

II.

Was I dead?

No, for dead men feel no pain, and I was conscious of my existence by virtue of the stabbing pains that were shooting through all my limbs. Yes, yes, I was alive, having the conviction that my arms and legs were broken, and that my shoulders were dislocated. And my head! It was aching so much that I hesitated to move it, so fearful was I that the pieces of my skull might come apart, each falling in a different direction...

More hours passed before I recovered possession of my faculties. From time to time, there was a sort of lurch inside my skull, as if a surge were bringing me back to life, followed by prostration and numbness...

To tell the truth, I was hovering between the alternatives of life and death; perhaps a sick man, in his death throes, experiences such bizarre intervals...

How long did that anguish last? It is impossible for me to measure it, however approximately. Finally, it calmed down conclusively; I recovered my self-possession, my reason, my intellect. I understood that I could think normally, and only then did I obtain quite clearly and profoundly, the idea of a resurrection.

At first, I did not think to ask where I was; my initial curiosity, quite naturally, was to check what state my poor carcass was in. I attempted to move my limbs, one by one; one leg proved immediately capable of flexion. I scarcely dared try the other, telling myself that one of the two must surely be broken, but I took the chance. The second, like the first, was intact. So was the right arm! And the left!

That exploration of my own body was most interesting. I raised my hands to my head, expecting the bony container of my cranium to give way beneath my fingers. Not at all! It was solid. My nose, too! And my eyes! Everything seemed to be intact, and in place.

Suddenly, I shivered. I was lying on my back, on a hard material that had to be rock. I told myself that it was my back that was broken, and that I would be incapable of standing up...

That thought was so painful that I was convinced, at first, that I had made the necessary verification that that my paralysis was henceforth entirely certain...and I had a strong desire to weep. But no! But no! I had not made the inquisitive effort! Oh, with what tightness in my chest I placed my two hands flat on the ground, to provide a point of support for my elevation. I uttered a cry of joy. I was sitting up! Yes, sitting up! Then, abruptly, I arched my back—which did not give way—and I stood up.

To understand the astonishing joy that ran through my veins and arteries like a warm stream, you would have had to have undergone something similar. In fact, I would not wish it on my worst enemy. It is true that the compensation was enormous; to feel oneself alive, not crippled or lame, when one has been the plaything of chance and madness for a time one cannot measure, a dead leaf borne away by a hurricane, which might have been reduced to dust...

I was, therefore, standing up—very weary, to be sure, my muscles slack, my head half-empty, but, all things considered, already certain that rest was all that was needed to repair the damage...

Rest—and nourishment! For my first sensation was that of an intense hunger.

Imagine that, when I tried to calculate the time that had elapsed since my flight from Dun-Khou, I could not, with all possible moderation and appealing to all my self-composure, estimate it at less than three or four days—which is to say that, in the state of insouciance into which surprise, terror and the instinct of self-preservation had cast me, I had probably accomplished the feat of running for 24 or 48 hours, which might represent 50 or 60 leagues! It seems impossible, and yet...

It is understandable that, for the moment, in that first phase of awakening, I did not devote myself to such calculations. Only the distress of my stomach, the sharp pangs of hunger, provided evidence of the extent of the crisis. For the first quarter of an hour, I remained still, my mind focused on that single problem: eating! It obsessed me to the extent that I could not think about anything else—not even finding a means to discover some nourishment. Such mental disturbances are incredible. The shocks I had undergone and the suffering I was presently experiencing produced a sort of hypnotism or catalepsy in me.

Finally, my brain woke up again, and there was a glimmer of light in my head. I opened my eyes—or, rather, checked that they were open and clarified them, because they had been open all the while but had been neither gazing nor seeing—and I uttered a cry of astonishment, almost of horror.

The place where I was could only be described by one phrase: a passage at the bottom of an abyss.

I understood immediately why my visual sense had been so slow to recover its acuity. In the narrow space in which I was enclosed, between two granite walls that rose up to a prodigious height, there was nothing but a grey, diffuse light, scarcely sufficient for it to be possible to discern objects. When I raised my head, in the instinctive movement of animals and flowers searching for light, I saw—above me, but at such a height that I could not even attempt to estimate it—a strip of bright blue sky, illuminated by a sun so ardent that it was almost white.

I raised my arms toward that light, toward the sun that I could not see. It was like a promise of life, a hope of salvation—but that was an illusion; the terrible reality gripped me again. How had I got into that rocky fissure, that crevasse less than three meters wide?

My emotion was such that I no longer felt hunger. All my vitality was concentrated in the notion of danger, the desire to escape.

To begin with, what could these rocks be? I knew that for twenty leagues around—and in all of western China, for that matter—the country was absolutely flat. The province of Ordos, which it is necessary to cross to get from Peking to Dun-Khou, is nothing but a vast plain, and beyond the Houang-Ho River, Mongolia begins. Then there is the Gobi desert, with its extents of sand, where caravans scarcely dare to go—the desert which, it is said, was born from a cataclysm analogous to the sinking of Atlantis, whose approaches are defended not only by the sinister harshness of the wilderness but also by legends that the Chinese and Mongols will only relate in lowered voices.

I tried to summon up my geographical memories, but the cerebral effort only served to increase my perplexity. It was impossible that I had come back in the direction of the Great Wall, toward Yu-Lo, for in traversing the Chinese countryside I would inevitably have perished in the hands of fanatics. On the other hand, though, if I had taken the direction of the Gobi...I could not have reached any mountains that way.

But what was the point of reasoning? Either it was necessary to resign myself to a slow death by hunger, or I had to gather all my energy into a decisive effort, to act and struggle...

Suddenly, my resolution was so firm and vigorous that I no longer felt my hunger or my fatigue. I wanted to live, and that determination pulled me together, affirmed by a nervous vigor that took on the appearance of an actual force.

I examined the corridor in which I was imprisoned by two lateral walls. To think of climbing them would have been the height of folly; they were sheer, and made of a material that seemed to me to be volcanic, a black basalt with a smooth surface. There remained the two directions of the corridor. By reason of the dearth of light, it was impossible for me to distinguish anything more than a few meters away; it was therefore necessary for me to undertake an exploration, commenced at hazard.

Having taken a few steps, however, I perceived that the ground, formed by a black mass identical to the walls, was sloping; instinctively, doubtless because I hoped to escape from the abyss by going upwards, I started walking up the slope. I did so, in my estimation, for about a kilometer.

At first the slope was almost imperceptible, perhaps two or three centimeters per meter. Mechanically comparing the ascensional progress thus obtained to the height of the rocks, which I estimated to be at least 150 or 160 meters, I was beginning to tell myself that I would never arrive at a summit when a something happened that would have dispelled any illusion, had any remained to me.

The two walls suddenly drew closer, to the point of scarcely leaving me the room necessary to pass through facing forwards. I set myself sideways and hazarded a few more steps. I experienced a sensation of choking, of crushing; I even had the horrible thought that if I went any further forward it might be impossible for me to get back again. I would be gripped, held fast by the rocks and would die there—an exceedingly slow and horrible death.

My blood froze, but the weakness was fleeting. I succeeded in recovering my composure and, turning round, started walking again, down the slope. In fact, that was much more logical. If I were to find help at all, it would doubtless be more probable that I would find it on the plain than those inaccessible peaks, where no human being was likely ever to have set foot.

Thus, it was with an open mind and without any despair that I retraced my steps—except that I hurried even faster, for it seemed to me that the strip of sky that was above my head was becoming less luminous. Perhaps night was falling—and if so, what would become of me in the darkness? I did not even want to think about that.

I was almost running now, being in haste to escape the embrace of those vertical walls, of which I was afraid, as if—I remembered Edgar Poe’s “The Pit and the Pendulum”—they might suddenly come together to crush me.

In the semi-obscurity that surrounded me, optical illusions sometimes showed me a sudden parting of the rocks, or even a distant glimmer of light at the far end of the corridor. A few more paces and there would be liberty, life...

No; the route went on interminably, sometimes sloping upwards, sometimes descending again, almost sheer, until the moment—oh, how did I not die of rage and despair?—when I bumped into an enormous boulder, a fragment of the mountain that had crumbled away...and which blocked the way completely.

Yes, I was trapped! No exit! I fell upon that stone cube, which must have weighed several thousand kilos, and tried with my hands and fingernails to tear it out of the black recess that retained it.

Nothing! The most powerful machines could not have budged it.

Oh, then the fever of terror that had already possessed me seized me once again. I rushed at the rock as if it were possible to climb over it, or as if my limbs might suddenly be furnished with adhesive suction-cups capable of attaching them to the smooth basalt. Twenty times I fell back; 20 times more I launched myself forward.

Then seized by despair, maddened, understanding that it was all over, I started running again, using my hands to feel the wall whose two sides imprisoned me...going at top speed only to slow down a moment later, to proceed one step at a time, my neck extended, my eyes questing.

Night fell—the definitive darkness that would be, for me, that of the tomb.

Exhausted, impotent, I stood still, as if stunned, with an incessant thundering in my brain. And hunger—the hunger that gripped my entrails once again...

I seemed to be sinking into the shadow and the silence.

Throughout my being, I experienced such agony—compounded out of despair and the exasperated tension of my muscles—that, no longer being in control of myself, I began howling with all my might, stupidly shouting for help, begging some invisible and all-powerful being to come to my aid.

Suddenly, I heard a singular noise, like something sliding along the basalt wall; there was an echo of friction, of a soft murmur. I felt my hair stand up on my head. I had my back to the wall, looking hard with wide-open eyes into that shadow, where I now dreaded to see...what?

This: some sort of enormous reptile, stouter than my own body, whose skin was brightened by a phosphorescence—and which was descending, doubtless suspended by its tail from some crack in the rock.

That semi-luminous thing, which seemed as if it were endowed with some intimate faculty of radiation, was swaying. I could see its head, or what I believed to be its head. It had no eyes, but a mouth like the orifice of a fire-hose, something like the maw of an octopus, which was moving back and forth, as if in search of prey...

Ten times that horrible and fantastic monstrosity passed in front of me, almost over me. I flattened myself against the stone, enraged that it did not open up to allow me passage...and the mouth finally settled upon me.

I had an overwhelming impression of invincible suction and, as if breathed in by the monster, I was lifted into the air.

In that astonishing moment, days and weeks ran by...and in my recovered placidity, in the perfect happiness that I now enjoy, I can no longer evoke the memory of that ascension without experiencing a sharp, general ill-feeling similar to that which accompanies nightmare episodes.

The mighty serpent—for how can I give any other name to that long rounded body?—hoisted me steadily upwards along the wall, which my limbs scarcely brushed.

I did not experience any pain, but my anguish was atrocious.

The beast had seized me by the shoulders, at the base of the neck, and I went up in a vertical stance, rather like a cat whose neck has been gripped by a strong hand—but I neither resisted nor thought of struggling; like an animal loaded on to a ship with the aid of straps passed under its belly, I let myself hang limply, arms and legs inert.

Suddenly there was something like a swirling wind around me, and it was horrible painful. From the still atmosphere in which I had remained for so long at the bottom of the crevasse I felt myself transported into an active environment, a moving atmosphere. It seemed to me that I had been turned around, since I had begun to descend again. I was not falling; I was still firmly held by the round mouth what was hermetically fixed to my flesh. I was at the end of my tether, though; my intellect could no longer hold out....

The last impression that I had was this: having touched the ground, or believing that I had, I saw in front of me, beneath a bizarre light whose nature was incomprehensible to me, a house, with a sign on which I read the words: *Hôpital Saint-Martin*.¹

Evidently, I had gone mad. I fainted.

¹ The Hôpital Saint-Martin is a military hospital in Paris, situated just across the road from the Gare de l'Est.