

THE HUMAN ANT

To Jacques Fréhel¹

On the day when I saw your generous nature quivering beneath the transparency of your works, I only felt a poor or miserly justice toward you. On first encounter, I like Latin talents and their simple harmony. It requires a longer appreciation for me to comprehend barbarian geniuses. Their liberal fecundity and seemingly crazy prodigality trouble me with an admiration in which, I fear, astonishment takes up more room than sympathy. I get lost at the unexpected bends and the abrupt divergences of their lush creations, and am led to manifest my anxiety more than my wonderment. But it is only a matter of time and familiarization. When I finally know the half-wild forest as well as the park, I sense how more broadly beautiful and more nobly moving it is.

So, with a joyful zeal I am engraving on the frontispiece of this book—a doubtless ruinous monument, alas!—my admiration, more profound every day, for so many pages of *Bretonne*, for almost all the pages of *Déçue*, and even more, if it is possible, for those astonishing poems in prose that you call, with excessive modesty, *contes* and *nouvelles*, and which you are greatly at fault, Madame, for not having collected in a volume.

Han Ryner

P.S. I have elected to leave this dedication as it appeared for the first time in 1901, but do I not have a duty, my dear friend, to note that your crime of abstention has been repaired? You have collected your delicate and penetrating poems in prose for our durable joy, under an exquisitely melancholy title, *Le Cabaret des larmes*. I would be committing a grave injustice toward the public, and even more so toward you, if I did not indicate how far, since the beginning of the century, you have surpassed your promise and all our hopes, or if I neglected to name those two broad and complete masterpieces *Le Précurseur* and *La Guirlande sauvage*.

¹ “Jacques Fréhel” was the pseudonym of Alice Télot (1861-1918). She and Ryner met in 1899 and were secret lovers for many years thereafter, although Ryner published reminiscences of the affair after her death. *Le Précurseur* (1905), the best-known of her several novels, is a philosophical love-story set in a kind of phalanstery. *Le Cabaret des larmes* appeared in 1902, many of the stories having previously appeared in the *Nouvelle Revue*.

I

Before recounting my incredible metamorphosis and the strange adventures of my life as an ant, it appears to me to be good procedure to describe what I was at the moment of the surprise and to summarize my anterior existence in a few lines. I can only explain that period of my existence by recovering the tone in which I spoke then and the rhythm in which I thought.

My name is Octave-Marius Péditant. I was born on 8 April 1875 at Château-Arnoux (Basses-Alpes) of esteemed parents, rich by the standards of our village and proud of their superior fortune. They possessed more than two hundred thousand francs, as much of it in land and other immovable property as in solidly invested money. Unfortunately, sage and sober as they were in all other matters, they were unable to limit the number of their children.

I was the oldest, and from my earliest childhood I showed a considerable penchant for science. They did not have the justice to understand that it was due to my intelligence. However, if I had remained an only son, if I had had sufficient income to live without forced labor, to dedicate all my time to the studies I loved, I might perhaps have become an economist of the first order, the equal of Paul Leroy-Beaulieu or Baudrillard.² Alas, I was given six brothers and four sisters. Fortunately, my father died young, without having time to complete the dozen.

Although I speak with an inflexible rationality, even when it is a matter of my own kin, I would not want to be thought lacking in heart. That judgment would be unjust, and here is the proof:

My father died intestate. I could, at my majority, have claimed my rights. I did not such things. I left my worthy mother to enjoy what belonged to me for as long as she lived, and when my brother Bienvenu and my sister Désirée's husband asked for a division, I showed them there inconvenience there would have been in such precipitation; I told them how we would go down in the estimation of our compatriots and pointed out that our mother, being very ill, had only a short time to live. In brief, I used my authority as the oldest and wisest against my own interests.

I had the annoyance of succeeding. If I had failed, if the bad sons had persisted, everyone, while blaming them, would have praised my noble opposition, and I would have obtained more advantage from a good deed that would have cost me precisely nothing.

At eight years of old I was sent to the Collège—now the Lycée—de Signe. I was soon withdrawn from that inadequate establishment, and I made the larger part of my studies at the Lycée de Marseille. I was always first in my class, but my most brilliant period was that of my studies in law. I was awarded my doctorate with five white balls. I would have liked, after that success, which augured well, to devote myself entirely to the noble science of political economics, the most beautiful creation of the 18th and 19th centuries, to which they will owe the esteem of the future. Alas, my patrimony, overly diminished by the large number of intruders—that is what I called my brothers and sisters, coarse individuals who wanted to leave school early and had never given my parents and me anything but causes for complaint—did not permit me to follow my vocation without hindrance.

I chose a liberal and esteemed career surrounded by security and consideration. I went into the Registry Office. At twenty-eight, already being a receiver at Sisteron, I made a passable marriage. My wife brought me a dowry of fifty thousand francs and adequately fine expectations, which had the disadvantage of appearing rather distant.

In spite of the scant leisure that my professional duties left me, I had published several papers on political economy. Our government—which is too harshly criticized—had rewarded me with academic palms and the Mérite Agricole. My last work, the one that had earned me the green ribbon, was a very careful statistical analysis of the depredations of which a species of ant, *Aphoenogaster barbara*,³ was guilty in regard to our wheat.

On 11 April 1897 I had gone for a walk on a plateau near Sisteron, at a place named Chambrançon. Lying face down—an inherently uncomfortable posture that can only be excused by a love of science—I was studying the movements of an ant-hill. A doubt had struck me regarding a detail affirmed in my pamphlet on the authority of

² Paul Leroy-Beaulieu (1843-1916) held the chair in political economy at the Collège de France from 1880 until his retirement. Ryner undoubtedly read and his book *Le Collectivisme* (1885), and did not approve of it. Henri Baudrillard (1821-1892) had previously held a chair in economic history at the same institution; his works were noted for their erudition, which Ryner probably respected in spite of his opposition to Baudrillard's economic theories.

³ I have retained Ryner's spelling of this generic name, although it is properly rendered as *Aphaenogaster*. His variation might be a simple error in transcription, but the ant society he describes is a composite image rather than a narrow depiction of one particular species, and the label is primarily a matter of convenience.

another observer. I wanted to verify it, and, in case it was erroneous, to add a note to enrich the second edition of my *Statistics of the Depredations of Aphoenogaster barbara in regard to our Wheat*.

With the patience that, according to the testimony of Buffon, is sufficient to form genius, I examined the prudent insects. Suddenly, without having heard the slightest sound of footfalls, so deep was my preoccupation, I heard words that were strange in their soft sonority and strange in their meaning: “Bonjour, bonjour,” they said. “I’m an enchantress.”

My mind translated with great vivacity: *You’re a lunatic*. I felt hostile to the newcomer. There was an insolent indiscretion in troubling my work with such ridiculous speech. It was embarrassing for me, even in the liberty of a deserted landscape, to be found lying on my stomach by a woman who doubtless did not understand the exigencies of scientific investigation.

I stood up in haste, as if pricked by a spur. With a rapid hand I brushed the dust off my trousers, and I looked at the annoying woman.

Her clothing, outside of all fashion—drapes rather than a dress—followed the contours of her body in yellow pleats. An ignorant person would have thought them merely ridiculous. I felt more keenly than anyone else how ill-suited they were to our modern world, but they did not distress me as much; they reminded me of paintings. Doubtless I would have thought them ingeniously beautiful if, instead of roaming the fields, they had been manifest at a masquerade ball.

From that noble harmony, which would have been charming but for their unfortunate untimeliness, a delightful and incomparable perfume emanated. I would give a very crude and false idea of it by likening to some mixture of thyme and lavender that had been attenuated by some unknown means, rendered light and discreet but simultaneously more penetrating.

The woman who was wearing that caressant atmosphere and those emphatic garments was beautiful, but her beauty was of a disconcerting, futile kind that did not awake any desire. She was too tall, as tall as the Virgin seated by Leonardo da Vinci on the knees of St. Anne, whose excessive height is condemned by most authoritative critics. The fault was all the more evident because she was standing upright, her head held proudly high. Her long sleek hair hung down freely, covering her shoulders like a black cape, juxtaposing with the yellow of her dress in an agreeable harmony. Her visage was quite similar to that of the Leonardo Virgin I mentioned just now, except that it was less full, possessed of an even more youthful, almost puerile, grace and malice. It made a bizarre, charming and yet irritating contrast with the extreme grandeur of her stature and the arrogance of her attitude. I don’t like beauty to be so strange. I want it to be composed of symmetry and health, the result of obedience to all the laws of life.

II

I sensed that it would have been impolite to continue my silent examination. With the smile of someone condescending to share a joke, I said: “Bonjour, Mademoiselle Enchantress.”

She was already smiling, and her eyes were shining like the eyes of lunatics. My greeting added radiance to her smile, and her gaze became a blaze of joy.

“Ah!” she said. “You, at least, are not a denier.” She used the intimate form of address.

I took a step back and looked the impatient individual up and down. In a very dignified fashion, I remarked: “Mademoiselle, receivers in the Registry Office are not accustomed to being addressed as *tu* by...” I hesitated momentarily. I thought: *by loose women*, but I was gripped by pity for her evident folly. I continued and concluded my sentence in a less wounding fashion, although still very firm. “Receivers in the Registry Office are not accustomed by being addressed as *tu* by just anyone.”

She frowned and came toward me, imperious and domineering. At that moment her absurd and intimidating beauty made me think: “a mad queen.” Nevertheless, she smiled again, with an indulgence that ought to have offended me, as she replied: “Enchantresses are logical grammarians. They do not employ the plural when addressing an individual. If that wounds you in French, I’ll speak Latin.”

She stifled a laugh, and, plunging her tall stature into a mocking reverence, she said: “*Salve, proeposite publicis tabulis exactor.*”

Then, straightening up again, her expression greatly amused, she added: “Some titles are a trifle absurd...when one translates them.”

I was overwhelmed by amazement. She seemed flattered by my admiring silence. In a voice that was almost no longer insolent, she explained: “Respectable receiver of the Registry Office, I never had any intention of offending you. On the contrary; I wanted to thank you for not having denied my title of enchantress, as so many of the imbeciles I encounter do.”

Her smile became amiable. Her overbearing beauty recovered a kind of seductive loveliness. Certain haughty faces are thus transfigured in amorous joy. And she said, in a musical and penetrating voice: "Listen, friend. Those of my kind give active thanks; our words are harnessed teams that draw benefits behind them. Express a desire, and my power will grant it in your favor."

Lunacy is contagious. Thus, I—a reasonable man, a receiver in the Registry Office, a doctor of law and an economist—said to myself, momentarily: "An enchantress. Who can tell? After all, we don't know everything." To be sure, it was only a flash of dementia, immediately extinguished in the somber immensity of shame, but I did not have the courage to draw away from the bizarre and poetic individual. I felt incapable of discontenting "the mad queen." I consented to play my part in her game, and to give my reply in the same spirit.

"Forgive the coarseness of the wishes of a mortal, Immortal Lady. I already have health and intelligence; women find me handsome; what could I desire, except a fortune?"

"What do you call a fortune?"

I became specific. "Admire the moderation of a sage or, at least, don't be scornful of the mediocrity of my desires. A mere million will suffice for me."

"You shall have your million," she affirmed.

More keenly than I should have, I asked: "When?"

"In fifteen months."

I pressed her further: "Why not immediately?"

But the enchantress gave an answer worthy of an ordinary woman: "Because." And she said: "Make a second wish."

After long reflection, I made a grimace of indifference, and my arms lifted slightly in a gesture of embarrassment. "I don't see what I could ask..." I hesitated, and then resumed, fearfully: "To be a minister, perhaps."

"You shall be one in five years, if you still desire it."

That promise, even if I had taken it seriously, would not have given me any great joy. This time, I did not ask; "Why not immediately?"

The enchantress spurred me on: "Make a third wish."

Although all of it, in my thinking, was pleasantries and chitchat, my natural moderation rebelled and I said: "I have nothing left to desire."

"What!" cried the mad queen. "You're not asking for anything for your soul..."

I protested: "Madame, I've asked for everything for my soul. A fortune will permit me to devote myself without reserve to my beloved political economy. I shall live in Paris, in the midst of an intelligent society. I'll attend premières..."

She cut me off, scornfully. "Ah! That's what you call joys of the soul. Poor man, who isn't even curious...!"

"What an idea! Not curious, me! What about my work in statistics?"

She did not deign to respond. She sat down on the grass, and gave me a sign to do likewise. Delicately, her fingers picked up an ant. She considered it with a strange smile. Then she asked: "Have you ever desired to know what passes through the mind of another animal?"

My human pride expressed itself: "There must be so little passing through it."

"That's where you're mistaken," she affirmed. "Would you like to do the experiment? Would you like me to change you into an ant?"

III

I was gripped by a great pity for that admirable woman, who was mad. I thought I saw a means of curing her: to demonstrate her impotence. I avoided the awkwardness of my first wishes. I began by cutting off all retreat for the presumptuous woman.

In an incredulous tone, I almost hissed: "Change me into an ant? When?"

"At this very moment," she said.

I replied, mockingly: "How will you do it? You've forgotten your wand."

"Do you think that a king is obliged to pick up his scepter to give an order? At any rate, if you want to see external signs of my power, be satisfied."

By means of I don't know what trick of prestidigitation, she had between her fingers a kind of orchestra-conductor's baton. The ant she had picked up a little while before was on the baton, running along it hurriedly, in

bewildered terror. It hastened toward the tip and then, as if it had bumped into an invisible obstacle, threw itself backwards.

The mad queen smiled at the ant. "Calm down," she said to it. "I don't mean you any harm."

As if it had heard and understood, the ant stopped. In order to have something to do, it started cleaning its antennae.

Again the strange young woman addressed herself to me: "Do you want to become this little animal?"

"I do."

"And you don't want to impose any other condition?" she asked. "You don't have any reservations?"

"What would be the point?"

"Imprudent!" she exclaimed.

She looked at me with infinite tenderness. Then her eyes lit up with an ironic gleam, and her words were like temptresses drawing nearer graciously, a trifle coquettishly, in hesitant undulations, advancing as if the slightest gesture would drive them away: "And the million that will fall due to the receiver of the Registry Office—what should I do with that?"

I did not want to be the object of mockery, and, in spite of the emotion with which the word *million* caused me to shiver, I retorted: "You've made me promises contradictory for a poor mortal; it's up to you to keep them all."

"It's simple," she said. "You'll only be an ant for a year. Does that arrangement suit you?"

"I accept it."

"And you're not requesting anything else?" she persisted. "You don't have any other precautions to take?"

"I can't think of any."

She burst out laughing. "What blockheads these receivers in the Registry Office are! What advantage would you obtain from the voyage if you forgot to take a little memory with you? You'll also require the faculty of thinking like a man as well as an ant."

"Poor mad queen!" I exclaimed. "From the impossible you fall into the inconceivable. How can the ridiculously small brain of an ant accommodate human thought?"

Insultingly, she said: "The thought of a man of genius might perhaps overwhelm it, but the mind of an ordinary man doesn't weigh very much." After a pause, she added: "I can't guarantee, in any case, that your duplicate thought won't entail considerable suffering. But your two minds will only rarely be alight simultaneously. Ordinarily, only one of them will illuminate your consciousness. And yet, because the second being will still be there, invisible but present, always on the point of confronting its neighbor, cursing, contradicting and denying the other in a howling quarrel, your thoughts will be painful, anarchic and chaotic to the point of madness, or very nearly. Sometimes, human habits will play your ant thoughts false, maddening the thinking ant. Sometimes your ant mind, a precision instrument and not an implement of labor, will grate upon your heavy human thought, like a fine scalpel of which one is demanding the labor of a spade."

She spoke in a distressed fashion, her head bowed. Her arms slack, her hands almost touching the ground. The smile had disappeared from her lips, and her eyes were two flowers of sadness. But she straightened her upper body. Her expression cleared. Her mouth took on a tremor that gradually opened into a valiant smile. Her arms were raised. Her free hand came to support her chin, and she began again, in a voice that was no longer tearful, but already encouraging.

"Be brave. Don't recoil before intellectual dolor, that ennoblement. The limits of thought are unknown, but it is only calm when it gathers itself in, makes itself small, enclosing itself its blind terror. Immediately it emerges, especially when it yields to its instinct to enlarge itself, climb higher and descend more deeply, that is when it suffers over its entire surface, for things enter into its magnification as thorns and nails enter into a body."

She was scornful of my tranquility: "Poor child, your thought is ignorant, not having yet collided with any other thought."

She raised her wand, and extended it toward my forehead in a solemn gesture, which stopped abruptly.

"I forgot..." she murmured. She opened an irritated parenthesis: "But why hasn't this banal individual even thought about that practical detail?" And she insulted me violently: "Imbecile! If I'd transformed you into an ant without any other precaution, the entire hive would attack the intruder and you'd perish amid horrible tortures. It's necessary that you should be an ant from this hive..."

"In case of an accident," I joked, "you'd have resuscitated me."

I don't know whether she understood my remark ironically, but she neglected it in order to continue with her own train of thought.

"And you're not asking, either," she said, indignantly, "how your human brethren will receive you after your long disappearance, after they've shared out your spoils and their serried ranks have closed to efface your position in

social life.” She reflected momentarily, and then added: “For a year, you’ll be the ant that’s on my wand—and that ant, for the same year, will be Octave Péditant.”

“That’s it!” I said, laughing. “A simple permutation.”

I said no more. The wand had touched my head.

I was an ant.