

XIII. The Sarvants at Mirastel

Since the resumption of the raids, Maxime had calculated the advantages that a searchlight might offer to the threatened dwelling. An excellent means of defense and observation, nothing was easier to improvise. At the instigation of his son, Monsieur Le Tellier had two remarkable powerful acetylene projectors sent from Paris, which two watchers were to maneuver continually every night.

Received at 1 p.m. on May 20, their installation was undertaken without delay, in the attic of the southwestern tower—the one where Maxime's laboratory was—beneath the low cupola. The modern rectangles of two large dormer windows, diametrically opposed, one looking northwards and the other southwards, punctuated the Louis XIII roof. The pivoting searchlights only had to be set up there to be able to direct their beams in every direction, each of the two illuminable sectors taking up exactly half of the surrounding area.

As they were not expecting the sarvants until the following day, the work of mounting the projectors was executed, as one might imagine, with more care than rapidity. At dinner time, only one of the searchlights was in place. It had, however, been filled with acetylene.

After the meal, Monsieur Le Tellier—still thinking about the next day—gathered the household together and gave the servants a lecture on observation. He recommended calm, self-possession, notes to be taken as soon as possible, written on anything that came to hand—on a wall, if necessary, with a stick of charcoal or a pointed stone...

He intended to repeat it all, and to explain his theory, on the following day.

Night fell. Robert proposed that they finish setting up the second light. The objection was raised that it would be better to do that in daylight, and that they would have 18 hours of sunlight for that purpose.

Then commenced one of those evenings so painful to those with heavy hearts. Everyone tried to kill time. Madame Le Tellier attempted to play patience. Her mother did crochet-work, in which her industry surpassed the skill of the sighted. Not far away, in the billiard-room adjacent to the drawing-room, Monsieur Le Tellier, Maxime and Robert started a game of billiards.

The windows had been left open, for the weather was fine and warm. They overlooked the terrace. The interior light illuminated the chestnut-trees and the lower branches of the ginkgo, as flat and stiff as painted trees. Beyond the parapet, the countryside was confusedly visible, dark and blue. Nothing but the impacts of the billiard balls, the noise of footsteps on the carpet, and the sound of four voices coming from the direction of the servants' quarters disturbed the background silence. At intervals, a train streaked the profound darkness with a trail of sparks, resonated metallically on the Marlieu bridge, and left the scene. They could also hear—but only by pricking up their ears—slight movements of gravel; they were the comings and goings of Floflo, mounting guard like a good little sentry.

Such pleasant evenings should always be holidays...

But what's that?

What's the matter? Why is Madame Arquedouve running into the billiard-room, her hand extended in front of her, her face distraught, stammering with fright?

"What's wrong?" cries Monsieur Le Tellier.

She grabs her son-in-law's arm. "They're here! I can hear them...feel them, rather!"

Robert has already started running, precipitating himself toward the tower in which the searchlight is lodged.

"Close the windows!" moans Madame Le Tellier, who comes in as pale as a corpse.

"No!" retorts Maxime. "We must try to see...to hear...Shh!"

"Shall we go up to the tower?" says Monsieur Le Tellier.

"No...no time... Shhh! Shhh!"

They listen. They're like wax figures in a museum. They can hear Robert going up the stairs to the tower, four at a time; they can hear laughter coming from the kitchen...a train whistle...the lap-dog moving back and forth...

Except for Madame Arquedouve, no one can hear anything apart from these sounds—and yet, they interrogate the darkness with all their might. It is rendered more impenetrable by the contrast with the luminous foliage; they try to listen with their eyes...but the darkness is the same, for their eyes as for their ears.

"Listen!" whispers the blind woman. "They're very close now..."

They hear nothing.

Yes—a bellowing. Yes—a whinnying. The farm has woken up. The ducks set up a frightened quacking in the darkness, as if a fox or a weasel were approaching; and there go the hens, which give voice to a prolonged clucking, as if an eagle were hovering overhead... The sheep intone a chorus of heart-rending lamentations...

Anguish reigns among the animals—and Floflo, who has come to a halt, suddenly starts barking.

Madame Arquedouve lifts up a finger and says: "The animals can hear too. They understand."

There is a momentary silence then...and finally, in the depths of that silence, everyone hears the *hum*.

It is the arrival of a large fly, or a moth. Yes, it is the hum of a moth, hovering above a flower into which it plunges its long proboscis: a murmur that is simultaneously soft and robust, which seems strident even though it is very low; which is, in fact, curiously melancholy, and which shudders in your breast like a steamer's propeller-shaft.

Now the windows are starting to vibrate...

"It's coming from above!" they murmur. "No—it's coming from the marsh. From Artemare! From Culoz!"

"The mountain," says the grandmother, breathlessly.

Madame Le Tellier, with one hand on her quivering throat, whispers: "It's still very distant, mother, believe..." But she does not finish, because a light, inexplicable breeze stirs the foliage; the leaves rustle, and a there is a sudden resonant *snap!*

They start at the abrupt sound that has just resounded somewhere outside, not far away, and seemingly in mid-air.

Floflo is barking furiously.

"Thunder?" asks Madame Arquedouve.

"No, Mother," Monsieur Le Tellier replies. "There was no lightning. We didn't see anything."

"It wasn't a spark either, an artificial discharge..."

"Evidently."

"Maxime, get away from the window," implored Madame Le Tellier.

"Keep listening!" commanded the astronomer.

The dog gives voice and runs to the far end of the garden. It's pursuing the sarvants, for sure; they're moving away. The humming has died away too...but Madame Arquedouve affirms that she can still hear it.

The dog falls silent. They breathe in. The blind woman's features relax...

A sharp cry!

It's nothing—just Madame Le Tellier, frightened by the unexpected sight of a broad beam of light, like a ray of sunlight piercing the night...

One might imagine that this auroral dart were completing the recent snapping sound, that it is a lightning-flash following the thunder, prodigiously...but the brightness persists and endures.

"Don't be afraid, Luce," says Monsieur Le Tellier. "It's only the searchlight."

A minute later, he rejoined his secretary in the little round attic.

Standing on a stool, Robert's upper body was invisible, projecting through one of the skylights, and he was making the dazzling beam—solar in its power, lunar in its whiteness—describe vast arcs, sometimes celestial and sometimes terrestrial. He was darting his shaft of daylight over the whole of the southern landscape that could be embraced from his position. The searchlight illuminated villages, mountains, woods and châteaux by turns; it seemed that their image was being projected on a black screen, in the fashion of a magic lantern—but Robert had to lean over and lift up the projector with its heavy support to extend his field of exploration toward the Colombar; he did not discover anything at all whose presence was not legitimate.

The sarvants were already out of sight.

"Did you see them?" asked Monsieur Le Tellier.

"I lost too much time," he secretary replied. "I had to start the generator, to light up...it took too long. They've gone—but they didn't do anything." War-weary, he abandoned the projector, which swung around, sweeping the expanse, and came to a halt pointed toward the ground, irradiating the terrace.

"Oh!" Robert exclaimed. "Look, Master!"

"What?" said the astronomer, sticking his head out of the window.

"The *ginkgo*. It's been cut!"

Monsieur Le Tellier was, indeed able to see by means of the acetylene light that the *ginkgo biloba* had been decapitated. From his high station, he could see the severed trunk, whose cross-section formed a pale disk.

With a single stroke the sarvant had cut that roundel, as broad as a man's neck and as hard as oak: with a single stroke of a chisel, so skillfully, so rapidly and so accurately applied that the tree had not even trembled; with a single stroke of the chisel whose click that the forester had once heard in the forest—the chisel to which no one had given another thought, but which was pitilessly pruning all the plantations in Bugey!

"They chose well!" remarked Monsieur Le Tellier. "Ah, the scoundrels! The most beautiful tree in the region. The only *ginkgo*! But how did they get away? Madame Arquedouve claims that they came from the mountain; they must have gone back the same way—but that's precisely the sector that you couldn't illuminate! Of course! The dog followed them as far as the end of the garden. Ah, he certainly got their scent. Brave Floflo!"

"Poor Floflo?" said Robert, who seemed extremely anxious.

"Why *poor*? Have they taken him away? Did you see him being carried off?"

"No—but he suddenly stopped yapping."

"Floflo!" called Monsieur Le Tellier. "Floflo!"

No Floflo.

They did not dare go out to search for him in the ominous darkness. The cook called to him all night long through the small panel in a door.

He had been taken.

It was thus that Mirastel was haunted by the sarvants, which were still called “flying men,” *ornianthropes* or *anthropornix*.

The witnesses of the event remained perplexed, however, not only by the promptitude and dexterity of the marauders, but also by the breath of wind that had blown through the foliage. It had blown for scarcely a second, that wind—the time of a wing-beat; as if it really had been a wing that had stirred the leaves—and when they thought about the awakened and alarmed animals, and the hens clucking as if at the approach of a bird of prey, the crazy hypothesis of eagles regained all its force.

Monsieur Le Tellier admonished himself in vain and recalled that the eagle-hunters recruited by his brother-in-law had returned empty-handed. He shivered no less with fabulous terror when he learned, the following evening, of a further strange and breathtaking event.

XIV. The Eagle and the Weathervane

The sarvants were not content with visiting Mirastel. They had also violated the village of Ouche, above the château. Alerted in the morning, Monsieur Le Tellier went there with Maxime and Robert. They were shown two squares of cabbages and one of carrots, completely harvested by the enigmatic prowlers, and the place where, the previous day, an irregularly shaped stone had stood, of which nothing now remained but a hole in the ground.

“Still the same old refrain,” said Maxime. “The gentlemen mimic phantoms. They elect to take rare but useless items for the sake of effect: a kind of menhir; a branch from a *ginkgo*; a pet Pomeranian dog.”

Robert folded his arms. “Do you think,” he said, “that cabbages and carrots are useless rarities? Have you noticed the eagerness with which our enemies have recently been devastating marketable crops? That the individuals who never appropriated two identical objects to begin with are now putting their hands on all sorts of vegetables?”

“Come on! All of that is to annoy the citizens—to make them pay dear for their tranquility!”

“Do you see any trace of tools or footprints?” asked Monsieur Le Tellier. “I don’t.”

“Nothing, as usual,” replied Robert. Then he added: “Think about it, all the same Monsieur Maxime—when it’s a matter of animals and human beings, the sarvants aren’t very particular in relation to the quality. Do you see? They carry off any woman or man, the first cat that comes along, and heaps of worthless rabbits, save for exceptions that seem due to chance. Admit it. Doesn’t it seem that way to you, on reflection? That’s the way it is?”

“Yes, that’s right,” the doubter confessed, after a moment’s thought.

“Well then,” Robert went on, in an almost gleeful tone, “in that case...”

“What are you getting at?”

“You might be making a mistake, that’s all.” And he cut any discussion short by moving away from his companions. He asked Monsieur Le Tellier to excuse him if he were not back in time for dinner, and set off downhill towards Artemare.

The father and son took the pathway back to Mirastel. “As long as he doesn’t do anything reckless,” murmured the astronomer.

“He’s stubborn,” said Maxime. “Impenetrable and stubborn—but brave! It’s not the first time he’s gone off on his own. I know that. He slips away...”

“He’d give his last drop of blood to recover Marie-Thérèse...”

“She’s worth it,” muttered Maxime. “She’s worth the blood of a Duc!”

“All the same,” Monsieur Le Tellier continued, without picking up the thread, “I’ll be glad when he comes back...I want to talk to him about the searchlight.”

“The searchlight? What should we do with it? It’s quite simple—dismount the projector and install it along with the other one at Machuraz. Since the beginning of their campaign, your jokers have never gone back to the same place; they won’t come back to Mirastel, but they haven’t plagued Machuraz yet. We need to ask the owners for permission to set up our lights there. Let’s go right away.”

That was what they did.

The two Le Telliers did not want to entrust the task of dismounting the lamp and packing up the lenses and mirrors to anyone else. They devoted such unaccustomed attention to the handiwork that they decided they ought to finish the job after supper. The previous day’s events had convinced them no longer to put off until tomorrow what could be done today. Consequently, they went back up to the attic of the tower with a lantern and got down to work, mute and preoccupied—for Robert Collin had not returned.

They worked for some time in that fashion, without saying anything, listening for someone climbing the stairway and crying: “Here I am!”—but only the rustle of wrapping-paper filled the twilight, while, overhead, the weathervane grated intermittently.

Finally, someone came up the stairs.

“Here I am!” said Robert.

“We were getting worried about you, my friend!” exclaimed the father.

“Where the Devil have you been?” asked the son.

“To the summit of the Colombier.”

Maxime looked the secretary up and down and quipped: “You’re very neat for a man who’s come back from the mountain. What a careful fellow he is! He’s as spick and span as he was this morning, with his frock-coat brushed and his boots shiny...”

“That was a grave imprudence!” complained Monsieur Le Tellier. “You know how dangerous that place is!”

“I wasn’t afraid,” said Robert, quietly polishing his gold-rimmed spectacles. “I think I’ve found a means of protection against the...sarvants. No, no...don’t ask me anything. To tell you my method would put you on the track of my hypothesis...and I beg you to give me credit. Anyway, I have to tell you about something that I’ve

just witnessed. I'd like your opinion about it. You mustn't be annoyed if I limit myself, at present, to revealing this fact to you, without saying what I think of it myself. Besides, what I think is so vague and so...no one would believe me. They'd confuse my ideas with objections. And at the end of the day, I have a...particular interest...in finding the solution by myself, haven't I? Because of...in the end, it's a matter of recovering Mademoiselle Marie-Thérèse, isn't it?"

"Get on with it!" roared Maxime, impatiently. "What have you seen?"

The little man replaced his spectacles on the bridge of his nose, tugged at his wretched downy beard and said: "I've seen an eagle." He looked each of them in the eye, one after the other.

Monsieur Le Tellier shuddered. "Ah!" he said. "I've thought about that a great deal today. But it's so extraordinary..."

"I've seen an extraordinary eagle," added Robert Collin.

"Extraordinary in what way?" Maxime asked, pressingly. "Enormous?"

"That I don't know. I lacked a point of comparison by which to estimate its size. I had been leaning on the upright of the cross, for about an hour, when I saw it pass by a long way to the east, above the Rhône, at high altitude. It was flying from the south-east to the north-west. I hadn't noticed it before, because there were others around, here and there—but they were normal eagles...as it had been itself, until the moment when..."

"In brief, what I noticed about it was the disordered and very extravagant beating of its wings. I had a pair of binoculars; quickly, I aimed them—and I observed that the raptor was surrendering itself to a sort of mad incantation, while flying at a speed that seemed to me to be average—although there also, the lack of reference-points prevented me from determining the animal's velocity.

"I followed it easily.—but all of a sudden, it disappeared from my instrument's field of view. Then, with the naked eye, I saw it climb rapidly into the sky, at a near-vertical angle and with considerable rapidity...except that it seemed diminished, as if it had become smaller. I was lucky enough to be able to catch up with it with my binoculars, and before it plunged into the clouds, I recognized the cause of that apparent diminution. *It was because the bird had folded its wings.*"

"What?" Maxime protested. "It was climbing *without flying*? Without even soaring?"

"That's odd!" added his father.

"Without flying," Robert confirmed. "Without soaring. With no more movement than a stuffed eagle on a perch!"

"Are you sure of what you saw?"

"Yes, Monsieur Maxime, I'll answer for myself. Now, what do you think of the phenomenon?"

"Let's see," said the astronomer. "Of what nature were the movements that preceded this fantastic flight?"

"Brutal wing-beats, in every direction, which must have required all the creature's strength."

"And which maintained it at a good speed and at the same height?"

"Yes."

"In sum," Maxime proposed, "they were similar to the contortions that discus-throwers go through before launching a weight or a quoit?"

"My God...yes."

"In that case," Monsieur Le Tellier continued, "your eagle was bracing itself, before heading straight upwards...it might have been a means of storing energy?"

"I'm asking you, Master. But it's certain that a carnivorous bird, flying in that manner, could disappear in no time, after having snatched its prey..."

"And what color was it?"

"Tawny...rather like the plumage of an owl."

"Hold on!" said Monsieur Le Tellier, not quite able to gather his thoughts. "After all, this eagle might perhaps have been gigantic, since you weren't...*listen! Who's that coming up the stairs?*"

They fell silent. The wooden steps resonated dully. Someone was coming upstairs, bumping into the steps in their hurry...

Monsieur Le Tellier picked up the lantern and went to the door, just as Madame Arquedouve emerged from the darkness. She had a deathly expression, and she launched a cry of alarm in a hoarse voice: "The sarvants! Again! They're coming back!" It was a strange and terrible sound, like a whispered howl.

"They're coming..." repeated Monsieur Le Tellier.

"Holy thunder!" Maxime swore. "We no longer have the searchlight!"

Without losing a second, though, Robert had snuffed out the lantern, and the two skylights now cut out two rectangles of sky, which seemed to brighten gradually. Maxime understood the stratagem; he leapt upon the box containing the generator, put his upper torso through the window, and set the widow-frame back against the roof. Robert cleared the other skylight in the same manner. Each of them was covering half the expanse; everything was therefore accessible to their gaze. It was dark, but within a radius of 100 meters, a man—or anything of similar dimensions—could not escape their notice.

Between them, behind them, in the obscurity of the attic, they could hear Madame Arquedouve trembling; behind them and between them, at the pinnacle of the cupola, the wrought-iron weathervane creaked periodically.

The moth-like hum had just begun. Where? Everywhere, it seemed—to the right to the left, in the sky, in the recesses of their breasts. As on the previous evening, they stared into the darkness as hard as they could, with the feeble eyes of diurnal animals...

The stables, the cowshed and the henhouse awoke. The sheepfold sobbed...

The half-light seemed to them to alternate between dazzling brightness and opaque darkness...

In the distance—or was it?—the sarvant hummed.

Robert felt a slight breeze caress his forehead, and he redoubled his vigilance.

Maxime also felt the breeze...

And the weathervane creaked...*but instead of creaking just once and stopping, it commenced the admirable prodigy of no longer ceasing to creak, turning around and around without pause, in imitation of a rattle!*

The breeze, which was still blowing, died down. Mechanically, the two watchers had turned their heads to look at the weathervane. They saw it come to a halt as the wind eased—and they resumed their surveillance of the plain and the mountain.

Suddenly, behind them, between them, at the pinnacle of the cupola, there was a dull *snap*.

An instinctive recoil brought both their heads back into the shelter of the roof, and they distinguished the fall of a hard and heavy object, which rattled loudly on the slates as it tumbled...then nothing more...and then the arrival of the object on the gravel of the terrace...

The hum had vanished.

"Damn!" gasped Monsieur Le Tellier, mopping his forehead.

"Disappeared! Flown away!" said Robert, having resumed his observation-post. "Damn! No luck! The weathervane's not creaking any more. Ah! *It's no longer there!* It's fallen down! That's what fell down!"

"They've knocked it down," Maxime completed, from the other opening. "This time, though, they've carried nothing away. They've let go of their prize. It must have slipped out of their hands..."

"What about the searchlight?" added the astronomer. "One might say that was unlucky."

"I didn't see anything!" muttered Robert. "Behind our heads! What bad luck! And not to have been able to resist the movement that made us pull back our heads in that cowardly fashion, stupidly!"

"Ahem!" said Madame Arquedouve, slumped on the top step of the spiral staircase.

"What is it, grandmother? Are they renewing the attack?"

"They're...only just going away...there! They've gone."

"Yes?" said Monsieur Le Tellier. "They're *really* gone this time? Finally. We can go out without danger! It would be as well to go search for the weathervane. We might perhaps learn something from its examination. It made a dull thud..."

They went down—but they found no sign of the weathervane-rattle save for a depression of the relevant size and shape hollowed out in the gravel, beneath the laboratory windows, where it had struck the ground.

"That's a bit stiff!" groaned Maxime. "They came back to get it! Grandmother was right—they hadn't gone! That proves that they're only audible at close range. Oh, if only someone had seen them from my laboratory, from which they must have been visible when they picked up the weathervane! We'd know what kind of noses they had!"

"Noses...or beaks..." ventured Monsieur Le Tellier.

Meditatively Robert thought aloud: "That weathervane...rotated on its axis...it seemed to be in the middle of...it seemed to be caught up in a whirlwind...a little cyclone...helpless... Hey, Monsieur Maxime, what about the breeze? Naturally, you felt it moving from left to right, since we were back-to-back, and I felt it moving from right to left?"

"But no—it was blowing from my right..."

"Aha! Then it really was a *circular* breeze..."

"Damn!" cried Monsieur Le Tellier.

But Robert hastened to ask: "Given all this, what do you think of my eagle?"

"Several contradictory things. That even if eagles sometimes carry off young animals and children, they're not accustomed to stealing weathervanes...but I also think that the manner in which your eagle was agitated bears an astonishing resemblance to the sort of flight employed, it's said, by the men of Châtel, and that, perhaps, some sort of...disguise... Are you with me? A man costumed as an eagle...to deceive... There's always been an element of burlesque in all this..."

Maxime laughed sardonically. "Costumed? Why not metamorphosed, as the journalist from Turin was mutated into a dwarf? My dear father, I no longer recognize you..."

"It's you that isn't recognizable. I know perfectly well that my inferences are fragile, but for want of better, I'm obliged to deliver myself to conjectures that might be stated in the scientific form: *everything happened like this*. Besides, you interrupted me, and I hadn't finished. We might be in the presence of a new, or recently-

discovered, force—or rather a buoyancy—which living beings are able to acquire, and acquire without wanting to, against which their bodies struggle...”

“Ta ta ta! We’re afraid, and that’s all. What have we done thus far, not counting gaffes? Prevarication and poltroonery. With so many precautions, we’ll never see the sarvants! Nothing prevents one from seeing one’s adversary like an overly large shield. Look, it’s ridiculous only to go out of the villages in numbers. That’s exactly what’s needed to catch a glimpse of the enemy. Personally, I’ve had enough of all your cowardice. From tomorrow, I’ll do as Robert does, and go out alone wherever it suits me.”

Seeing that Maxime was getting angry, Monsieur Le Tellier wished him goodnight. Once he had gone back down to the hallway, Robert said to Maxime: “Listen. You’re being rash. Trust me: *if you go out alone, dress like one of the missing persons; make yourself a copy of one of them*. If need be, dye your hair and beard. Shave, if necessary. Don’t forget the walking-stick and gloves, and go as far as to reproduce the gait.

“Today, before climbing the Colombier, I went to Dr. Monbardeau’s house and there, according to his indications, I dressed in a khaki costume belonging to his son, similar to the one he was wearing on the day of his abduction. Monsieur Monbardeau helped complete the resemblance; we covered a black felt hat with chalk to turn it white, and I put on yellow boots. That’s why you found me looking so neat on my return—I’d just returned my borrowed clothing. It’s a useful trick—at least, I think so. In any case, it seems to have succeeded, since here I am. But be discreet, won’t you?”

“Are you cracked?” asked the other, simultaneously amused and disconcerted. “If the stratagem works, why keep it a secret?”

“For various reasons, but most of all because there presently exists another means of immunization, which is the fruit of empiricism, and is certainly more reliable than my procedure, which is the result of calculation. That means is precisely the one that you’ve rejected, which consists of gathering in force away from habitations. That’s well-known; everyone accepts that temporary obligation, and those who refuse to submit to it—imbeciles, hotheads or braggarts, meaning no offense—won’t want to use my system either.”

“There’s some truth in that...”

“Except...except that...will the first of the two procedures, the more popular, always be efficacious? And is the second—mine—reliable? Is it by chance that the sarvants didn’t carry me off during that first experiment? Might it be that they didn’t see me? Paradoxical as it might seem, you know, *I desire that wholeheartedly*. For, if that one part of my theory were to be verified, the entire theory would be true, and then...” He passed his hand over his forehead, as if he were facing frightful apparitions. His hand was trembling and beads of sweat were forming on his brow.

“...And then, my dear chap, you haven’t had dinner,” Maxime finished. “You’re hungry. Empty stomach, hollow head. Hunger is leading you astray.”

“Monsieur Maxime,” said Robert, “I would give my life to be mistaken.”