

V. The Violet Daylight

Death is merely the most unintelligible of enigmas and what terrifies us most of all therein is the unknown. It seems that the fear of death and the horror of not knowing, of not understanding, are two closely kindred sentiments, and that it is correct to label the anguish that grips us in the face of an unknowable fact “the shudder of the little death.” I do not think I have ever experienced that sentiment more acutely than in the first minutes that followed the appearance of the light. So it was that, having ardently wished for prodiges. I trembled at their approach.

Hands clenched upon the balustrade of the walkway, I felt beads of sweat on my temples despite the frightful biting cold against which, in my emotion and my haste, I had taken scant care to protect myself. Meanwhile, as we advanced towards it, the light gradually extended itself across the horizon. As time went by, we were able to take account of what there was about it that was strange—or, to put it better, “never seen before.” To human eyes, the fire of the Sun appears as a calm and serene radiation of uniform brightness. By contrast, this light was not motionless; one might have taken it for the reflection in the sky of an immense invisible torch, which vacillated from moment to moment. At other times, large undulations ran across it from one end to the other, parallel to the ground and it then resembled a vast immaterial and sparkling flag whose fabric as rippling in the wind.

“What is that?” I murmured, eventually, in a very faint voice.

My companion replied with a vague gesture, then said: “Perhaps an aurora borealis—a prodigious aurora borealis...or some other meteorological phenomenon that no one has had the opportunity to observe before...”

He did not appear to find this explanation very satisfactory himself, though; his physiognomy expressed both anxiety and irritation. Doubtless in order to permit his perspicacity to triumph over mine on at least one point, he added: “In any case, my anticipations regarding a more clement temperature were correct. Look at the thermometer...”

That did not interest me, however. I felt as if I were on the edge of a precipice, tottering in the grip of vertigo. In order to prevent me from fainting, I needed Ceintras to furnish me—by way of a branch to which I might cling—with a rational explanation of the strange phenomenon. I interrupted him, and in the pleading tone of a man condemned to death, whose appeal has already been rejected and who no longer has the shadow of a hope, I said: “But that light—that light?”

“Wait a while,” he replied, with some impatience. “We’re getting there; we’ll be able to see...”

Without noticing it, we had achieved a rather elevated altitude, the relative warmth of the atmosphere that surrounded us having been caused by a progressive expansion of the hydrogen. We could see that the white and grey snow about 500 meters in front of us then acquired a violet tint; the line of demarcation between the pale polar light through which we were still moving and the zone of surprising luminosity seemed very neat, like that which separates the part of a street directly illuminated by oblique sunlight from the part on which the shadow of the houses falls.

A minute later, we were on the very threshold of the mystery.

How can I describe the first impression I received of that landscape? Have you ever placed a piece of stained glass before your eyes? Even when the Sun is shining with all its brilliance, one would think that the horizon has diminished, that the sky has become heavier and drawn closer to the Earth; the illuminated parts take on a livid aspect and the smallest shadowed corner becomes the repair of fear. When I was very young, playing in the vestibule of the château, I sometimes amused myself by looking at the garden through a door in which panes of variously-colored glass were framed and imagining that I was entering another world, or that the sky had taken on that tint permanently. When I succeeded in persuading myself of that, there was a horrible sensation of oppression and sadness. The atmosphere suddenly seemed to become unbreathable; I dared not move, for it seemed to me that the air, in becoming less clear, had also become less fluid, and that the slightest movement would be as painful as carrying a heavy burden. For as long and as well as I could, I consolidated the illusion in order to increase my anguish, until the moment when, with my nerves taut and my throat constricted, ready to burst into tears, I suddenly opened the door. Then I recklessly filled my eyes again with the limpid and familiar azure; I ran out; I took a deep breath; it was the end of the nightmare, a marvelous liberation...

Now, I found myself in almost the same state of mind as when, in the days of my childhood, I had looked at the grounds for a long time through the violet pane—but this time, it was impossible for me to open the door.

Because we still had snow beneath us, its reflected light on our faces and the surrounding objects slightly attenuated the fantastic character given to them by that light, which was dazzling and somber at the same time. But the temperature continued to rise and glimpses of the ground showed through here and there. A few more minutes went by, and the last vestiges of snow soon vanished completely before our eyes. The thermometer measured six degrees Centigrade; surprised by this abrupt warmth, we were streaming with sweat. We were also overwhelmed by fatigue and emotion, anxiously waiting to see what would happen next.

Vegetation soon became vaguely manifest. So far as we could judge at first—for our eyes had difficulty doing their work in that unaccustomed light—the plants must have belonged to different species of tree-ferns and cacti, and did not grow to more than a meter high. The ground was covered with short dense grass, which extended without interruption as far as the eye could see. The landscape no longer had anything authentically terrestrial about it. That became more obvious when the mantle of fog that covered the horizon suddenly lifted and the polar Sun appeared on the far side of the plain, like an immense shield of polished metal. The power of the master of the world seemed to be annihilated here by a singular luminous force that had invaded the sky; no radiation emanated from it, and in that violet light it was like a glow-worm within the glare of an arc-lamp.

Then, for the first time, we heard close by the sound of the air whipped by invisible wings. A little shadow passed very close to us with a strident screech and collided with the roof of the cabin. Our eyes tried to follow it, but, within a second, the thing had already disappeared.

“It’s terrible!” sobbed Ceintras.

He turned towards me. Tears were beginning to flow from beneath his swollen eyelids, gleaming blue and yellow like drops of decay. The Polar light confused the features of his terror-ravaged face, exaggerating the wrinkles and tumefying the lips. He gave the frightening impression of a walking and talking cadaver—but I was near to tears too, and my appearance could not have been much different from his.

“My God,” the poor chap murmured, drawing back as far as the walkway. “We look like dead men!”

Our hostility had taken many forms, from the basest to the most noble, since furious hatred had caused our fists to clench and made us resemble beasts—to the point of an emulation that sometimes led us to strike heroic attitudes. Seeing Ceintras so depressed and miserable, my courage was suddenly reborn.

“After all,” I said, “if you were in control of your nerves at this moment, you would appreciate that nothing is threatening us. We merely have to advance prudently into this unknown world. If need be, a turn of the rudder will quickly get us out of trouble.”

“Certainly, certainly,” he stammered—and he was shaken from top to toe by a sudden frisson. Again, the screech resounded in our ears, immediately followed by others. This time we had time to see one of the creatures silhouetted in black against the violet background of the sky. It seemed to be a sort of bat, flying vertically, and furnished with a kind of beak, very long and very thick.

“Well, Ceintras, were my presentiments mistaken? Are we not confronted by a new flora and fauna? Come on, don’t be so downcast! It’s better for you that things have turned out this way—it can only add to your glory! Our story will interest the public much more than if we had found nothing unexpected at the end of our journey. Think of the swarms of journalists that will be hammering on your door when we return—but don’t let that stop you attending to your controls.”

My words reassured him somewhat. He came back into the warming room and, as we were nearing the ground, manifested the intention of opening the hot air tap. I stopped him.

“We have to land here,” I said to him.

“You’re mad! Don’t even think about it!” he exclaimed, looking at me with eyes dilated by fear.

“It seems to me to be indispensable, though,” I insisted, “to collect a few specimens of minerals, plants, and even—if possible—animals. Let me pass; I want to load my rifle.”

He did not want to listen. He said that he would rather blow up the balloon than yield to my crazy desire. Then he calmed down, suggesting to me that had plenty of time, and that it would be better to put off the excursion until later. As that seemed fair enough, all things considered, I gave in, and we continued on our way at an altitude of about 400 feet.

The terrain had not changed, except that the elements of the vegetation now appeared larger and taller. What struck me about their appearance was that, unlike the majority of terrestrial plants, they increased

more in breadth than height. One might have thought that some invisible obstacle was preventing them from growing above a certain limit, or that the ground attracted their branches more than the sky. Shortly afterwards, an accumulation of white vapor signaled the presence of water to us. A few minutes later, we glimpsed a river beneath these vapors, like a burnished silver blade that some giant had left behind in the middle of the plain.

"Look!" Ceintras suddenly said to me. "The temperature down there must be getting lower again; I can see patches of snow on the ground."

I leaned over the balustrade and fixed my eyes in the direction in which Ceintras was pointing.

"Ceintras!"

"What is it?"

"Come and see—it's as if the snow were moving."

Each snowy white fragment did indeed seem to be moving and varying its contours, as a flock of sheep might have done as some of them drew closer or more distant from others.

"It's frightful," my companion murmured, ready to faint.

"No," I replied, "it's strange, at the most. We're apparently in the presence of an optical phenomenon due to a visual milieu that is new to us...or we're the victims of a hallucination."

"Yes, yes," he repeated, mechanically, "a hallucination. Nevertheless..." He rubbed his eyes and leaned downward desperately. "A hallucination—that's not possible! It's moving. Look, look! And we aren't mad!"

"Then we have to go down and see what it is."

We were at the point at which, whatever might happen, it was better to risk everything than remain any longer in the pangs of indecision; this time, undoubtedly, Ceintras would be easily swayed by my desire. At the same moment, though, the violet light diminished and a sort of twilight soon descended, furrowed with reflections and fluorescences. Gradually, we fell back into the half-light through which we had been traveling since leaving Franz-Josef Land. I realized then that the somber light of the Pole had already become necessary to us, and that, abruptly deprived of it, we were going to lose the use of our eyes for a while.

The atmosphere was crackling around us, electrical sparks appearing periodically, like those that our magneto produced in the engine's cylinders to ignite the gas. The stars beyond seemed motionless and distant. The snow beneath us still seemed to be stirring vaguely. The cries of the large bats were no longer resounding in our ears, and yet the air was not absolutely silent; with a little attention, we could perceive a soft susurru and muted whistling sounds that seemed to be coming all the way from the surface of the ground.

"This is beyond comprehension," said Ceintras, whose excess of fear gave him a semblance of energy for a few minutes. "We have to go. We have to get out of here as quickly as possible!"

In spite of my desire to be, or to appear to be, the stronger of the two of us, I felt incapable of offering him the least resistance just then. In truth, the indescribable horror of the spectacle excused that pusillanimity. While I studied my companion's face and the somber reflection of my own in the cabin's porthole, I had the impression once again that we were dead, that nothing remained of us but two cadavers impelled by an irresistible force, not towards oblivion and rest but towards an inferno populated by ghosts, specters and nameless things that I thought I could already sense swarming beneath us—for, at intervals, slow greenish undulations ran through the last vestiges of the violet light; under that coloration the ground, and the vague white patches moving thereupon, acquired the appearance of an immense charnel-house over which a dubious moonlight spread.

"Let's go, then!" I exclaimed, in an unsteady voice. "We'll figure out later what's the best thing to do."

"Yes, yes! Go...we have to go," said Ceintras, breathlessly. "You can see it—this is the country of madness and death!"

Knocking over everything that got in his way, he raged feverishly against the sky, studded with pale stars.

"Go...we have to go," he repeated.

He accelerated to top speed—and, to get us away from the ground as soon as possible, he opened a canister of hydrogen and the hot air tap at the same time...

A terrifying enigma presented itself then. The motor hummed madly; the little manometer that measured the interior pressure of the enveloped indicated that the pressure could not be further increased without danger—but it was all futile. We were neither advancing nor climbing; one might have thought that invisible hands and impalpable chains were preventing our progress and hauling us gradually towards the ground.

As if to bring all these emotions to a head, the most prodigious thing imaginable in such a place appeared. Mounted on a hillock and silhouetted against the sky, it was a sort of disk of grayish metal, fixed at the summit of an exceedingly long stalk, like one of those that mark the entrance to a racecourse, but much larger. There was no doubt about it: the apparatus was the work of intelligent industry—and that conclusion offered itself immediately to my mind in all its implacable clarity.

It did not have time to sink in, though; an inexplicable drowsiness overcame me, so sudden and violent that I was unable even to try to collect my will-power to oppose it. I heard, as if from a great distance, Ceintras—similarly weighted down by drowsiness—ask me, in a feeble voice: “What’s happening?” I did not have the strength to reply, and we sank into a profound unconsciousness.