

THE IRON MAN

I dreamed that while traveling in the valleys of the Swiss mountains, I discovered, in the midst of a chain of very high rocks bordered by precipices, a lair carpeted by blackened verdure. I do not know what curiosity, which tormented me night and day, told me to enter it.

I climbed with effort toward a sheer and steep place, aiding myself with my hands and feet, and I saw that someone else had been as curious and as bold as me; for there was an iron crampon and a large pulley attached to the rock that served as a dome to the entrance of the lair.

The entrance was difficult to reach, but I pulled myself up with the aid of the crampon and the pulley, and immediately found myself under a low stony vault, which formed a long corridor.

The juice distilled by the rock was petrified as it fell, and formed columns, seats and tables. I advanced, and I heard a muffled sound in the distance, like that of a torrent precipitated from the top of a hill.

I was not mistaken, for, having advanced, I saw the source of a great river that was running impetuously through a narrow space. Immediately, a loud voice shouted to me: "Temeritous individual, what has given you the audacity to come to this redoubtable place? If you want to avoid death, plunge into the foamy torrent."

And suddenly, I perceived a giant armed with a heavy club, who rose up in front of me, and the voice repeated: "Plunge into the foamy torrent."

Scarcely had I dived in than I felt my entire body hardening by degrees, and that I was becoming iron from head to toe.

A being whose grandeur and majesty were above the human, clad in an azure robe, crowned with amaranth, said to me: "You have the strength; travel the world. You are justice personified; act. I have endowed you with all that is necessary to exercise august functions."

My muscles of steel had retained their suppleness; my brazen arm was endowed with an extraordinary strength. With one blow I knocked over a wall; my hand was a catapult that launched enormous darts into the distance; I shook prodigious masses, and nothing resisted my impulsion, which was increased by any contrary effort.

Although made of iron, I felt the movements of pity and commiseration beating more forcefully in my breast. My heart was even more warmed by my love for my fellows; the sentiment of equity had become more powerful there, and my head appeared to be illuminated by a new understanding.

I marched through the streets, and, seeing one man striking another, I struck him in my turn. Any man who did not lift up his comrade, fallen by accident, I laid on the ground with instant correction. I punished insults and violence, and went in all directions redressing order everywhere that it was wounded.

All absurd, abusive or cruel usages I attacked without mercy, and my arm, although iron, was weary in the evening of redressing that host of ancient abuses. The prelate, the courtier and the royal valet, obtained no favor from my rigid equity. From the courtier who obtains charges and lucrative posts by trickery, to the pickpocket who steals handkerchiefs, everyone received a salutary reprimand to his face, and sometimes an expressive gesture, if the case required it.

The rogue, the knave and the scoundrel ran away as I approached; but I had their descriptions, and in my fortunate velocity, I seized them in order to punish them.

I encountered a tax-collector with a hydropic belly, carrying a sack of paper, for which he demanded a thousand louis. I took an equal volume with which to pay the insatiable leech who dared to murmur, and I delivered the full settlement to the discretion of his famished clerks.

The usurer also had his share of my distributive justice. With the tip of my finger I erased the note of the young wastrel who had promised to pay double what he had received, and when I encountered in the street one of those succulent dinners prepared for libertinage, prodigality and hypocrisy, I took pleasure in taking it to attics where indigents without bread were awaiting the help of charity in order to eat.

I saw a man who had betrayed the fatherland; I made him get down from his carriage in front of his numerous domestics and I marked his forehead. I engraved three letters on the cheek of another, who had delayed a fortunate epoch by criminal insouciance. The poltroon received a kick in the rear and the dastard who had counseled lucrative infamies saw his ears hang down over his broad shoulders.

I opened the prisons suddenly; any murderer was put to death in an invisible instant; I fustigated thieves rudely and sent him to the public works; the calumniator was punished in the same way.

My metamorphosis had given me justice in spirit, rectitude in the heart and firmness in the soul. I was the prompt redresser of the most inveterate abuses, and consequently, I had a great deal to do; for my justice was simultaneously remunerative, punitive and civil.

But as it was often the law that committed the sin, I effaced all the old edicts already struck by public scorn, and which even the tribunals dared not reawaken for fear of attracting universal criticism.

No lieutenant of police, I assure you, ever did his duty better; my elastic arm took the place of sixty assistants; I did my own spying, for my legs were as indefatigable as my arms, and I ran from the gilded drawing-room to the obscure tavern. Here I snatched the cards from the frantic hand of the gambler, there the bottle from the drunkard's mouth; no sentence was belated, the punishment following the crime swiftly; one of the flicks of my fingers was worth the hundred blows of the stick applied to a Chinaman on the command of a mandarin.

My ears were endowed by an exquisite sensibility. I could hear three leagues away when anyone appealed to me, and arrived more rapidly than mounted police at the gallop. My flashing eyes caused the guilty to pale; he was half punished by that devastating gaze.

When I crossed the streets, I distinguished the idle man who was walking to consume time, and I imposed a task on him.

Whoever passed by was obliged to look me in the face and tell me what his employment was. If he had none, he was fustigated severely.

I approached a fortress containing prisoners who were neither murderers, nor thieves, nor seditious. I saw a man for forty who, delivered to his reflections, was detained in profound idleness, and more insupportable than all the rest. I asked him what the reason was.

"It was for having moved the tip of my tongue," he told me, "Which did not cause a single hair to fall from all the ample wigs that decided my captivity."

Another had moved three fingers of his hand, one of which was slightly stained with ink, which had not occasioned the fall of a single tile throughout the kingdom, and he was guarded under thirty bolts.

I let them both out of their cells, shrugging my shoulders in pity because the pride of men in high places dared to take liberty away from citizens on such frivolous pretexts.

I perceived the palace of the Law, and attached these verses to it:

*Justice is of kings the most noble sharing,
Of their grandeur it is the firmest support;
The true image of God enters into their bearing,
And other virtues, without which they are naught.*

Having entered a house with columns, I saw little wheels and men in robes and turned-down collars surrounding them. I asked what it was.

“It’s a game,” I was told, “Which is played before that which is most serious.”

Immediately, children with rounded cheeks appeared, who had cakes and a great appetite. They were about to eat them when a voice cried: “Don’t eat your cakes, my friends; give them to me; because, for one cake I will give you back fifteen; for two, two hundred and seventy; for three, five thousand five hundred; and for five, a million cakes.”

The children opened their eyes wide and repeating “A million cakes!” fought and overcame their appetite. That magnificent promise was so attractive that they glimpsed in that game the prospect of a splendid meal for that day, the next and all the days of their life.

They sacrificed the pleasure of the moment, therefore, and having clubbed together they had a hundred cakes. Their gaze was attentive to the movement of the wheels, and shone with the keenest hope.

The wheels turned under the reflective and composed eyes of the grave magistrates, and all that was returned to the poor children, standing on tiptoe in order to see better was four cakes; so that pitiless egotism, the motor of those perfidious wheels, had devoured arithmetically ninety-six of them.

As the children wept, the magisterial voice, to console them, said: “Play constantly five or six hundred thousand times in succession, and you will surely be lucky; keep playing, my little friends, in order that you will be permitted to play.”

Alarmed by the inequality of that barbaric and dangerous game, I broke all the wheels, in order that there could be no more question of that wicked custom, which stole from poor children deceived by hope the cakes that they would have eaten with a sensitive appetite, which would have enabled them to grow for the service of the fatherland. They remained stunted, their legs frail, and the ninety-six cakes passed on to tables where men were sitting who nibbled food with superb and disdainful teeth, who did not feel the need of hunger, and who gave the stolen cakes to their valets and their dogs.

I went to a famous sepulcher where royal cadavers lay; I said, like the Egyptian, “Emerge, impious cadaver, that you might be judged.”

He got up, trembling. The people present, who recognized him, thought he had been resuscitated and uttered a long cry of pain.

I said to the cadaver: “Standing, do you hear the maledictions that you have merited. You might be buried in the superb pyramids the Egyptians have built; you might be surrounded by obelisks and monuments charges with trophies, and your memory would be the same. Fall back into death with the opprobrium that ought to accompany your name. Would you not give, presently, all your past grandeur for one single virtue?”

The cadaver uttered a long moan, and fell back into death and eternal opprobrium.

I became, above all, the enemy of all the multiplied bureaucrats that hinder and vex commerce, fatigue the traveler and cause him to curse the beautiful roads of the kingdom.

I expelled those hirelings scribbling on ruinous paper, with a rare sensuality, a mocking contentment and an inexpressible satisfaction. I broke their pens, more maleficent than daggers; I dried up their detestable inkwells, and there was no more question of those idle and voracious scribes, *omnes sedentes in telonio*.¹

To signal the triumph I gave a meal to forty peasants on the same green baize where those insidious systems, so fecund in rapine, had been meditated.

The unfortunate who, for a handful of salt or a pound of tobacco, had been treated as one of the great enemies of society, had salt and tobacco, and the monarch was richer for it.

The tribunals that had rendered these strange sentences no longer existed. I did so well that there was more money in the royal coffers, and no one went to the galleys for having sneezed, or salted his cooking-pot.

¹ “Everyone sitting in toll-booths.”

I took against other self-important clerks whose slender knowledge was flaunted in a host of equivocal operations.

They all had despotism in the head and in the heart. Absolute in their futile ideas, they took a malign pleasure in weighing upon all merit the hammer of the power that was sometimes at their disposal momentarily. They would have liked people to believe them the depositories of all political enlightenment, and took a puerile pride in having operated very petty things with enormous means.

Jealous of everything that did not emanate from their Minerva, they were determined that everyone should believe their works the ultimate effort of a profound and mysterious science, and their ignorance of true principles was veiled by a mass of words with which they complimented themselves, in order to complete their ridiculousness and ineptitude.

How I detested those frivolities, the insolent luxury of a few individuals whose superfluity was subsidized by the necessity of so many unfortunates, that troop of artistes useless to the whole world. I put to flight those petty architects, those painters, those decorators, etc., who had made fashionable those varnished cages, those filthy boudoirs, those rotundas, and, in sum, all those trinkets of futile ornamentation veritably made to scandalize the gaze of any sane person.

At the sight of all the foundations of various kinds, laid in various places, which are waiting for, and will wait a long time for, the final touches of the architect, I realized that patience was the rarest virtue, especially among the French. The science of great men has always been estimating the execution of works in accordance with their grandeur, and their grandeur in accordance with time.

I reminded the men in place of these principles, for projects no longer have either depth or maturity when one wants to hurry everything and does not give anything time.

And I engraved on a slab of marble: "Whoever you are, do not start anything unless you are certain of being able to finish it; be jealous of finishing rather than undertaking."

The slightest reform occasioned the strongest clamors in the part of interested parties; one, subjugated by his idleness, did not want to examine the question. It would have been necessary to ascertain the facts, which he did not want to do. Another had heard his grandfather say that all novelties were dangerous. A third examined everything with the telescope of personal interest. Then ignorance, malevolence, envy and avarice heaped upon any proposal the titles of ideal and chimerical projects, and the terms innovator and visionary were not spared.

But my brazen arms remedied everything. I expelled from his place the apathetic and indolent man who saw nothing but the revenues of his position, who was only afraid of losing them; his inaction, further prolonged, would have augmented the corruptive ferment, and everything would have been vitiated, when his belated retirement had exposed the wounds inflicted by his negligent timidity.

A man having said that the creditors of the State had no other debtor than the King, and no other guarantee than his will, I gave him a slap, and cried out: "A contract made to the profit of the state and founded on public faith must be national and bound to the state that it has alimanted as the entrails to a human body. Anyone who contradicts me on that will feel the strength of my arms."

I distributed in large quantities the following quatrains; I put them in the hands of everyone; I gave them to passers-by in the same profusion that certain charlatans spread their deceitful and self-interested advertisements.

*Men, to aid one another, received the supreme law.
Who wants to live for himself must live for others.
The ingrate can forget what he owes to his brothers,
But generosity is generosity's own reward.*

*Against the conscience there is no refuge;
It speaks in our hearts, nothing stifles its voice,
And of our actions it is simultaneously
The law, the accuser, the witness and the judge.*

*We obtain everything from God, including virtue.
What do we not owe to that supreme Being,²
Who, for love of good and verity,
Deigns to associate humans with his divinity?*

*No, humans do not die; that is a gross error,
It is a frightful blasphemy to believe them mortal;
Once one day, freed from their vile dust,
The unexpected guest will possess the heavens.*

*Do you think you are alone, a solitary being?
No, God follows, hears and sees you everywhere.
Dread that in your heart some shameful mystery
Might insult his presence and wound his eyes.*

*It is not to us alone that our life belongs;
Of the brief moments that Heaven afford us,
To holy amity we owe a part,
And the rest to the fatherland.*

*Of our wealth and woes the uncertain measure
Is in opinion more than in nature.
Which is the most beautiful color? That of modesty,
Which engraves the innocence of the heart on the face.*

² Author's note: "I sense that there is a God, and I do not sense that there is not. I conclude that God exists, because that conclusion is in my nature. I hold in my heart and mind to the doctrine of Socrates, who said that: 'God is unique and simple in nature, born of himself, only veritably good and unmixed with any matter or conjoined with anything temporary.'

"The infinite Being who preceded time, who exists by virtue of himself, cannot emerge from his sublime grandeur to allow himself to be grasped by our thought. Our thought cannot know that which is above itself, and we can only glimpse God under the features of the intelligence and wisdom imprinted on the globes and on the atom.

"Cold materialist, who calumniates human beings, do you see them taking pleasure in their state of abjection and misery, embracing a voluntary ignorance? See, on the contrary, the immensity of desires that is fermenting in the human bosom; see the features of grandeur on the face surrounded by misfortune; see the elevation of human thought alongside the weakness of the human arm.

"And what attests their sublime origin is that they adore and prostrate themselves before virtue, while their determination for good is depraved by the lure of a feeble sensation.

"Can the man who contemplates in the silence of the night all the circling worlds—the host of heavenly bodies sown in the expanse, the foundation, the grandeur, the immensity of that marvelous edifice, all those brilliant stars—prevent himself from rising higher to the hand that fabricated and sustains that magnificent dome?

"Does not the soul sense the divinity distributed in the animate world? A leaf of a tree is the abode of a republic of tiny beings that savor the pleasures of life and reproduction. And that profusion of existence accorded to that infinite multitude of insects is only an effusion of the inalterable bounty that forms pleasure and pours it into the heart of an earthworm as into the human heart.

"See the article on God in my work entitled *Mon bonnet de nuit*, vol. 4, Lausanne edition."

*Frank in ambition and desire,
Poor mortal, spend a life
Close on whose heels death follows.
A little suffices for the wise;
And to make a short voyage,
Few preparations are necessary.*

*One is a king when one masters oneself,
When one subjugates one's passions,
When of foolish ambitions
One does not sense the smitten soul,
And when, of a vain people, one scorns
The vain acclamations.*

“The more delights the senses receive, the fewer ideas the soul has. Those vivid and frequent pleasures rob reason of fine and profound perceptions. A man requires a frugal life in order for his understanding to remain healthy. The man who eats too delicately can no longer eat after a few years. If sensual pleasure dominates you, you will soon be its slave, and you will no longer be able to experience anything but ennui....”

That is what I said to a prince, who did not understand me; I was annoyed by that, because he was likeable.

Another prince confessed to me that in the midst of sensual delights he had encountered frightful voids. I advised him to set about doing good throughout the extent of his domains. He was disposed to do it, but, alas, he did not have sufficient substance to be veritably sensitive, to be able to weep, to be able to savor the keen and sweet joy that follows and recompenses a good deed, to be able, in sum, to sense the intoxication that accompanies the condition of a sublime sentiment.

When it is reflection, and not sentiment, that informs certain princes that there are unfortunates, their virtues are completely wasted and they do not feel that generosity and benevolence have something divine about them; that can only be felt by souls exercised in benevolence, for whom goodness of soul is not a phrase devoid of meaning.

A poet once said these beautiful lines to a prince:

*Pleasures and grandeurs cannot fulfill my desires;
An instant of virtue renders me happy.³*

I saw a very astonishing phenomenon; it was a minister of war fully occupied in making peace. All that was lacking then was to see a controller of finances finally renouncing loans, which ruin future generations.

My power did not extend as far as that; people abuse as long as they have the scope....

All the laws were enunciated in clear and precise terms. “It is necessary that laws be brief,” said Seneca, “in order that the ignorant can easily grasp their spirit.”

TO BE CONTINUED IN THE BOOK

³ The lines are from *Le Diogène d'Alembert, ou Diogène décent* (1754) by André-Pierre Le Guay de Prémontval.