

Smarra
or the Demons of the Night

Preface of the First Edition (1821)

The singular work which I offer to the public in translation is modern, and even recent. In Illyria it is generally attributed to a noble from Ragusa who hid his name under that of Count Maxime Odin, at the head of several poems of the same genre. I owe my knowledge of the latter to the friendship of M. Chevalier Fedorovich Albinoni, for they had never been printed up to the time when I stayed in those provinces. They probably have been printed since.

Smarra is the primitive name of the evil spirit which the ancients associated with the gloomy phenomenon of the *nightmare*. The same word expresses the same idea still in most of the Slavic dialects, in the lands of those peoples most subject to this frightful ailment. There are few Morlakian families that don't have a member tormented by it. Thus, Providence has placed at the two ends of the vast chain of the Swiss and Italian Alps the two human infirmities which are most in contrast: In Dalmatia, the deliriums of an exalted imagination which transports the use of the faculties above a purely intellectual order of thinking; in the Savoy and the Valais, the almost total absence of the perceptivity that distinguishes humankind from the brute. These are, on the one side, the frenzies of Ariel, and, on the other, the savage stupor of Caliban.

In order to enter with interest into the secret of the composition of *Smarra*, perhaps you'd need to have experienced the nightmare illusions of which this poetic story is the faithful history—and that would be paying rather too much for the dull pleasure of reading my bad translation. All the same, almost everyone has been pursued in sleep by some distressing dream, or dazzled by the wonders of some spell-binding dream that ended all too soon. So I thought that this work would at least have for most people the merit of recalling familiar sensations which, as the author says, have never yet been experienced in any language and which even the people just waking from them can only rarely describe themselves. The poet's most difficult artistic task is to round off and sustain well enough the narrative of an anecdote when its beginning, crisis, downfall, and outcome are based on a succession of bizarre dreams, where the transitions are often determined by only a single word. Even on this point, though, he only has to fit his teasing whim to nature—which amuses itself by interrupting us in the course of a single dream by episodes having nothing to do with its subject, while putting us through all the stages of a regular, complete, and more or less plausible action.

People who have read Apuleius will easily see that the plot of the first book of that ingenious storyteller's *Golden Ass* has a great deal to do with this one. They resemble each other at bottom almost as much as they differ in form. The author even seems to have wanted to invite this comparison by keeping Lucius for his main character's name. In fact, the philosopher of Madaure and the Dalmatian priest cited by Fortis, in his *Travel in Dalmatia*, volume I, page 65, have a common origin in the traditional songs of a country that Apuleius visited himself, curiously enough—although he disdained to give an account of the locale. That doesn't, however, keep Apuleius from being one of the most romantic writers of ancient times. He flourished in the very period which separated the ages of judgment from the ages of imagination.

I must admit in closing that, if I had realized the difficulties of this translation before undertaking it, I would never have given myself the task. Seduced by the poem's general effect without figuring up the combinations that produced it, I had attributed its merit to the composition. But the composition is really next to nothing. Its weak interest would not hold the attention for long, if the author had not enhanced it by using the wonders of his astonishing imagination, and, especially, of his style, which is incredibly bold, and yet elevated, picturesque, and harmonious throughout. And the style is precisely what I couldn't

reproduce. I couldn't even have tried to put it across in French without ridiculous presumption. I'm sure that the readers who know the original work will see in this weak copy nothing but a futile attempt, but I hoped in my heart that at least they wouldn't consider it the wasted effort of luckless vanity. I have judges in literature so inflexibly strict and friends so devotedly impartial that I am sure in advance that neither group will find this explanation useless.

C.N.

Smarra
or
the Demons of the Night

The Prologue

*Somnia fallaci ludunt temeraria nocte,
Et pavides mentes falso timere jubent.*
[Accidental dreams play in the deceitful night,
And bid shivering, deceived minds to be afraid.]
Catullus

*The isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears, and sometimes voices
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,
The clouds methought would open and show riches
Ready to drop upon me, that, when I waked,
I cried to dream again.*
William Shakespeare - *The Tempest*

Ah! how sweet it is, Lisidis, when the last chime of the bell, dying over the towers of Arona, has just tolled midnight—how sweet it is to come to you to share the bed that's been so lonely for a long time, the bed where I've been dreaming of you for a year!

You are mine, Lisidis, and the evil genies that separate your sweet slumber from Lorenzo's will no longer terrify me with their magics!

It would be right to say, you may be sure, that these nightly terrors which attacked me and rent my soul during the course of the hours intended for repose were only a natural result of my stubborn examination of the marvelous poetry of the ancients, and the impression that some of the fantastic fables of Apuleius left on me—for the first book of Apuleius seizes the imagination with a grip so keen and so painful that even if it cost me my own eyes, I wouldn't want it ever to fall open under yours.

Don't let anyone talk to me any more today about Apuleius and his visions. Don't let anyone talk to me anymore about Latins, or Greeks, or the dazzling whims of their geniuses! Aren't you yourself, Lisidis, a poetry more beautiful for me than poetry, richer in divine enchantments than all of nature together?

But you're asleep, my child, and you don't hear me anymore! You danced too late this evening at the ball at Belle Island!—You danced too much, especially when you didn't dance with me. And here you

are, tired as a rose that swung in the breezes all the day and waits, half drooping on its stem, for the first sight of day, to rise up redder than before!

Well, then, sleep beside me, your face leaning on my shoulder, warming my heart with the scented warmth of your breath. Sleep is overtaking me, too, but this time it descends on my eyelids almost as graciously as one of your kisses. Sleep, Lisidis, sleep...

There was a moment when the spirit, suspended in the wave of its thoughts...

Peace!—night has completely fallen over the earth. You no longer hear the steps of townsfolk as they return home ringing on the echoing pavement, or the shoes on the mules' hooves as they return to their stable for the night. The noise of the wind crying and whistling between the gaping joints of the wood planks of the casement—that's all that's left to you of the ordinary impressions of your senses. And within a few seconds more, you imagine that this murmur itself comes from inside you. It becomes the voice of your soul, the echo of an idea, indefinable, yet distinct, blending itself with the first perceptions of sleep. You begin this nocturnal life which passes (what a wonder!) into worlds entirely new, among innumerable creatures whose forms were conceived by the great Spirit, but without bothering itself to bring them into existence. It was satisfied with scattering these flighty and mysterious phantoms through the unbounded universe of dreams. The sylphs, in the confusion of the night-sounds, descend around you, humming. They tap your heavy eyelids with the monotonous beating of their moth wings. You can see the transparent and multi-colored dust that rises from them floating for a long time in the profound darkness, like a little cloud shining in the middle of the dark sky. They press against one another, they embrace, they merge in one another, impatient to renew the magic conversation of the preceding nights, and to tell each other of unheard-of events. These wonders take shape in your mind as if they came from memory. Gradually their voice weakens, or, rather, it reaches you only through an unknown organ, transforming their stories into living scenes and making you an involuntary actor on the stage they have prepared. A sleeping man's imagination, in the power of his independent and solitary soul, shares to some extent in the perfection of the spirits' powers of vision. The soul keeps up with them, and, transported miraculously into the aerial dream-choir, it flies from surprise to surprise until the instant when the bird of morning's song warns its adventurous escort of the returning light. Frightened by the omen of its call, they gather together like a swarm of bees at the first growl of thunder, when large drops of rain bend down the tops of the flowers which the swallow would have caressed without touching. They fall, spring back, and mount up, crossing each other's paths like atoms attracted by opposing forces, until they disappear in chaos in a sunbeam.

The Story

*O rebus meis
Non infideles arbitrae,
Nox, et Diana, quae silentium regis,
Arcana cum fiunt sacra;
Nunc, nunc adeste...*

[O witnesses, not unfaithful, to my affairs, Night and Diana, you who rule over silence, when they perform the sacred mysteries; now, now, be here.]

Horace - *Epodes V.*

By whose order do these angry spirits come to fright me with their clamors and their goblin-shows? Who casts these lines of fire in front of me? Who makes me lose my way in the forest? Hideous apes whose teeth gnash and bite, or rather hedgehogs crossing the paths to be found beneath my feet and wound me with their prickles.

[...His spirits hear me
And yet I needs must curse. But they'll nor pinch,
Fright me with urchin-shows, pitch me in the mire,
Nor lead me, like a firebrand, in the dark
Out of my way, unless he bid 'em; but
For every trifle are they set upon me;
Sometimes like apes that mow and chatter at me
And after bite me, then like hedgehogs which
Lie tumbling in my barefoot way and mount
Their pricks at my footfall.]
William Shakespeare - *The Tempest*.

I had just completed my studies at the Athenian school of philosophers, and, as I was curious about the beauties of Greece, I was visiting for the first time poetic Thessaly. My slaves were waiting for me at Larissa in a palace ready to receive me. I had wanted to travel alone, and in the imposing hours of the night, through that forest, famous for the spells of magicians, which extends its long curtain of green trees on the banks of the Peneus. The thick shadows gathered under the immense canopy of the woods hardly allowed the trembling ray of a pale star circled by mists to shine through some of the thinner branches into a clearing—opened, no doubt, by a woodcutter's axe. My heavy eyelids closed in spite of myself over my eyes, tired with looking for the white line of the path, now lost in the brush. I couldn't keep from falling asleep except by following with painful attention the noise of my horse's hoofs, sometimes making the sand crunch, and sometimes making the dry grass rustle under the regular beat of his tread. If the horse stopped at times, the silence wakened me, and I shouted at him, for I was tired and impatient, urging him to speed up his pace, if it had become too slow. Frightened by I don't know what unknown obstacle, he jumped and bounded, snorted fiery whinnies from his nostrils, reared up in terror, and drew back again, even more terrified by the showers of sparks that the bits of stones struck up beneath my feet.

"Phlegon! Phlegon!" I told him, when my over-tired head hit his neck, as he reared up in fright, "O my dear Phlegon! Isn't it time we got to Larissa? There are pleasures waiting for us there, and especially the sleep that is so sweet. A moment's courage more, and you will sleep on a litter of special flowers—for even the gilded bedding that people gather for the oxen of Ceres won't be too fresh for you!"

"You don't see, you don't see!" he said, shuddering. "The torches those women are shaking in front of us kill the heather and mix deadly vapors in the air I breathe.—How can you ask me to cross these magic circles, and their threatening dances?—they'd make anyone pull back, even the horses of the sun!"

And yet the rhythmic steps of my horse still went on ringing in my ears, and a deep sleep suspended my worries for the longest time! Only, every few moments it happened that a shining group of peculiar flames went by, laughing over my head—and a deformed spirit, in the shape of a beggar or a wounded man caught hold of my foot and let himself be dragged after me with horrible glee. Or, rather, a hideous old man, who added the shameful ugliness of crime to the ugliness of decay, would leap on to the croup behind me and bind me with his arms, as bony as a dead man's.

"Let's go, Phlegon!" I cried, "let's go, you most beautiful of the coursers fed on Mount Ida—come, brave the fearsome terrors strangling your courage! These demons are nothing but vain appearances. My sword, whirled in a circle around my head, splits their lying forms, and they dissolve away like a cloud. When the morning hazes float below our mountain-tops, and the rising sun strikes the fogs, they're outlined by a half-transparent halo, and the summit, cut off from the base, seems to hang from an invisible hand in the skies. It's like that, Phlegon, when the witches of Thessaly split up under my swordstroke. Don't you hear the far-off cries of pleasure rising from the walls of Larissa?—Look, look, there are the proud towers of that Thessalian city, so loved for sensual delight. And that music flying in the air is the song of the maidens."

Who among you, you seductive dreams that lull the soul, drunk with the inexpressible memories of pleasure, will bring that sound back to me, who will bring back to me the song of the maidens of Thessaly

and the voluptuous nights of Larissa? Among columns of half-transparent marble, under twelve bright domes, reflecting in gold and crystal the flames of a hundred thousand torches, maidens, wrapped in the colored clouds given off by all the perfumes, appear to the eye as just one blurred and charming form that looks as if it's ready to vanish away. The wonderful mist swirls around them or makes all the inconstant tricks of the light play over their enchanting groups, in the fresh colors of the rose, the changing hues of the dawn, the dazzling confusion of the capricious opal's rays. Sometimes there are showers of pearls rolling over their light tunics, sometimes plumes of fire springing from every knot in the bands of gold around their hair. Don't be afraid if you see that they're paler than other Greek girls. They hardly belong to the earth, and seem to have waked up from a past life. They are sad, too, whether because they come from a world where they've left behind the love of a Spirit or a God, or because a woman falling in to love has in her heart an immense need for melancholy.

Listen, now. There are the songs of the maidens of Thessaly, the music rising up, rising into the air, and as it passes like a luminous cloud, touching the lonely windows of leaded glass in the ruins dear to poets. Listen! They hug their ivory lyres, questioning the sonorous strings which answer once, vibrate a moment, stop, and, motionless again, still prolong a kind of harmony, unending, that the soul hears through all its senses, a melody pure as the sweetest thought of a happy soul, or love's first kiss before love can even understand itself; or a mother's gaze caressing her baby's cradle when she had dreamed the child was dead, but now sees he is there asleep, beautiful and peaceful. That's how it is when the last sigh of the sistrum fades away, abandoned to the breezes, lost among the echoes, hanging in the middle of the silence of the lake, or dying with the waves at the foot of the insensate rocks, played by a young woman weeping for her lover, who has not come to her. The maidens look at one another, lean consolingly towards one another, fold their elegant arms, while floating locks are tangled together. They dance to make the nymphs jealous, as their steps stir the dust that springs up, flies away, turns white, dies, and falls again in silver ashes beneath their feet. And the harmony of their songs runs on forever like a river of honey, or a graceful stream, all the lovelier because it murmurs so sweetly of banks kissed by the sun and rich with hidden turnings, of cool and shady bays, of butterflies and flowers. They sing . . .

One all alone, perhaps . . . tall, motionless, upright, pensive . . . Gods! how solemn and troubled she looks behind her companions, and what does she want of me? Ah! don't haunt my thoughts, you faded apparition of my beloved who is no more! Don't disturb the sweet charm of my nightly vigils with the vision's terrifying reproach! Let me forget, for I've wept for you for seven years. Let me forget the tears still burning my cheeks by thinking of the innocent delights of the sylphides' dance and the fairies' music. You can see them coming, you can see their groups mingling, twining together in wreathes that keep changing and shifting, now clashing, now racing, drawing near, flying away, rising like a wave in its cycle and falling again like the wave, as it rolls across its fleeting billows all the colors of the rainbow that embraces sky and sea at the end of the storm, when just as it dies away at the last point of its immense round, it breaks against the ship's prow.

But what do the fortunes of the sea, or the voyager's curious anxieties matter to me? For after all, a divine favor has been given to me, perhaps a favor granted to humanity in a bygone age, freeing me whenever I want it—the delightful gift of slumber—from all the perils that threaten you! My eyes have scarcely closed, the melody that ravishes my soul has scarcely ended, when the creator of night's enchantments opens before me a deep chasm, an unknown abyss where all the shapes of earth, all its sounds and lights, die away. He throws a narrow, slippery bridge with no promise of reaching the other side out over a boiling torrent, greedy for death. He pitches me onto the end of a springy, shaking plank, high above cliffs that are terrifying even to look at . . . Calmly, I stamp on the obedient earth with a foot accustomed to command over it. It sinks, it rebounds, and, well pleased to leave humanity, I soar. I can see the blue rivers on the land-masses falling away beneath my easy flight, and the somber wastes of the sea, the many-colored treetops, dappled with the new green of the spring, or the purple and gold of autumn, or the dull bronze and drab violet of the leaves shriveled by winter. If some astonished bird flaps his laboring wings by my ear, I shoot up, I rise higher still, longing for new worlds. The river is nothing more than a thread hidden in a somber green, the mountains nothing more than a blurred point, the summit lost against the base, the Ocean only a dark blotch on some kind of shape, astray in the middle of

the air, where it twirls faster than the six-sided knucklebone that little children in Athens spin on the point of its axis down the arcades paved with stones that surround the Ceramic quarter.

Haven't you ever seen along the walls of the Ceramic quarter, during the first days of the year, when they're struck by the rays of the sun that renews the world, a motionless train of haggard men, their cheeks hollowed by want, their eyes dull and stupid, some squatting like beasts, and others standing up, but leaning against the columns and bent double under the weight of their starved bodies? Have you seen them, their mouths half open to breathe in once more the first influences of the life-giving air, to gather with mournful consciousness the sweet impressions of the mild heat of the springtime? The same sight would have struck you at the walls of Larissa, for there is misfortune everywhere: but misfortune there bears the imprint of a special fatality which is more degrading than misery, sharper than hunger, heavier than despair. These unfortunates slowly advance in the line, one after the other, and mark each step with a long pause, like the fantastic figures a clever mechanic sets up in a circle to mark the divisions of time. Twelve hours run by while the silent procession goes around in its circle, even though its length is so short that a lover who counted the hours on the tips of his mistress's fingers, more or less spread out, could read the time left to him till the longed-for hour of the night for his rendezvous. These living ghosts have kept almost nothing of the human. Their skin is like white parchment stretched on their bones. The orbits of their eyes are not animated by a single spark from the soul. Their pale lips quiver with anxiety and terror, or, more hideous still, they curve in a disdainful, savage smile, like the last thought of a bold man condemned to die as he faces his punishment. Most are shaken by convulsions, weak, but continual, and they tremble like the iron stem of the jaw's-harp, that ringing instrument that children play by setting it between their teeth. The saddest of them all, struck down by the destiny that pursues them, are those condemned to frighten the passersby forever with the repulsive deformity of their knotted limbs and their rigid stance. Nevertheless, those recurring periods in their lives between one sleep and another are for them a time when they are free from woes that they find yet more fearful. Victims of the vengeance of the Thessalian witches, they fall prey to torments that no other tongue can express, as soon as the sun, fallen beneath the western horizon, has stopped protecting them from the fearsome queens of the shadows. That's why they observe its course, all too swift, with their eyes always watching how far it has gone, in the hope—always deceived—that it may forget its bed of azure for once, and rest suspended between the golden clouds of sunset. Night has hardly come to undeceive them, spreading out its wings of black crepe, leaving behind not even one of the divine gleams which died out all at once on the tops of the trees; the last reflection, sparkling yet on the polished metal on the ridge of a high building, has hardly finished disappearing, like a coal still burning in the blaze that's been put out, as it turns white, little by little, under the ashes, and soon becomes indistinguishable in the bottom of the abandoned hearth, when a fearsome murmur arises among them, their teeth chatter with despair and rage, they draw together and then apart in the fear of finding witches and phantoms everywhere. It's night! . . . and hell is going to open again!

There was one, among the rest, with all his joints creaking like worn-out springs, and his chest heaving with a sound harsher and heavier than a rusty screw as it turns with difficulty in its nut. But some shreds of rich embroidery still hanging from his cloak, a look full of sadness and grace that now and then gleamed through the listlessness of his own features, a sort of mixture of inconceivable degradation and pride—like the despair of a panther in agony caught and muzzled by the hunter—made me notice him in the crowd of his miserable companions. When he passed by some women, a sigh was all that could be heard. His yellow hair fell in neglected curls on his shoulders. They could be seen—white and pure as a fabric of lilies—over his purple tunic. Yet his neck bore the mark of bloodshed, a triangular scar from a spear-head, the mark of the wound that stole Polémon from me in the siege of Corinth, when my faithful friend flung himself over me in front of the frenzied rage of a soldier already victorious but still eager to give one more corpse to the battlefield. It was Polémon himself, whose loss I'd wept over so long, and who kept coming into my sleep to remind me with a cold kiss that we must meet again in the immortal life of death. It was Polémon, still alive, but preserved in an existence so horrible that the ghosts of criminals and the specters in hell consoled each other by describing his misery, for Polémon had fallen under the rule of the witches of Thessaly and the demons who follow them in their rites, the inexplicable

rites of their nightly revels. He stopped short, studied me for a long time, looking astonished at seeing a face he could remember, and came towards me with a steady, yet troubled pace. He touched my hands with a hand that shook and trembled in grasping mine. Suddenly he threw his arms around me and gazed into my eyes, his veiled eyes shedding a pale ray of light into mine, like the last gleam of a torch going away from the dungeon door:

“Lucius! Lucius!” he cried then, with a fearful laugh.

“Polémon, dear Polémon, my friend and savior!”

“In another world,” he said, lowering his voice. “I remember that—it was in another world, in a life that doesn’t belong to sleep and its phantoms.”

“Phantoms?—what are you saying!”

“Look!” he replied, stretching out a finger into the twilight, “there they are, they’re coming.”

“Oh, my young and unlucky friend—don’t give way to the fears of the shadows! When the shades of the mountains fall and grow large, bringing together from all round the points and lines cast by their gigantic pyramids, and embracing each other at last in silence on the darkened earth; when the fantastic images of the clouds grow long, mingling and fleeing together under the shelter of the night, like lovers, secretly married; when the birds in the woods clamor at funerals, and the frogs at the edge of the swamps sing their monotonous songs in their croaking voices—don’t abandon your tormented imagination to the illusions of the shadow and the solitude then, Polémon! Fly from the hidden paths where the ghosts meet to cast black spells against the sleep of men. Fly from the cemetery grounds where the mysterious council of the dead meets, all of them wrapped in their shrouds to appear before their Areopagus, holding court in their coffins. Fly from the open fields where the grass is trampled down in a blackened circle, sterile and withered, under the witches’ dancing steps. Won’t you believe me, Polémon?”

“When the light grows pale and retreats, dazed by the approach of the evil spirits, come with me and revive its wonders in splendid feasts and wild orgies. Don’t I always have enough gold for my wishes? The richest mines open the treasures of their hidden veins to me! Even the sand in the streams transforms itself under my hand into exquisite gems, fit for a king’s crown. Won’t you believe me, Polémon?”

“It doesn’t matter if the day dies, so long as the fire that it lit for us still sparkles in the lights at the feast—or in the more cautious gleams that adorn the sweet vigils of love. Demons, you know, fear the scent of burning wax or perfumed oil shining gently through alabaster or spilling rosy shadows over the double silks of our rich tapestries. They shudder at the sight of the polished marble lit by chandeliers with crystal pendants that shed long rays of diamond around them, like a waterfall struck by the last parting gaze of the setting sun. Never a gloomy lamia, never a fleshless mantis dares to show its hideous ugliness at Thessalian banquets. Even the moon, though they invoke her, frightens them when she shines among them with those fleeting rays that give whatever they touch the dull whiteness of tin. Then run away, then, faster than a grass-snake alerted by the noise of a grain of sand rolling under a traveler’s foot. Don’t worry, they can’t catch you in the middle of the fires that sparkle in my palace and shine into all corners, reflected by my dazzling steel mirrors. Watch how fast they run away from us, Polémon, when we go for a walk, lit by my servants’ torches, through galleries decorated with statues, inimitable master-pieces of Greek genius! None of these images could make a threatening move to reveal to you the presence of those fantastic spirits that sometimes make them come alive when the last gleam shines from the last lamp, rises up, and dies away in the air! The stillness of their forms, the purity of their features, and the never-changing calm of their stance should reassure fear itself.

“If some strange noise struck your ear, my heart’s dear brother, it’s only an attentive nymph, as she pours over your tired, heavy limbs, the treasures of her crystal urn, where she’s mixed perfumes never before known in Larissa. They’re mixed with an amber liquid that I gathered on the shore of the seas that wash the cradle of the sun; with the honey of a flower a thousand times sweeter than the rose, which grows only in the deep shade of brown Corcyra;¹ with teardrops from a bush sacred to Apollo and his son,

¹ *Translator’s Note* [i.e., Nodier’s note]: I believe that is not a question here of the ancient Corcyra, but of the island of *Curzola*, which the Greeks called *Corcyra the Brown* because of the appearance given to it from a distance by the vast forests that covered it.

which spreads over the rocks of Epidaurus its bouquets of purple clusters still trembling under the weight of the dew. So how can the charms of these magicians trouble the purity of the waters that rock their silver waves about you?

“Myrthé—pretty Myrthé with the black hair, the youngest and dearest of my slaves—you’ve seen her bending down as you pass, for she loves all that I love—She has some enchantments known only to herself and a spirit that confides them to her in the mysteries of sleep. She’s wandering like a shadow now around the bath-house, where the healing wave ripples the surface; she’s running, singing the tunes that chase away the demons, and sometimes she touches the chords of a wandering harp, and the spirits give way to it obediently, even before her wishes have had time to make themselves known as they pass from her soul to the expression in her eyes. She’s walking; she’s running; the harp matches her pace and sings beneath her hand. Listen to the ringing sound of the harp, the voice of Myrthé’s harp: it’s a rich, full, solemn sound that makes ideas of earth be forgotten, prolonging and sustaining

itself, occupying the soul like a serious thought; and then it flies, it flees, it dies away, it comes again; and the tunes of Myrthé’s harp—a ravishing enchantment in the nights—the tunes of Myrthé’s harp, flying, fleeing, dying away, and still coming again—while she sings, while her tunes fly, the tunes of Myrthé’s harp, the tunes that chase away the demon!—Listen, Polémon, do you hear them?

“In truth, I’ve undergone all the illusions of dreams myself, and what would have become of me then without Myrthé’s harp to rescue me, or without her voice, so quick to disturb the grievous and shuddering repose of my nights? . . . How many times in my sleep I’ve leaned over a clear, still pool, a pool only too faithful in mirroring my altered features—my hair bristling with fear, my eyes as fixed and gloomy as the eyes of a man in despair, not even weeping anymore! . . . How many times I’ve trembled to see the traces of the pale blood running through my pale lips; to feel my chattering teeth loose in their sockets, my nails coming loose at their roots, ready to shake and fall away! How many times, frightened at finding myself naked, shamefully naked, I’ve been given up to the laughter of the crowd, dressed in a tunic shorter, lighter, more transparent than the one that wraps a courtesan as she sits on the edge of the shameless bed of debauchery! Oh! how many times, in dreams still more hideous, dreams that even Polémon doesn’t know anything about . . . And what would have become of me then, what would have become of me without Myrthé’s harp to rescue me, and her voice, and the harmony she’s taught her sisters, gathering obediently around her, to charm away the terrors of the woeful sleeper, to make songs brought from far away ring in his ears, like the breeze blowing between a couple of sails—songs that join together, blending into one another, dulling the heart’s stormy dreams and enchanting them into silence with a long melody.

“And now, here are Myrthé’s sisters, who’ve prepared the banquet. There’s Thais, recognizable among all the girls of Thessaly, even though most of them may have black hair falling on shoulders whiter than alabaster—but there isn’t another with hair curling in such supple, voluptuous waves as the black hair of Thais. That’s her, leaning over the fiery cup where the wine is turning white, boiling in a jar of rare clay, while she lets fall into it, drop by drop of topaz liquid, the most exquisite honey ever gathered from the young elms of Sicily. The bee, deprived of her treasure, flies restlessly among the flowers; she hangs on the solitary branches of the abandoned tree, asking the breezes for her honey. She drones her grief, because her little ones will no longer have this shelter in any of the thousand five-walled palaces she built for them out of light, transparent wax, and they won’t get the honey she’s gathered for them from the fragrant bushes of Mount Hybla. It’s Thais who stirs in the boiling wine the honey stolen from the bees of Sicily. And as for Thais’ other sisters, black-haired like her—for Myrthé is the only blonde—they hurry in, submissive, eager, and caressing, and smile obediently as they run to prepare the banquet. They mix pomegranate flowers or rose leaves in foamy milk; or instead they stoke the oven with amber and incense that burns under the fiery cup where the boiling wine is turning white, and the flames lean far in, all around the circular rim, they bow to it, bend to it, draw near to it, graze it, kiss it with lips of gold, and end by mingling themselves with the white- and blue-tongued flames that float above the wine. The flames rise, fall, and wander like that fantastic demon of the wilderness who likes to admire himself in the springs. Who can say how many times the cup has gone round the banquet-table, and how many times, empty, it’s been filled brimful again with fresh nectar? Girls, don’t hold back on the wine, or

the hydromel, either. The sun never stops ripening more grapes, and shining his rays of immortal splendor on the sparkling clusters that hang in rich festoons on our vines, among the dark leaves on the round branches that run in garlands along the walls of Tempe. Another libation to chase away the demons of the night! As for me, I don't see anything here now but the joyous spirits of intoxication fizzing up from the trembling foam, chasing each other in the air like butterflies of fire, or dazzling my heated lids with their radiant wings—like those nimble insects decked by nature with innocent fires, the ones you can often see, in the cool silence of a brief summer's night, shooting up in swarms from the middle of a clump of greenery like a shower of sparks under the blacksmith's redoubled blows. They float, carried by a little breeze passing by, or called by some sweet scent they feed on in the heart of the roses. The luminous cloud goes on, or changes its mind and lulls itself, resting, or turns in a moment and falls, all of them together, on the top of a young pine, lighting it up like a pyramid used for public celebrations, or on the lower branch of a great oak, giving it the look of a chandelier ready for the forest's vigils. Look how they play around you, how they tremble like the flowers, how they shimmer in the firelight reflected from the polished vases: surely they aren't enemy demons. They dance, they rejoice, as abandoned and as riotous as the spirit of folly. If they take the trouble sometimes to trouble people's rest, they only do it like a thoughtless child to satisfy their pleasant whims. They roll themselves up mischievously in the linen wound in a clump around an old shepherdess' spindle, they make the straying threads cross and tangle, and multiply the contrary knots in spite of the efforts of her useless skill. When a traveler has lost his way and searches with an eager eye across the whole horizon in the darkness for some point of light promising him a refuge, they make him stray from path to path for hours, by the gleam of treacherous marsh fire and the sound of a lying voice, or like the far-off barking of a watchdog that prowls like a sentinel around a solitary farm. That's how they abuse the poor traveler's hopes until at last, touched with pity by his weariness, they bring him all of a sudden to an unexpected place to sleep, that no one had ever spotted before in that wasteland. Sometimes, even, he is astonished to find at his arrival a bright fireplace that's cheerful just to look at, with rare and delicate things to eat, brought by chance from a fisherman's cottage or a poacher's, and a girl, fair as the Graces, who serves him, afraid to raise her eyes: for it seems to her that this stranger is dangerous to look at. The next day, surprised that so short a rest should have given him back all his strength, he rises happily at the song of the lark as it greets a clear sky: he finds out that his lucky mistake has shortened his road by twenty stadia and a half, and his horse, whinnying impatiently, with clean nose, glossy hide, sleek and shining mane, strikes the ground before him with a triple signal to depart. The goblin jumps from the croup of the traveler's horse to the head, he runs his clever fingers through the spreading mane, rolling it and crimping it in elf-locks; he takes a look, applauds himself for what he's done, and he leaves, glad to go amuse himself with teasing a sleeping man burning with thirst who sees a refreshing drink that flees, shrinks, and dries up in front of his lips, just when he's ready to suck it; who judges the cup by sight in vain; who longs in vain for the absent liquor; then wakes, and finds the urn full of a Syracusan wine he's never tasted before, which the tricky spirit had pressed from the choicest grapes, at the same time that he was amusing himself by disturbing the traveler's sleep. You can drink, talk, or sleep without terror here, for the merry spirits are our friends. Only satisfy the impatient curiosity of Thais and Myrthé first, and the yearning curiosity of Thelaïre, who can't stop looking at you, with her long bright eyelashes and her big black eyes that roll like lucky stars in a sky bathed in the tenderest azure. Tell us, Polémon, the wild griefs that you believe you experienced under the rule of the witches—for the torments with which they pursue our imagination are nothing but the vain illusion of a dream which vanishes at the first light of dawn. Thais, Thelaïre, and Myrthé are waiting . . . They're listening . . . Well, go ahead! . . . tell us your despairs, your fears, and the mad delusions of the night. Thais, pour us some wine. Thelaïre, smile during his story so that his soul may be comforted. And, Myrthé, if you see that he's overcome by the memory of being lost and about to give way to a new illusion, sing, and strike the chords of the magic harp—Call out comforting sounds from it, sounds that banish evil spirits . . . That's how we free the somber hours of night from the tyranny of dreams, and escape through one pleasure after another from the sinister enchantments that fill the earth during the absence of the sun.”