

Jean Jullien: *An Investigation of the World of the Future*

(1909)

I. *The Prophet*

A few years ago, the editor of the *Universal Informer* commissioned me to make an investigation of the United States. It was a matter of interviewing thinkers, scientists and scholars such as James Milner, Professor Fuss, the engineer John Eddy—all the geniuses in whose brains the destiny of the future world is unfolding. I have, in consequence, not done what my colleagues in reportage do, giving a glimpse into the present states of minds in the Great Republic, but have researched what it will be tomorrow and thereafter.

From that excursion into the other world I will report the materials necessary to establish an exact picture of its society, as it will function when we have disappeared. You will admit that, for a newspaper, that is definitely the last word in information.

My first impressions were rather discouraging. The meddlesome formalism of an administration given free rein, the affectation of an unfortunately superficial correction, the rush of crowds after bluffers and a thousand other features of its mores suggested to me a civilization in decline, in which the brutal release of individualism, reinforced by imperialism, marked a return toward a certain savagery. I did not, however, attach any more importance to the eddies of that crowd throwing itself into life and fighting over it, in the midst of eternal conflicts of interest, than to the eddies of the sea breaking untiringly against the rocks. The masses live their own times; they do not prepare the future. Only minorities work for that, grouped around men of science or art, builders of hypotheses or utopians, whose dreams are the next realities.

In the Union more than anywhere else, it is necessary to recognize, the most vertiginous conceptions easily find ways to emerge from the domain of the abstract and speculative, while, in our old world, they incubate for centuries. There, a sense of practicality has taken possession of the most disinterested minds; people are not content to caress chimeras; they domesticate them and bring them down to earth.

How many futile words have been pronounced here and among our neighbors regarding the march of progress? How many projects, each more wonderful than the last, for the reform of society? How many popular orators promise happiness and how many poets sing about it, who see nothing more therein than words? How many prophets announce the new life, who obtain nothing from their apostolic mission but the disdainful shrug of our fellow citizens' shoulders? What hope is there, anyway, for a civilization like ours, where *inventor* is synonymous with *crackpot*?

It is not like that in the United States. Prophets are not armchair apostles; they act; they draw crowds, become forces—and the trade is, in fact, quite lucrative. Could I do better, in order to be informed as to the future, than to address myself to one of these seers?

I have little confidence, I must admit, in those variously inspired people who tell you things, with an imperturbable aplomb, that cannot be checked, and who have thrived on credulity for as long as humankind has existed. But I was told about a prophet, a man of science, and the man in question seemed to me to be so extraordinary that I did not hesitate to consult him.

He lived in the vicinity of Kansas City, and answered to the imposing name of Hierophas. I expected, as you might imagine, to find a thin old man with a long white beard living a solitary and ascetic existence of privation and mortification in his Thébaid, in order that his mind might focus on the future with all its acuity of perception. How surprised I was when I arrived at the door of the most sumptuous of cottages.

A tall ostentatiously-uniformed black man came to open the door by a crack and ask me whether I had an appointment. I replied that I had something better than that, and handed him the card that accredited me as a representative of the *Universal Informer*. The black man examined it attentively—he must not have known how to read—passed it to a groom, who disappeared, and opened the doors of the waiting room with an expansive gesture.

Scarcely had I had time to admire a few nice paintings and other art-works imported from Europe than an usher introduced me to the reception hall. Imagine a throne-room for a petty monarch, with the ambience and mysterious solemnity of a sanctuary. Hierophas took great care with his stage-setting. I expected to see him appear in antique garb, emerging from a trap-door, but he was a middle-aged gentleman of commanding bearing, who, in a grey jacket with a carnation in his buttonhole, simply came in through the door.

“Delighted, my dear sir,” he said to me, like an old acquaintance. “I was expecting your visit.”

Slightly surprised, I looked at him. Blue eyes softened a slightly ruddy face, at the base of which a carefully groomed blond beard fanned out; the lips were smiling with genuine affability. After all, there was nothing astonishing about a prophet anticipating my visit; and without asking anything more, I shook the hand that he offered me. He assured me that he was most honored to receive the representative of the *Universal Informer*, the only French newspaper that was worth the trouble of being consulted, and that he was entirely at my service.

I hesitated to reply. Should I address him as Master, Professor, Doctor, Reverend or simply Sir? Hierophas did not seem to be hostile to advertisement, and I concluded that he ought not to be insensitive to flattery, and gratified him with the Biblical title of Prophet. It seemed to me that he found it quite natural.

“Prophet,” I said, “it would be childish to try to conceal the object of my visit from you. You have foreseen it, so you know as well as I do what I expect from you.” He nodded his head in agreement. “I am, therefore, ready to consign to my notebook the oracles that condescend to escape from your august mouth.”

He immediately burst out laughing, with frank amusement, put his hand on my arm in a familiar manner, and said: “My dear chap, don’t be so pompous.” He was definitely a straight-talking prophet. Instead of going up to his throne, he sat on the corner of the table at which I had installed myself in order to take notes, and said, cheerfully: “Write. I’ll dictate.”

He commenced thus:

“My visit to the prophet Hierophas was a bitter disappointment to me. I thought I would find myself in the presence of a pontiff and I found myself confronted by a charlatan, or at least a hoaxer.”

I stopped writing and protested strongly.

“Don’t deny it,” he said, amiably. “I can read you like a book with large print. Yes, I live in a palace that astonishes you; I have a black porter in gaudy livery, who makes you smile, and this room looks like a stage set to you; yes, I dress ostentatiously and make sibylline pronouncements with a distant expression—because, if I behaved otherwise, no one would want to believe my predictions and I wouldn’t have a single client. You see, my dear chap, the great inferiority of science is in forsaking stage-setting and presenting its truths naked.”

I was no longer smiling, and I looked in amazement at the man who had evidently read my thoughts.

“For you,” he continued, “who have sent to me by the *Universal Informer* and I divine to be sufficiently well versed in scientific matters, I don’t have to surround myself with all that phantasmagoria. I received you immediately, because I had nothing to prepare, quite simply, because I have nothing to hide, and I introduce myself to you, not as the prophet Hierophas but as who I am: William Smithson, mathematician.”

I was still stunned by that unexpected declaration when a girl opened the door. “Papa,” she said, “are you coming to lunch?”

“I’m coming,” Mr. Smithson replied. He turned to me. “Will you stay for an informal lunch?”

I excused myself, invoking some pressing engagement.

“Don’t disguise your refusal with a polite pretext,” he replied, smiling. “Accept, or I’ll think that I’ve annoyed you by telling you the truth. Then again, we haven’t had time to chat. I want to explain my method in detail, in order that the *Universal Informer* can defend it before the world, as I shall defend to scientific sincerity of my predictions before you.”

Conquered by the strange perspicacity and the captivating frankness of my interlocutor, I allowed myself to be drawn into a conservatory, in the middle of which the lunch table had been set. The prophet introduced me to Mrs. Smithson, who was supervising three young children as they ate. She smiled at the compliment I addressed to her, invited me to sit down next to her, and immediately started a conversation about France, its mores, its art and its literature.

Mrs. Smithson was a tall woman, with a slim but full figure, as gracefully abrupt in her movements a thoroughbred mare. Brown-haired, with a rose-tinted pale complexion and bright lips, she had enigmatic eyes: very beautiful, clear and innocent eyes, but impenetrable, which were not the windows of the soul but mirrors reflecting a sun. Her sarcastic smile, characterized by an advancement of the lower jaw, revealed solid teeth that were a trifle long, but dazzling. She represented a certain type of American beauty. She also had a fine mind, very cultivated, not lacking in irony or mischief.

She told me that French novels seemed to her to be detestable. Were their readers only interested in vile adultery? Was it usual, in France, for women to deceive their husbands? Did they always find someone with whom to deceive them? Shocking! In America, the respect due to women was differently conceived—but she let it be understood that perhaps French manners did not displease her overmuch.

While we were discussing that subject in the fashion of Marivaux, the children disappeared, taken away by a governess, and the prophet left us to give an audience. I remained alone with the charming woman, and the conversation immediately took a more gallant tone. She stared into my eyes with a challenging expression, leaned closer to my ear in order to say things that she thought daring, and then leaned back with the stifled giggles of a provocative flirt. The most naïve and the most foppish would not have scorned the opportunity, and although I am not one of those lady-killers who imagines that he can conquer a woman at first sight, I was obliged to recognize that the lovely Mrs. Smithson was making advances to me.

It would have been necessary to have neither eyes nor ears to be insensible to the attractions of her vital beauty, to have neither warmth in the heart nor blood in the veins not to be seduced by the envelopment of that siren in the inept *gaucherie* of an honest woman. One idea, however, held me back. If I became smitten with his wife, Hierophas, who read me like a book, would certainly perceive it—and then what would happen?

The more I restricted myself to respectful banalities, the bolder she became, and the more she developed her supple and undulating grace, playing the tease. I thought, however, that Smithson, in his quality as a diviner, had doubtless foreseen the welcome his wife would give me, and knew in advance the little scene that was being played out a few yards away from him. What kind of man was he, then? What role was he making me play? I was only twenty years old, and such adventures cannot help being disturbing, when one is abroad—especially in America, where one can so easily encounter the barrel of a revolver.

I advanced, meanwhile, to the ultimate limits of admissible gallantry, but quickly understood that I could not remain there without seeming absolutely ridiculous. Too bad—I launched myself into a crazy declaration, which she received point-blank, her eyes half-closed, with an extreme joy. I was about to become more pressing when the prophet came back in.

Absorbed in the oracle he had just rendered, he appeared not to notice anything, and talked to us about the pleasure that he experienced when he was able to offer his clients fortunate predictions.

“You’re a prophet of good omen,” I said to him, smiling.

“A prophet, no, my dear sir,” he replied, with slight impatience. “Once again, strictly speaking, I’m not. I don’t claim, like many of my colleagues in whom the Magi of the Old Testament live again, to be inspired by God—nor by the Devil. I have nothing in common with astrologers, diviners, sorcerers, necromancers and other charlatans. I possess neither the unhealthy gift of foresight of the ancient pythonesses and convulsives, nor the second sight of somnambulists and hysterics. I practice *prescience*.”

Now, I thought, *it’s getting interesting*. And I had a strong desire to take out my notebook in order to take notes. A scruple restrained me. I looked at Mrs. Smithson. She was leaning backward on the cushions, eyes closed, lips smiling, as if still under the spell of the confessions she had heard. I was ashamed of doing my professional duty in front of her, and did not want her to be able to suppose, for an instant, that I attached more importance to her husband’s words than hers. It was certainly very agreeable to see her thus, but I could not entirely forget the objective of my visit; and although not very well of, I would have given a considerable sum for some household obligation to have summoned her into the next room and permit me to become the reporter glad to take notes about *prescience*. Unfortunately, it is only in the theater that characters exit when desired.

I could not, however, remain silent. By way of compromise, I declared that *prescience* seemed extremely interesting, but that it was impossible for me to deny the delightful attraction of the

unexpected. Our lives would be rather dull if we knew the day before exactly what we would be doing the following day, and were unable to abandon ourselves insouciantly to the sweet joy of living.

“Ha ha!” said Smithson, smiling. “I see that you’ve been getting along well with Laura!”

“Why do say that?” I asked, a trifle anxious, while the lady’s large eyes settled gently upon me.

“Because my wife doesn’t believe in science, and remains attached to superstition.”

“That is to say,” she put in, “that I don’t believe in your predictions.”

“A French proverb declares that no one is a prophet in his own country—all the more reason why he should not be one in his own house,” I hastened to remark.

“Note that I affirm nothing; affirmation is only for the ignorant; science always doubts. Although I talk about the future, I don’t claim certainty; I merely calculate probabilities to the nearest ten thousandth—and human life is no more than probabilities!”

Apparently, I was not concealing the interest I was taking in her husband’s declarations well enough. Mrs. Smithson got up abruptly. “So you think Monsieur will be amused by all your stories!”

“I don’t doubt, my love, that your conversation would be infinitely more agreeable to him than mine—except that Monsieur has come here with certain preconceived ideas, of which I want to disabuse him completely. Let’s go into my study.”

“I hope that you won’t steal Monsieur for too long, in order that we can resume the conversation that you interrupted untowardly?”

“Yes, yes—that’s understood.”

I followed Smithson into his study like a man who, sensing that he is a victim of circumstances, no longer seeks to resist them. It was a large, well-lit room, simply furnished with tables like those architects use, and tall stools. The entire back wall was taken up by a blackboard, on which was displayed a scaffolding of formulas and symbols alternating with cascades of numbers. There were statistical tables, innumerable filing cabinets, enormous ledgers and calculating instruments such as one sees in physics laboratories or observatories, and bundles of electrical wires were branching out in all directions. He was certainly a modern prophet.

“My method,” he began, “is exceedingly simple. It closely resembles the one that meteorologists employ to anticipate the weather. Those scientists study the situation of the heavenly bodies, the state of the atmosphere, calculate the direction and speed of currents, the action of multiple influences, and finally refer them to statistical analysis.”

“Which doesn’t prevent them, as we say back home, from often sticking a finger in their eye.”

“Once again, Monsieur, absolute certainty does not exist. For my research, I have completed the studies carried out on the physical world by analogous studies of the intellectual and moral worlds, that’s all.”

He took me to a window, showed me a building that resembled a factory, and told me that there, every day, five hundred employees recorded the ideas and facts that came to their attention, and classified them into categories and tables reproducing the approximate movement of universal life. Others drew up diagrams of currents of opinion and various influences, so accurately that when a case was submitted to him, Hierophas was able very rapidly to identify similar cases, and, given the present direction, calculate the probabilities. He added that an extensive training had rendered him very sensitive to the kind of radiation emanating from facts that is known as “ideas in the air,” and that with his profound knowledge of men and things, he sometimes arrived instantaneously at the solution to a problem. But that was only a conjuring trick; his method was entirely founded on observation.

“Then you’ll be able to tell me what the situation of humankind will be one or several centuries hence?”

“Indeed I can. But you don’t expect me to reply to you immediately? Then you’d have the right to take me for a trickster! The question is one of the most colossal that can be asked. To resolve it will require considerable research and innumerable calculations; I don’t know how many years it would take me to make them, but the problem doesn’t frighten me, and it’s very possible that I’ll study it.”

Then he started talking to me gaily about the ridiculous questions he was asked every day. As he was telling me about the misadventures of a farmer’s wife, who had wanted to know, at any cost, how many eggs her chickens would lay, an electric bell vibrated precipitately, several times over.

“That’s my wife getting impatient,” he said, “and thinking that our discussion is lasting too long; let’s go find her.”

Those words, bring me back to the reality of a situation that I had gradually forgotten, caused me to shiver. Now that I had learned what I wanted to know, however, I was determined not to take my flirtation with Madame any further. I would offer her my compliments—I could hardly do otherwise—and I would take my leave.

“There’s one curious detail,” said Smithson, linking arms with me in a familiar fashion in order to take me to the drawing room. “Just now, my wife declared that she didn’t believe in my predictions. Well, she’s not entirely wrong. Can you imagine that, with respect to all the people closest to me—my wife and children, for example—my vision, so clear with respect to others, become almost completely obscure. Sentiment disturbs it, as a magnet confuses a compass needle.”

“The ancients were right, then, to put a blindfold over the eyes of love.”

“Yes, it’s always blind!”

The tone in which he had produced the last phrase might equally well have indicated an intimate dolor, pity for his wife, a threat to me, or perhaps all three. With that devil of a man, who saw through all games, how could one tell which one he was playing?

In the drawing room, sparkling with light, I could see nothing but Mrs. Smithson. She was in evening dress, her shoulders bare, her perfectly contoured neck emerging from a bodice of flowery satin, molded over rounded forms. Again I met her large, bottomless eyes, her ironic smile and her dark hair, artistically decorated with orchids.

Smithson rapidly made himself scarce, in order to receive the daily reports of his secretaries.

Alone again with that half-naked woman, on whose forehead our artists would have put a crescent, so symbolic was she of nervous pride—not the banal Diana but a Diana of the north with snow white flesh—I forgot my resolutions and did not defend myself against rapture. A flood of enthusiastic acclamations rose to my lips, and as, fortunately, English is as familiar to me as my mother tongue, I multiplied the susurrations of admiring words, mingled with exclamations of languid finality that enveloped her like a caress: perfectly lovely! She received my compliments with the satisfaction of a sovereign who knows what is due to her, but who was nevertheless slightly surprised by the exaltation of my emotion.

Then, she turned her head, and said, with a delicate flick of her fan: “Oh, you Frenchmen!”

Her smile was more sarcastic, her eyes went in search of some unfathomable ceiling, and I could not make out whether the reminder of my nationality signified that she was tormented by my words or my gallantry.

Smithson came back, very correct in a florid smoking-jacket. My decision was made; I thanked him for his cordial reception, and the kindness with which he had informed me; I bowed to Madame and made as if to leave.

“Oh, no, no!” cried the gentleman prophet. “You’re our guest, you’re staying with us! We rarely have the opportunity to welcome a Frenchman here, and you wouldn’t want to deprive us of that great pleasure. I have, in any case, more information to give you about prescience, and my wife won’t be displeased to find out a little more about French mores.”

Mrs. Smithson nodded, and, very embarrassed, I replied that I would like nothing better, but that it would be very difficult for me.

“Come on, my dear chap—no one, so far as I know, is expecting you? It’s getting pitch dark, we live some way from the town, and I was so convinced that you’d stay with us that I permitted myself to send your carriage away.”

I remarked politely that it was not very honest, in order to justify his predictions, to make it impossible for people to carry out their plans, but that, having said that, I greatly appreciated the honor that Hierophas was doing me in receiving me beneath his roof. He had to know that, deep down, I was not excessively annoyed. I was seduced by the prospect of resuming the flirtation, of seeing that honest wife ignite, like a grey ember stirred by a gust of wind, in the breath of passion, and of finally deciphering the enigma of her eyes.

Supper, in the midst of flowers, was very cheerful. Smithson, as a philosopher who knew the vanity of life and was not harassed by the pursuit of a ideal, seemed to be joyfully practicing the principle of *carpe diem*. His wife laughed at my merest remarks, and I must say that I deployed a firework-display of pleasantries by which I was dazzled myself. That prolixity, which greatly amused my hosts, came, I now understand, from the need I felt to daze myself and no longer to analyze my impressions.

I slightly cloud passed over when I was served, under the label of Champagne, an alcoholic tisane from California, which I declared inferior to our national product. Mrs. Smithson saved the situation by saying, with a slightly malicious intent, while her nose was in her glass: "Wasn't it one of your poets who said: 'what does the bottle matter, so long as one gets drunk?'"¹

"I congratulate you, Madame, on knowing our national literature so well, but intoxication that is not poured out by beauty is, for me, merely a brutal delirium, and that beauty is the guarantee of the sublimity of my joy, for a golden ewer with rare sculptures can only contain a nectar worthy of the gods!"

I proclaimed that with such conviction that Madame's drink went down the wrong way and her husband the prophet was gripped by an outburst of laughter that was prolonged like a hurrah in a crowd.

After supper, Laura sat down at the piano, excusing herself for only being familiar with the German repertoire. While her fingers flew nimbly over the keyboard and melancholy ballads succeeded the broadly overlapping chords of passionate sonatas, Hierophas and I, seated on the same sofa, silently blew away the smoke of our cigars. He was doubtless absorbed in his calculations, while I was pursuing my flirtation. Each note seemed to vibrate for me alone. I felt that she was smitten, as I was smitten, and that her heart was coming to me on the wings of the music, just as the blue spirals of smoke were bearing mine toward her.

"My dear friend," said Smithson, suddenly, "I've been thinking about the question you asked me a little while ago."

"What question?"

"About the future of humankind."

"Oh, yes...yes."

"Tomorrow morning, perhaps I'll be able to give you a more categorical reply, but at first glance, this is what I observe: the gods having rendered the earth inhabitable, humans have gradually recreated it. The forces of nature have been tamed by mind, if not entirely, at least in part, and...are you listening to me?"

It was not only the piano but her voice, a warm mezzo-soprano that filled the room with tremulous and tender notes.

"Yes, yes!" I hastened to reply to Smithson, who continued.

"Follow my reasoning carefully. After the great physical discoveries will come the great metaphysical discoveries, which, even more than the former, will transform the world. We shall thus advance to the limits of the unknowable, and...are you with me?"

She had made a selection of the most fiery declarations of love, and I experienced I don't know what mad desire to respond to that voice, which was proclaiming in vain the ardor of its flame. Without being aware of it, I repeated with her the words: "Yes, I'm yours."

"I think," said Smithson, laughing, "that you're a little distracted."

"The music is so penetrating," I stammered, understanding my gaffe.

"I'll wager that you're in love?"

"Me!" I felt a shiver run down my spine. Repaying the audacity, I added, laughing: "I won't take the bet, because you only bet on sure things, since nothing can be hidden from you."

"I congratulate you on being in love—it's the noblest passion of all; I hope you'll be happy."

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask him whether I would be—he ought to know! To address that question to a husband, however, seemed to be to be in doubtful taste, and I relied with a vague exclamation.

"Is one ever sure of being happy?"

"Yes, sometimes," Smithson replied—and he dispatched his smoke slowly toward the ceiling, smiling at agreeable memories.

That prophet, that prescient, was the blindest and least jealous of husbands! He was truly soaring above contingencies. He read the future and did not see the present: his wife's flirtatiousness and our exchanged glances. He did not understand my disturbance at all. I felt sorry for him.

When she had finished, as I congratulated the cantatrice, I told her that her song had given birth to an emotion within me to which her husband could testify. Laura denied being a great artiste and

¹ Alfred de Musset, in "La Coupe et les lèvres." The line became a favorite cynical euphemism.

claimed that in order to have been moved I must have been very obliging. I was about to say something stupid when some neighbors arrived to talk to Smithson about local business. As such questions were no more interesting to Laura than to me, we took refuge in a corner of the drawing room and resumed our intimate conversation.

She explained that, living in an environment where everything was foreseen, the unknown, that universal alarm, had a charm for her that she could not resist. For her, I was the unknown; an invincible force had driven her toward me, and my gallantry had done the rest. Incidentally, she told me that William and she had separate apartments, and that the room set aside for me was only separated from hers by a glazed corridor.

I limited myself to repeating that she was the most beautiful, most adorable and most marvelously amiable of all the women I had encountered thus far. I would have liked to silence the immense love that, on seeing her, had struck me like a thunderbolt, but I could not do it. By retaining me in her proximity, she had prolonged my happiness but aggravated my torment, and I would only leave the house in permanent despair. Perhaps I put a little more emphasis into it than sincerity, but she didn't appear to perceive it.

The prophet bid his neighbors farewell.

Laura stood up, passed close to me, and leaned over to whisper in my ear: "One o'clock in the morning." Then she slowly drew away, to say goodbye to the people who were leaving.

I remained nailed to my chair by shock. Laura had given me a rendezvous, and a nocturnal rendezvous, which could only take place in her bedroom! My first reflection was to think that these American prudesses so strict in their "respectability," so prompt to be shocked when one mentioned Parisian women, could certainly give them pointers! I could not imagine, in fact, that one of our honest bourgeois wives would fall into the arms of anyone like that, after a few minutes of conversation. The sphinx had feet of clay! Which didn't prevent me from glorying in my conquest—one doesn't meet the wife of a prophet every day—and reveling in the thought of the promised felicities.

Having exchanged good nights with my hosts, accompanied by warm handshakes, I found myself alone in a very elegant apartment, naturally provided with all desirable comforts. Then I reviewed the multiple incidents of the day; they appeared infinitely less odd to me.

I was now certain that I had stupidly allowed myself to be caught by a flirt, an expert and exceedingly cunning woman who was drawing me into a wicked escapade. Her gracious welcome, her smiles, her glances, her beauty—everything seemed suspect to me. That insistence on my staying, the skill in engineering private conversations, that outrageously low-cut dress and those lascivious songs—was all of that not a task of seduction planned in advance? Besides which, could there be anything unexpected in that house?

An atrocious idea crossed my mind: perhaps she was following a plan concocted by her husband. Yes, yes, the fellow's joviality rang false and his cordiality was only feigned. True, I had not familiar with prophets, but it seemed to me that such a man would not put himself out for a mere reporter, explain his working methods to him, introduce him to his wife, allow her to flirt with him—for he could not have failed to notice it—and then entertain him under his roof. What did it signify that he had sent away my carriage, and made me drink, in spite of myself, strange alcohol decorated with the name of Champagne? And the care he took to tell me that he could not foresee anything that concerned his wife—was that not to give me to understand that I could pay court to her without fear?

I threw myself down on a chaise-longue, certainly not to sleep but to collect myself and concentrate my ideas.

There was no need to seek any further; I had fallen into a trap. What were their objectives? What did they expect of me? Did they want to make me sing? They couldn't suppose that I'd roll over for money. Did Smithson want to take revenge on his wife? He couldn't have expected my arrival.

Aided by the darkness and the silence, the most extravagant thoughts crossed my mind. Sinister anecdotes crowded my memory. Who could tell, with these eccentrics, what one might expect? I could already see myself riddled with bullets or lacerated by stab-wounds.

I thought about running away. Through the house? That was unthinkable; I might get lost in the maze of corridors and stairways, and bump into the porter, who would mistake me for a thief and shot me dead. Jump out of the window? I looked out; it opened into an interior courtyard.

The best thing to do was to stay in my room, lock the door and wait for morning. In order to put this very reasonable plan into execution, I went to lock the door. There was no key!

Firmly decided not to go to sleep, and to remain ready for anything, I paced back and forth, wondering whether it might not be prudent to barricade the door with furniture. No, in spite of appearances, I might be mistaken, and then, how ridiculous it would have been to erect such defenses.

My watch showed a quarter to one. Already! Laura would be expecting me in a quarter of an hour. Would she be the only one expecting me? Whether she was sincere or setting a trap for me, she would be expecting me, I was sure of it. At that moment I imagined her there, all ready, at the other end of the corridor, her beautiful body draped in a light and transparent fabric, lifting up her loose tresses with a gracious gesture and darting a last glance at her mirror. Then I saw her curl up, tremulously, in a profound armchair and smile within it, that dazzling smile which transfigured her beauty. Her feverish eyes, fixed on the face of a grandfather clock, following the progress of the hands... By the undulation of lace I sensed her breathing becoming gradually weaker. I saw her beautiful arms, so pure in their lines, coming apart like wings, and extend toward the unknown—toward me—while her lips came together to blow me a kiss.

Shall I lose that delightful Laura forever because of a stupid and unjustifiable pusillanimity? Shall I exasperate myself and curse myself in a vain attempt? I've certainly seen what I've seen, heard what she said to me; thunderbolts are undeniable: she loves me! She loves me and I'd be stupid not to respond to her love, to let her go because a hallucinatory wakefulness has given birth within me to chimerical dreads. No, a thousand times no! Shall I tell her tomorrow that I was afraid? A truly fine defeat for a gallant man! All the more reason to do it if there's a risk to be run. That woman, sincere or false, has trusted me, and I can't appear to her to be a coward or an imbecile.

The hands of my watch were approaching one o'clock. What if I were going to my death, though? Damn it! The husband was one of those idiots that can be fooled with impunity. Was it not the height of cynicism to take the wife of one's host? Get away! Is there a morality for love?

The d'Artagnanesque side of my character got the upper hand, forcefully, and I opened my bedroom door.

Moonlight coming through the windows that lit the corridor described large black arabesques on the floor. I slid along the wall, muffling the sound of my footsteps as much as possible, pricking up my ears at the slightest suspect rustle. I reached the blissful door.

It is no exaggeration to say that at that moment, my heart was beating as if to burst. I scratched softly; no sound replied to me; no light filtered through the cracks.

Softly, I called: "Laura, my darling?"

Nothing.

I presumed that Laura, by virtue of some residue of respectability, preferred silence, darkness and mystery. Boldly, I pushed the door. It opened. Hesitantly, I advanced into the darkness, dreading at every step that I might bump into a item of furniture.

"Laura?" I repeated, tenderly. "Laura, my darling?"

Emotion must have paralyzed her throat, for, after a few seconds, I perceived the hoarse sound of her respiration. Cautiously, I approached the bed. I reached out a hand; I felt a dangling arm: her arm, rather strong, with pure firm lines. I seized it, and covered it with kisses.

Abruptly, it tore away from my caresses. The bed shuddered, as if she had leapt out of it. Electric lamps lit up and I saw, standing by the bed, in his sculptural nudity, the black man who had opened the door to me!

Alarmed, he had flicked the switches, and grabbed a revolver. I stopped him with a placatory gesture; he recognized me.

How could I explain my presence? I could not confide to him that I was going his mistress's room and that, having mistaken the door, I wished he would tell me where I was. I gave the excuse that I was looking for a bathroom, to which he gave me directions tremulously, and I found myself back in the corridor.

What should I do? Knock on another door? It seemed to me, now, that it was a nearby door that she had indicated to me. No, though. What if, this time, I were to go into the prophet's room? I retraced my steps. And, although it was exceedingly cruel to tell myself that Laura might perhaps be there, impatient to see me, I went back into my room, furious with myself, ashamed of the ridicule that would shower upon me if rumor of the adventure got around.

In the morning, I had resolved to cut things short, to leave without even seeing my hosts, and send them a letter explaining the plausible reasons that had motivated my precipitate departure. I forgot that in that house, one could not do anything that was not anticipated.

Scarcely was I in the hallway than I saw Smithson and his wife advancing toward me, with their hands outstretched, thanking me effusively.

“For what?”

Finally, the prophet spoke. “Yesterday, when I received your card, I was with Laura. ‘A Frenchman!’ she said. ‘Will you introduce me to him?’

“Do you intend to deceive me with him?” I asked.

“Why not?” she replied.

“Confronted with that threat, I declared to her that, in spite of everything she could do, I was certain that she would not deceive me. She replied that she did not believe in my prophecies, and that, if she wanted to, she would deceive me. My prediction, and I thank you for it, has thus been realized this time, since Laura did not leave my side last night.”

“And I have won my bet too,” continued Madame, “since, if I had indicated the door to my room last night, instead of that of my servant, you would at the present moment, William, be well and truly deceived; while my servant would have been spared a shock.”

I must have had an expression so pitiful, and a manner so disconcerted, that the adorable Laura thought it necessary to offer me excuses.

“Alas, Monsieur, I am indeed not the Messalina you thought you had encountered; I’m merely an honest mother, who permitted herself to play a joke on your complacency—a cruel one, I admit—and who sincerely begs your pardon. I would have been horribly vexed if I hadn’t succeeded in seducing you and I would rather you were dead than had failed to come to knock on the black man’s door. Be assured that I shall conserve a precious memory of all the gallant things you said. I hope that, for your part, you will also recall our flirtation with pleasure.”

And Laura held out her pretty hands, which I kissed respectfully.

“I don’t want to be in your debt,” Hierophas said to me, “And I don’t want you to harbor any resentment with regard to an adventure from which none of use emerges entirely honorably. This is my response to your question about the progress of humankind. Humankind is in decline in Europe, Asia and Africa; it is making progress in America.”

“Which means?”

“That humankind will become American, or disappear!”