

III.

Varvouste has solved the problem of inter-atomic energy. It is as simple as that! That is to say that he has taken to its extreme limit the attempts at liberation sketched out by radium—and thanks to his discovery, an interplanetary voyage will become possible. In three years one could reach, in the direction of the nearest star to Earth, Proxima Centauri, a planet to which Varvouste has given the name of his wife, Celia. The first attempt might perhaps be made with a reduced apparatus—a sort of rocket—which would be followed by a large shell containing everything that a human being would need to live inside it for months...

It's imbecilic.

At 6 p.m., worn-out with fatigue, and prey to a violent headache, I declared; "You have the elements of a curious book...a popular romance... You ought to begin with a book."

Madame Varvouste came back in at this point. She murmured: "I've given him that advice so often..."

"Not you, Celia," the unfortunate begged. "Come on, not you! I don't do literature, but science, and the most practical..."

"I'll willingly put 20,000 francs at your disposal," I proposed, "since that sum will suffice for a trial."

"And if the trial succeeds," Madame Varvouste whimpered, "he'll want to go...he'll go through with this madness, you see!"

I repeat that I had a very bad headache. I pronounced the following words, which slipped out and which, by virtue of a bizarre duplication, I heard with admiring astonishment as if they came from someone else: "Don't worry. I'll be the one to go. I've got nothing to lose. Not only do I promise, I make it the express condition of my partnership. A little voyage to...to..."

"Proxima Centauri," Varvouste supplied.

"...wouldn't displease me. You can guarantee my return?"

"If you reach Proxima Centauri, you'll be attracted by the planet Celia, and I'll come to look for you if you can't get back by yourself. It would only take me six months to construct a new apparatus, if you leave me the material possibility of doing so."

I raised another objection. "Your discovery must have other consequences than such a long journey. Couldn't we envisage some immediate applications?"

"No. Later, no doubt. Today, my work can only be fully applied by moving outside our atmosphere and bathing in radiation that is only found in unexplored regions. Besides, my invention will only bring about a trivial progress in aviation. To test a submarine it's necessary to descend..."

"Here, it's necessary to rise..."

"It is indeed."

After that we talked about the different and wretched problems that afflict our poor Earth, and I went out uttering the relieved "oof!" of a reasonable man who has spent his afternoon listening to a feverish one—but I had almost forgotten Georgette and my rival.

That was well worth 20,000 francs.

Strangely enough, nothing interests me anymore but this. Varvouste has drawn me in his wake, up into the clouds. I've seen Georgette again. I received her in my study. I had 300,000 francs in banknotes in front of me.

"Are you doing your accounts?" she asked me, in a slightly faltering voice

"Yours."

"Mine? I don't understand."

"Take it..."

"I'm to take it?"

"Yes. Take it away. Make a parcel. Hold on—here's paper and string..."

"A gift?"

"I'm going away."

"I don't want it, then..."

"I'm going away, Georgette."

"Where are you going?"

"Far away."

"And you're leaving me?"

"Invest this money in an annuity."

"I refuse your money."

"Thank you."

"Another woman, presumably?"

"Georgette, we've never discussed..."

"What do you mean by *discussed*?"

Do you want this liaison, charming in so many ways, to end in shouting, lying and tears?"

"I want to know..."

"Knowing is so painful, alas! I assure you—I'm speaking from experience. My darling, let's not spell anything out. Let's leave things imprecise. What does it all matter, from the viewpoint of Proxima Centauri?"

"Translate, I beg you."

"There, the parcel is made up. Go, and don't come back."

"You haven't even kissed me."

"I prefer to retain the memory of our last kiss."

Her face is genuinely distressed, but the hands with the incurved fingernails are ready to take the parcel all the same, and hold on tight. "In sum, you're leaving me?"

"In sum, we're separating."

"There are things you ought to know..."

"Shh!"

"It's not true..." And, on the threshold, this candid admission: "In any case, no woman—you hear, not one—will ever love you more than I do..."

"I'm convinced of it—and that's what breaks my heart."

She searches for a riposte, finds none, and leaves. Varvouste's first success: the liberation of atoms... The trial rocket will not depart any more rapidly than Georgette has just departed, with her 300,000 francs, sprinkled with tears, perhaps not all of which are tears of happiness...

The rocket is ready. It looks like an ostrich egg equipped with minuscule winglets. Inside, there's a message from an inhabitant of the Earth. One turn of the key of a mechanical toy, and the egg will fly away...or ought to fly away. We shall see...

June 2, midnight. Varvouste and I have come to the Bois de Boulogne. We have arrived in the vicinity of the Bagatelle. We had to wait; amorous couples disturbed us. Finally, the moment has come. A throbbing roar. The rocket scintillates joyfully, as if it were freed from all known attachments. It's out of sight already.

"It'll get there, I'm sure of it!" murmurs Varvouste. And he throws himself into my arms, weeping...

"An accident?" asks a passer-by, full of solicitude.

"No, no," I say. "Monsieur is emotional."

"I understand!"

The sky is now overcast. It is starting to rain. I bring back a delirious Varvouste, convinced that he has just communicated with the Unknown...

So far as the world is concerned, we have constructed an aircraft, the technicians of which think it nothing extraordinary. We have resolved to keep the whole thing secret. In case of failure, we'll begin again. If we succeed, we have to surprise the world. I'm convinced. It's a case of *folie à deux*.

Madame Varvouste only sees one thing: I'm leaving without her husband. She will keep him by her side, with his children. For me, is it a suicide? Yes and no. I've spent long nights contemplating the stars. Little by little, my personality has become detached. A prodigy has been realized: I'm no longer thinking about myself. I knew similar intervals during the war. I just thought: *All this is absurd. It's abject horror, and I don't want to save my skin.* And shortly afterwards, because a breath of wind

had passed by, a perfume of France enveloped in music, I no longer thought that skin so precious. A sort of inspiration lifted me up; the coward mutated into a hero...

What excites me most is that I shall be alone. A few kilometers from this globe, doubtless imperfect, but comfortable in the meantime, I shall very probably die of asphyxia in my prison. I have every chance dying, and dying obscurely. Varvouste affirms that he has thought of everything: a reservoir of water that will be renewed automatically thanks to a procedure known to him alone—so much for thirst; for hunger, I'm taking enough concentrated nutrients to sustain me for several years, provided that I don't get greedy. I have the necessary provisions of breathable air and enough space, cleverly organized, to permit me to exercise my muscles. I'm running no risk of starvation, thirst or paralysis. Besides, my health is excellent and the doctors to whom I have declared that I'm going to take a long trip in an aircraft have not raised any opposition. I enjoy, it appears, a magnificent heart, magnificent blood-pressure, a magnificent stomach...

Am I afraid?

The time of reckoning is approaching. Still the sentiment experienced during attacks: *It's insane, but I'm sure I'll get out of it.* I merely observe a singular dryness of the mouth. My tongue sticks to my palate. I need to drink incessantly or suck pastilles. No shadow of hesitation. What is certain is that a vaudevillesque incident—the treason of a woman that I didn't even love—has cut the last tie. If I recoil at the last moment, if I refuse to let myself be dispatched like a parcel in the problematic direction of Proxima Centauri, I'm capable, out of weariness and self-disgust of ending it all by a shop-girl's suicide.

In our epoch, going to China would be like a trip to the suburbs. I've acquired a taste for adventure. Either I shall leave a name immortal in human memory, or I'll be volatilized. It might also be that I shall arrive in a marvelous country and will disdain to give my news to the unfortunates who continue to crawl on the surface of our globe, or that I'll come back, having not left the apparatus, bringing back observations, photographs and the key to the great mystery, having learned to live there as a bird lives with its wings, eventually to share with Varvouste an unprecedented glory.

No, it really is a matter of suicide. The Georgette incident, insignificant in itself, has opened my eyes. I'm one of those people who don't know how to grow old, or, if you prefer, I'm one of those people who can only live their youth. All the rest has been nothing but a succession of failures. I pass judgment very lucidly on what I have been, as if it were someone else. I make allowances for parental exaggeration, but it was the rule, around me, to credit me with genius. Genius, no—without doubt—but sufficiently bright talents and a sensibility that was bound to fade away rapidly, before the age of 25.

Before certain events that made our fortune, my family was poor. In our little house in the Rue des Archives, there was no piano. A relative, having bought a "baby grand," gave us his upright piano. I was six years old at the time. The arrival of that luxurious and sonorous item of furniture dazzled me. Six months later, vaguely instructed by a professor at a discount, I was tapping out little symphonies of my own invention. A composer cried prodigy and, taking me in his arms, cried: "I'm hugging Mozart!" I made progress, but three years later, on the pretext that his daughter needed an instrument, the relative took the piano back. I shed tears when men as lugubrious as undertakers carried off my vocation. And later, when my father was able to buy a baby grand, the action of an old egotist had killed my inspiration. I wrote verses then, which I tore up afterwards, which were doubtless imperfect but which marked the birth of a poet. I modeled fine statuettes in wax. One of my dullard friends drew targets on the paper in my bedroom, made bullets of my wax and used them as projectiles. I possessed oratorical gifts; I could convince people. A prolix intelligence, I admit, but prodigious gifts. I deposited them at the feet of silly girls. In youth, I betrayed my marvelous childhood. Later, I betrayed my youth. I retain a remorse that still stabs at me...everything that I might have been starved in satiation!

In reality, I have been dead for 30 years. I cherish the child, the adolescent and the young man that I was and whom no one understood. The rest is not even worth a regret. At any rate, to rehabilitate my dismal old age I shall have an exploit: a crazy exploit, but an exploit!

I have renounced the contemplation of the sky. Proxima Centauri no longer interests me. It is, it seems, my fatherland that I'm going to rejoin. I'm attached to the pettiest aspects of the Earth in general, and Paris in particular. They seem touching...

My affairs are in order. I've left a large sealed envelope to be opened after three years absence—the legal interval. Varvouste, his wife and children will be protected. I've let my domestics go, telling them that I'm going abroad, but that I might possibly return. I've studied the apparatus that will carry me away until I'm sick of it. I still have a week to kill...seven centuries, seven hours...

A beautiful night. The stars are fraternal...their palpitation seems to be calling me. Madame Varvouste is here. She dreads that her husband might decide at the last minute to accompany me. He is unhappy: "You're playing the better part," he assures me. She thinks she'll get him back once I'm gone. It is midsummer, but I'm very cold. I speak calmly, even good-humoredly, but in a jerky fashion. And still that unbearable dryness in my mouth...

I've had a copious meal—my last on Earth. I've drunk two bottles of champagne and one of old brandy, without getting drunk.

There's no one on the airfield.

I'm installed; the door closes...

A dull explosion...

Gone!