved in a *cause célèbre*. He would make a sensational deposition; the dailies would doubtless publish photographs of Jules and him.

As he was daydreaming, a luxurious limousine appeared, driven by a chauffeur with a singular face. It was heading toward Passy, smoothly and silently, scarcely revealed by the imperceptible purr of a well-tuned engine. The driver perceived the peace officer watching over the cadaver lying on the sidewalk and, probably interested by the spectacle, stopped his machine. He considered the recumbent human rag. The policeman thought he could hear words exchanged with someone who must be in the back of the vehicle: strange, curt words in a foreign language—but he did not take long to persuade himself that he had been the victim of an illusion, for when he drew nearer, he observed that the car was empty.

The newcomer, however, did not pull away, seemingly having a strange interest in contemplating the cadaver.

“Are you looking at that poor fellow?” said the policeman. “My colleague and I found him dead on that bench.” He said that because he felt an irresistible desire to speak, to chase away the emotion he was experiencing. In any case, the automobile was luxurious; there was no doubt that the driver was in the service of very well-off people.

To his great amazement, however, the chauffeur did not reply. Then, the worthy Hector saw that he had an odd, suntanned face, almost black, surrounded by a silk turban, with ascetic features and ears

ornamented with golden earrings. He only just had time to jump backwards as the door, abruptly opened, had almost hit him in the face.

But that door had opened of its own accord, since there was no one in the back of the vehicle, and the Hindu chauffeur still had his hands on the steeringwheel!

The policeman, vaguely anxious, returned to the cadaver.

Then something extraordinary, miraculous and tragically frightening occurred, which was to remain forever incomprehensible for the unfortunate peace officer.

One might have thought, at that moment, that the darkness beneath the vault of chestnut trees had suddenly become denser. The flickering light of the gas lamp was depressed by a gust of cold air, causing all the surrounding shadows to vacillate. And before the fearful eyes of the policeman, *the dead man moved.*

First, the upper body rose up; the man appeared to be sitting on the ground with his arms dangling, and his head slumped over his breast, slightly tilted to one side, as if asleep. Almost immediately, though, the body stood up with a supreme effort and with the head still hanging down, swinging to the right and left, like that of a marionette.

For a moment, the macabre vision remained upright, prostrate, like a lamentable rag. It took a step; the policeman heard a sigh, and the sinister remains collapsed onto the bench.

Not possible, thought the cop. *I'm dreaming.*

Having rubbed his eyes, however, and ascertained that he was not dreaming, that his sensibility was real and his hearing still keen—for he could hear the purr of the engine, which the driver was allowing to tick over—he had to accept the fearful certainty: the cadaver, doubtless uncomfortable lying on the sidewalk, had thought it as well to go back to sit on the bench.

So, the corpse was alive?

A formidable emotion caused the policeman's heart to hammer. Immediately, however, he had a generous thought: to help the unknown man.

Horror! The dead eyes retained their astonishing fixity, in which the reflection of an atrocious terror remained petrified!

So, the dead man really was dead! And since the policeman was not asleep and was not insane, there was some frightful magic at the bottom of this. The cop's hair bristled on his head.

Triumphing over his fear, and exasperated by the ironic smile of the Hindu, who was still at the steeringwheel of the automobile, the sentiment of duty exalting his courage to the most dolorous sacrifice, he resolved to have the last word. And since that cadaver had been resuscitated in a macabre farce, he decided at the first move he made to put the handcuffs on him. He took them out of the pocket of his tunic.

The dead man had stood up again. Like a lamentable puppet, limp and devoid of sinews, he was upright on the sidewalk, even more horrible, with his head hanging down and shaking, his long arms flapping against his highs, his chest hollow, his knees sticking out, his legs wobbling and his feet at an angle, like those of a miserable cripple. He resembled those effigies of cloth stuffed with bran that are paraded on the end of poles on carnival day, and which, the day having ended, having been roughly handled, trampled and half emptied of their stuffing, collapse like sad, limp rags or deflated balloons.

But he walked, or, rather, dragged himself along, nodding his head and swinging his arms, as if he were sketching out a *danse macabre*, and, zigzagging all the while, folding up and straightening again. Like a monstrous scarecrow, he headed toward the limousine, plunged inside it—not without bumping his head on the rim of the door—and finally lay down on the cushions.

Then, his faculties suddenly returning to him, the policeman realized that the dead man was about to escape him. The characteristic noise of the engine changing gear left him under no illusion. He leapt toward the automobile and stepped onto the footplate, but just as he was about to stick his head through the window, he saw the horrible, frightened face of the cadaver loom up in front of him. The white and glassy eyes rolled back and stared at him. Then abruptly, the dead man's limp arm was raised, and the policeman received a punch in the face that sent him sprawling in the gutter.

He got up immediately, only to see the mysterious limousine pull away and disappear into the darkness. The head of the dead man was hanging out of the window, and sinister laughter chilled Hector with fear.

For a long time he rubbed his eyes, terribly tortured and anguished. He sat down on the bench where the ambulant corpse had been resting a little while before, because his legs could no longer support him. His head felt weak, and, wondering whether he might not have been living a nightmare, he turned his desperate eyes to the sky, a patch of which he could perceive through the mauve mass of the vault of foliage formed by the trees of the avenue.

Above that mystery, the indifferent heavens, beautifully somber, splendid and velvety, extended their infinite vellum, in which thousands of yellow, red, blue and green dots were scintillating like exceedingly pure gems. Amid their splendor, the Milky Way unfurled its immense sash of suns.

II. A Communication to the A.D.S.

The afternoon that preceded the mysterious spring night on which a cadaver of a murdered young man stood up and took a few tottering steps at about two o'clock in the morning under the foliage of the Avenue Henri-Martin, in front of a frightened peace officer, and then got into an empty automobile whose door opened by itself, which pulled away at speed, driven by a turbaned chauffeur wearing golden earrings, had been as lovely and bright as an April page preceding a tenebrous sultana Scheherazade in a starry robe in a tale from the Thousand-and-One Nights.

At four o'clock, in spite of the delightful temptation of the exceedingly mild and sunlit afternoon, inviting strolls, the most select audience was covering the steps of the amphitheater of the Académie des Sciences. To hear Dr. Jean Fortin, the vast hemicycle was filled with curious listeners, in spite of the beautiful sunshine and blue sky that made the spring magical, taking on the appearance of an elegant social gathering. There were many bright costumes, and feathered or flowery hats on women's heads set winged bouquets, rare plumes and miniature gardens, joyfully, among the morose patches of the somber dress of the men.

At four o'clock, after other communications of lesser interest and the *hors-d'oeuvre* service, Dr. Jean Fortin got up to take the floor. His was a face that caught the attention at the first glance, tanned and clean-shaven, with eyes that were malicious or cruel, according to the thought of the moment: the intelligent and refined face of a pope, evocative of a superior Innocent III, arrogant and authoritarian, which seemed, in the Académie des Sciences, to be presiding over a synod. The scientist's eyes had a hint of mockery in them as they scanned the assembly, and he smiled as he perceived familiar silhouettes here and there on the benches reserved for the public.

Dr. Fortin was the *enfant terrible* of the Académie des Sciences. His reputation, made by extraordinary discoveries, endeavors of a disconcerting audacity, calumnies and jealousies, was primarily popular. Colleagues inclined before his genius, but they were afraid of the man with the ardent temperament, the overabundant heart and the malicious verve. Fortin had a horror of everything official and practical; he admired the illuminati who spent their lives in pursuit of an elevated, ungraspable ideal. He did not hide his love of revolutionaries in art, science and even politics—and that attitude obtained him unusual relationships, by which his friends were alarmed.

Original in his brusque but good manners, disdainful of honors, recompenses—he preferred a rose in his lapel to a rosette—and publicity, but haunted by admirable chimeras, the great public loved him. That sincere admiration of the crowd made a distinguished scientist—which all the members of the Institut are, in a banal way—into a veritably glorious one.

With a remarkable suppleness, Dr. Fortin climbed the steps of the stage and began speaking in a clear voice.

“Messieurs, the subject on which I have to make you a speech today is too vast for me to hope to exhaust the anguishing question once and for all. I want to talk to you about the existence of the soul, a problem so grandiose that it seems at first sight to surpass human thought and intelligence. Thus, the endeavor about which I am going to talk to you is merely a commencement of studies, a set of observations from which we can extract information, but which you must be careful not to envisage yet as a definitive work.

“In any case, what do we know? As soon as we begin to study the manifestations of a healthy spirit—a soul, to put it better—we have the impression of finding ourselves confronted by a fluidic phenomenon, of a force of the magnetic or electrical order.

“Well, in the same way that, for a long time, we have been utilizing magnetism and electricity without knowing their true causes, we have been utilizing the fluidic forces of the soul without knowing anything precise about their origins. They are all, however, formidable forces. They have no weight, no aspect, no color, but, while some, stored in the air and the ground, seem to govern the world, others, more intimate, inhabit our brains and command our actions, our endeavors and our passions.

“And I do not see why, when we have domesticated electricity and enslaved magnetism, we should not become masters of our spirituality.

“That leads us, quite naturally, to research into the duality of our nature, the scientific analysis of that duality. To separate from a corporeal envelope the soul that inhabits it, in order better to treat and study that soul, and perhaps to change its aspirations—is that not a goal worthy of imposing its ideal on a man of science?

“Already, let us not forget, our great hypnotizers—Charcot and Luys,² to name only two—have enabled us to witness troubling cases of the exteriorization of the human soul. The experiment is facile, and I have repeated it many times, very often, with my daughter Jeanne, my collaborator, who has become so superior that in certain research, I have almost become her pupil...”

A few members of the audience turned round, trying to discover in the audience the young woman whose work had astonished the scientific world, but Jeanne Fortin was not at the session.

The doctor continued: “Such subjects lose consciousness of their individuality and become, in the hands of the master, an obedient and passive machine. The sense of things is transformed, tastes are modified profoundly, the body is insensible to suffering, and can even assume positions contrary to the laws of equilibrium.

“Why?”

“Because the soul is absent, and nothing remains in the hands of the operator but an automaton.

“Thus, we are able to manipulate the soul, a subtle fluid, as the electrician manipulates the current from which he draws energy, light and heat; and it is possible—this is the most important point of my communication—to instruct that fluid to quit, for a time, the being that it animates, to animate another corporeal envelope. The subjects do not suffer any harm in so doing, as I shall have the honor of proving by means of a public experiment.

“This fluid is stored in the circumvolutions of our brain, and, like everything within us, is never at rest. You cannot have failed to reflect, Messieurs, about this world that lives within us and for us. Without that molecular activity, which is the fundamental constituent of all bodies, life could not be manifest. We each consider ourselves to be one being, but in reality we are an association of beings, to which are added chemical, mineral, gaseous and, finally, fluidic elements. Nature, after having composed a being whose mechanical movements are regulated by the play of muscles, nerves and bones, has given all that a fluidic motor, and our brain performs the function of a switchboard receiving and distributing sensations. Thus we utilize a few exterior forces: electricity, magnetism, waves, radiation, etc. You know as well as I do how the king of animals makes marvelous use of exterior fluids.

“From there we have, quite naturally, been led to the study of the interior fluids, the fluids of the spirit, of the soul. In the same way that we make use of electricity and magnetism without having been able to analyze them, we shall make use of the animal fluid without being able to define it: a strange fluid, in truth, of which we are both masters and slaves. For it permits use to direct our thought in a waking state, but wanders in the most bizarre fashion in the dream state. Thus, an individual who sleeps for six hours a day spends a quarter of his existence in an extraordinarily fantastic second life. In addition, if the subject is afflicted by morbid anomalies, his fluid loses its personality and obeys a will sufficiently powerful to dominate it; in that case, an inferior fluid is mastered by a superior one.

“Furthermore, that inferior fluid may be deceived, duped and constrained to act contrary to its own judgment and will. That human fluid, Messieurs, as you know, is subject to anomalies that are akin to maladies. The comparative study of various fluids and various means of influencing them has led us to surprising results—among others, to the conclusion that the fluid of normal subjects can be forced to passive obedience by a cultivated fluid having an absolute dominance over the others. From there to the exteriorization of that fluid and its vagabondage in the waking state is only a small step. That step, we have taken, and I have come to submit to you today the results of experiments of which, I admit to my shame, the demonstration and analysis are not yet possible for us.”

² The neurologists Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893) and Jules Bernard Luys (1828-1927).

At that moment, there was a stir in the audience. Among the colleagues as well as the public, many people were wondering, given Fortin's singular character—whether he might be indulging in an extravagance. That scientist of genius was, in the opinion of some, a trifle harebrained, and quite capable of an eccentricity. However, he had already made so many sensational speeches that this one, on reflection, was no more troubling than the others. And when it was realized that the most renowned member of the Académie des Sciences was about to proceed with a permutation of souls, a slight frisson ran through the flesh of the “lovely ladies.”

Smiling—with the expression of a sardonic pope—the doctor continued:

“Don't expect, Messieurs, that I'm going to read you the formidable report that treats this question. Apart from the fact that the revelation of my discovery would not be without danger if I rendered it public, it is too technical and far too long for me to undertake its reading. I have had a paper printed, which I shall propose to the A.D.S.”—there was a movement of puzzlement and Fortin, still smiling, explained—“to the Goddess: the Académie des Sciences; but I believe that it is not inappropriate to proceed right away with a proof that will convince the incredulous. Mesdames...”

The members of the Académie des Sciences looked at one another, slightly shocked and anxious. It was the first time that one of their members, on the subject of a communication, had addressed himself directly to the public. Dr. Fortin was decidedly determined not to refuse himself any liberty.

“Mesdames,” he continued, “I appeal to your good will. There is, in any case, no danger. Which of you would like to continue to speak in my stead—with my feeble spirit, of course?”

One professor whispered in his neighbor's ear: “He's addressing idlers, like a charlatan or a fairground wrestler in a public square asking for challengers.”

Other colleagues opened their eyes wide, testifying to their emotion. They did not know what manifestation of genius or buffoonery they were about to witness. In any case, this was no ordinary session; it was turning into a spectacle, a circus performance.

The ladies looked at one another, a trifle alarmed—but none of them budged.

“Very well,” said the scientist. “I shall be obliged to do without your good will.”

Addressing himself then to the Marquise de Virmile, he bowed and said: “It will therefore be you, Madame, for you are someone that no one will accuse of being an accomplice. A part of my spirit—of my thought, I could say—is now sliding into your brain. You are already Fortin, and I am retaining of my personality only what is necessary to direct this experiment.”

The Marquise, blushing deeply, sketched a gesture of refusal. Suddenly, however, to the amazement of the audience, she stood up, and assumed the decided and slightly Machiavellian expression of Dr. Fortin, while the latter sat down, with an attentive expression.

“That's prodigious!” someone exclaimed.

“She looks just like Fortin!”

“It's sorcery!”

“Shh! The Marquise is speaking!”

Indeed, Madame de Virmile continued Fortin's speech at the point where he had left off:

“The soul moves. A mysterious fluid, it never ceases to exist, without concern for the body that it inhabits and animates. If the body dies, it abandons it and seeks a new envelope. Thus it is with all fluids. An electric current is imprisoned in a long copper wire. A simple contact, a discharge, liberates the fluid from that conductive wire to escape into the air or the earth. In the air, accumulated at the poles of a cloud, it becomes lightning, a thunderbolt, and descends again, in that form or another, captured by a new conductor. Thus, nothing dies; everything evolves, is transformed. Matter returns to what it has been: humus. Living bodies fall to the ground, decompose, and turn to dust, but fecund dust in which new lives germinate.”

At that moment, the Marquise stopped short and sat down. Immediately, it was a venerable member of the Académie, the chemist Bernardet, who stood up to continue the lecture. He was seen to be rejuvenated by twenty years, while the Marquise took on the weary air of an old man. Through the mouth of the chemist Bernardet, however, Fortin was still speaking:

“You have been able to judge, Mesdames et Messieurs, the docility of a fluid, of a soul, of which a part has passed successively from the brain of Dr. Fortin into the brain of Madame de Virmile and into that of the illustrious Bernardet. Let us recap: the intelligence of Madame Virmile is resident in Dr. Fortin’s brain, and Bernardet’s is resident in the Marquise’s brain, while I, Fortin, am presently animating the body of my friend Bernardet.”

The members of the audience looked at one another anxiously, for they were wondering, nervously, where these demonstrations would stop. The confident attitude of Fortin, however, convinced them that things would easily be restored to order when he decided to do so.

The spectacle of the trio, however, was enough to provoke apprehensions: Dr. Fortin was sitting down and arranging around himself an imaginary dress, while the Marquise picked up a corner of her scarf wearily in order to mop her brow and cranium, thus disturbing the entire expert edifice of a complicated coiffure; Bernardet, meanwhile, was stroking his chin with a gesture habitual to Fortin.

The doctor hastened to conclude by making a new transposition. With his hands placed on the table and his fingers going back and forth like those of an electrician pressing the buttons of a switchboard distributing lights, he seemed thus to be directing, with the gestures of a typist, the entire scene that was fascinating the anxious Académie and amusing the troubled public.

“However,” he said, “this does not prove, as yet, that we are on the road to the immortality of the soul. These exteriorizations are too similar to those produced during sleep, in which our souls can lead several existences in a matter of hours. But I am only at the beginning of my research, and I hope that, in the near future, the mystery will have yielded further secrets.”

He was obliged to stop: that interchange of intelligences, of souls, was threatening to create misunderstandings of a nature too amusing for the austerity of the location. In fact, while he completed his lecture, the chemist and the Marquise, placed side by side, were looking at one another with astonishment. The Marquise, wanting to make use of her lorgnette, put Bernardet’s watch to her eye, while the famous chemist, thinking that he was mopping his forehead, continued to forage in the Marquise’s coiffure.

Quickly, the doctor hastened to repair the confusion of intelligences by carrying out the mutation necessary to the harmony of the individuals. Fortin’s two victims immediately resumed their ordinary personalities, without having the slightest idea of what had just happened.

As he returned to the stage, Dr. Fortin had something of the air of a conjurer who has just performed his tricks. He was smiling, visibly satisfied with the admiration of the public and the alarm of his colleagues. Like a performer of genius, he looked at the assembly and concluded: “That, Mesdames et Messieurs, is only one small aspect of the formidable problem that is posed to us, of which the sole objective, the only interest for us, is to discover what becomes of our personal fluid, our soul, after death. Does it return, like the matter, to the great All, or does it conserve its personality—which is to say, without all the confusion of human actions, at least the progress acquired scientifically and mentally.

“Now, this is the conclusion of my research, at the point that we have presently, reached, which is only the first step in the mystery. The human spirit passes from life to death as it goes from wakefulness to sleep. Have you tried to specify the absolute moment of that transition? It’s impossible. It is, however, repeated every day. Thus, the intellectual fluid escapes life and passes into a new state. What happens to it?

“If it were a substance, even a gas, it would obey the physical laws of the Earth and obey, among others, the law of gravity, and would continue an evolution on the globe. As a fluid, however, it escapes that law and remains, in the universe, at the point where it is at the moment of death—which is to say that the Earth, carried away by its velocity of almost a hundred thousand kilometers an hour, continues in its course through space and that the soul, nor longer obedient, as a fluid to the laws of gravity and attraction, remains at the point in the Universe where it was at the exact moment of death, of the separation of the fluid soul from the material body.

“Can you imagine the human soul, placed thus, without transition, in the environment of astronomical space? If it is not prepared, by a profound study of sidereal phenomena, for the splendid flight through the worlds, then, mad with terror, it might return to its cradle and easily find a new

incarnation on this globe, recommencing a new terrestrial existence. If, on the contrary, by virtue of the knowledge of great stellar laws, it is on the path of progress, it might disdain our Earth, and go elsewhere in search of new sensations and a gradual spiritual elevation.³

“This, Mesdames et Messieurs, is all that we ought to say to you today: that the soul is a fluid, manipulable, thanks to science, like other fluids. That is very little. Let us hope that, among the multitude of scientists occupied with the question, one of the more fortunate will discover the key to the obsessive mystery...”

A thunder of applause underlined those final words, and the doctor descended in the midst of a general ovation. He increasingly resembled a clown who had just astonished a circus, but no one was unaware of the elevated and marvelous thought hidden behind his smile. Rapidly, he shook a few complimentary hands, and went out immediately.

Outside, a group of snobs of both sexes, seduced by his picturesque and legendary status, were waiting to acclaim him. Ordinary people who were passing by, having heard his name pronounced, had also stopped, and they all formed a temporary crowd, bizarre and enthusiastic, typically Parisian.

A tall dark-haired man in a nicely-tailored jacket and a silk hat that was very chic in its design and shine, of aristocratic appearance, with extraordinarily beautiful and fascinating eyes, was in the process of accompanying to her auto a very elegant young woman, Comtesse Simone d’Armez, and a cameraman was in the process of filming their departure for the benefit of Gaumont cinemas.

“*Au revoir, Madame,*” said the superb cavalier, who seemed to be continuing and concluding a flirtation—his bold and magical gaze was going straight to its target and penetrating it easily, like an invisible and powerful desire. “Without any need for other words, you can read my profound admiration in my eyes, *a bientôt*, lovely Comtesse. I shall be close to you in spirit—and, in truth, closer than you think and more intimately than you imagine.”

But Jean Fortin appeared. Numerous hands were extended toward him. Disengaging himself with difficulty, he was getting ready to climb into a car when he stopped and shuddered; the tall man with satanic eyes bowed to him. Fortin ran toward him.

“Marc Vanel! You, here! I recognized your ardent eyes immediately!”

Their hands gripped effusively. The gentleman with the demonic eyes explained: “Master, I was among those who were listening to you just now, and am impassioned, as I was before, when I was your pupil...”

“My best pupil! How long ago that was! But where did you spring from? Everyone thought you were dead?”

At that moment, Dr. Fortin perceived that the man with the extraordinary eyes was not alone. A person of modest appearance was standing beside him. Clad in a light suit, with the jacket buttoned up, he was not attracting much attention, seeming somewhat paltry beside the bronzed athlete whose presence was dominating his. Nevertheless, the small man’s eyes were shining intensely in a slightly swarthy face, in which one sensed an obscure valor. Dr. Fortin was too observant not to notice that silent, grave and self-effacing individual.

Vanel made the introductions. “Comrade Tchitcherine, commissar attached to the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in Paris incognito.”

The foreigner bowed. “I salute you humbly, Master.”

Dr. Fortin was impressed. “Well, since, in finding one friend, I’m collecting two, you’ll do me the pleasure of dining with me! Good, it’s agreed—I’ll take you away. I know someone who’ll be delighted to see you.”

“Your daughter. How is Jeanne?”

“Astonishing! Compared with her, I’m nothing, my dear friend—yes, nothing but a weakling.”

³ This notion of the cosmic liberation of the soul was popularized by Camille Flammarion in *Lumen* and several other works of speculative fiction and speculative non-fiction, although the notion had earlier been broached by Louis-Sébastien Mercier in “Nouvelles de la lune” (1768; tr. as “News from the Moon”)

“I’ll be delighted to see her again,” said Dr. Vanel, slightly emotional at the memory of the distant past—of his entire youth—that was rising in his heart.

“And you’ll also find Garnier. Alexandre Garnier, the professor whose lessons you loved is a highly-respected practitioner today, and makes a great deal of money—he’s gone to the bad!—but his son Georges, with whom you once kept company, is collaborating with us...oh, it gives me great pleasure to see you again!”

A splendid limousine had drawn up at the sidewalk. Vanel said a few rapid words to the Hindu chauffeur, whose bronzed face with ascetic features was surrounded by a silk turban, and whose ears were ornamented by gold rings; the latter got out and opened the door. The scientist, followed by his two guests, climbed into the automobile, which drew away and immediately sped in the direction of the Porte de Saint-Cloud.

It carried away three men seemingly similar, and yet very different. One, Fortin, had just been striving, so to speak, to Renanise,⁴ physically and quasi-materially, the problem of souls. The second, the ardent Russian communist, was synthesizing, very clearly, the vague aspirations of a great human mass, muted and inert: a nation long immobilized in age-old decrepitude, which had proclaimed in Moscow, with Lenin and his comrades in folly, the republic of the wretched. As for the third, Dr. Vanel, more powerful and more Mephistophelean in appearance, with aggressive, mysterious and hallucinating eyes, he had something of the magician and sorcerer about him.

Who was this Marc Vanel? Like the other two, Jean Fortin and Tchitcherine, he had the illuminated brow of those who frequent the temple of eternal truths.

And this book will display that Man-God.

⁴ The verb *renaniser* [to Renanise] was derived from the name of philosopher Ernest Renan (1823-1892), most famous for his account of *La Vie de Jésus* (1863; tr. as *The Life of Jesus*), which dismissed all the supernatural and miraculous elements as embellishments; the term was therefore used to describe similar arguments reducing the seemingly-supernatural to the natural.