

## THE GIVREUSE ENIGMA

### *Part One*

#### *I.*

One evening in the first half of September 1914, four stretcher-bearers were crossing the heath of the Loup Rouge. Darkness was falling, formidable and terrific. Between the sky and the ground it was Hell; a furnace of sulfur and blood was disclosed in the clouds. Man-made thunder growled beyond the hills, shaking the trees to their roots and the rocks to their depths. The stretcher-bearers were coming back from the field-hospital and returning to the killing-ground. One of them mopped his brow and murmured: "They've all been picked up."

"We've advanced again," replied his companion.

There was horror on the heath. The blood formed pools, coagulating amid the grass. Cadavers were extended, peaceful and sinister. Suddenly, a hand was raised beneath a tree-stump and a feeble plaint was heard.

"One that wasn't noticed!" said the one who had spoken last. He went to the stump.

A soldier was looking round, dazedly. He was a tall man, whose face was scarcely muddied by the shell-fire. His hair was reminiscent of the color of ripe oats and his moustache that of spelt straw; he had large jade-colored eyes, feminine cheeks and a high forehead sharply angled at the temples. Black blood was drying on his skull.

"It's all right," said the stretcher-bearer, "someone's here."

The man did not reply. His eyes were misted; he seemed to be about to fall asleep.

"Not a good sign," the stretcher-bearer went on. "Hey, Charlet, are we taking him?"

Charlet, however, was going toward a tall clump of bracken, attracted by some clue. "Another!" he muttered. He had perceived the other one at the same time as the man discovered by his comrade, through a gap in the bracken. The dusk had scarcely begun to gather; the air was diaphanous.

Charlet looked at the two wounded men and remarked: "One might think that they were related." Then, with increasing astonishment, he added: "It's quite extraordinary. They must be twins! Come on then, Henriquet!"

A red-haired stretcher-bearer came over to the two wounded men in his turn and declared, with conviction: "They're twins, and no mistake!"

The second wounded man reproduced the features of the first identically; he too had clotted blood in his hair. His jade-colored eyes were misted by a dream, and one might have thought that he was about to fall asleep.

"That's rare!" Charlet observed.

"Right! What about their identity tags? Let's see: Givreuse, Edouard-Henri-Pierre. And the other?"

"I can't find anything—his tag's been removed."

"That's okay," said Henriquet. "We'll find out later. Time's pressing—let's not dawdle. It seems to me that they ought to be kept together."

Henriquet and Charlet loaded the man from the tree-stump on to their stretcher, while the other two loaded up the man from the bracken. There was no indication that the wounded men were conscious of what was happening.

The little company left the heath and went through the grounds of Grantaigle. The château's two towers were visible, one of them collapsed. A chapel raised its thin steeple in front of a copper and aquamarine cloud. A look-out post was dangling from the crumbling, smoking walls. A flock of crows fled over blue beeches while flames scaled the debris. One of the stretcher-bearers, who was an educated man, murmured: "One would think we were in the times of Philippe-Auguste."

They went past the château; the field-hospital—a large shed and some huts—appeared at the far end of a field, on the edge of a small village. Plaints rose up, punctuated with a wild clamor, and the scent of rotting flesh spread around, mingled with less precise odors.

On the threshold of the first hut, a medical orderly barred the way. "Full up! The hut's bursting. Over there, look—the sixth should still have space..."

At the "sixth" a corpulent doctor was washing his hands in a bowl. Large folds of flesh hung down from his slack jaws. "It'll be the death of us!" he cried, on seeing the new arrivals.

"It's one case," Alexandre observed, softly. "Twins, Major."

"What do you want me to...?"

"All the same, it's rare that one sees the like on a battlefield."

The major turned his surly gaze to the two soldiers, distractedly at first, and then more attentively. "They're as similar as two of the 69th's shells!" he muttered. "Where did you pick them up?"

"On the heath, near the Château de Grantaigle."

"I didn't know..."

"Thirty paces apart..."

The major leaned over each of the men in turn. "There's a difference, though. One's face seems slightly...very slightly...longer than the other's."

"Do you think so?" said Charlet.

A tall, slender woman approached, like an oread in her white uniform. She studied the two wounded men with an alarm that gradually became intense. "One would think that they had *the same wound* on their heads," she said, uncertainly.

The doctor parted the blood-matted hair as best he could, and became pensive. "It's fantastic! One would think that two identical pieces of shrapnel had struck in the same place."

There was a pause. The major seemed ill-at-ease. The stretcher-bearers looked at one another vaguely and the woman put her hands together in a mechanical gesture.

"No, it's not natural!" sighed the stretcher-bearer named Alexandre, finally.

"Everything's natural!" said the doctor, impatiently. "Let's go—we have to get them inside."

There were only two free beds, one near the entrance and the other at the far end of the hut. The wounded men were undressed, without either of them emerging from their semi-lethargy.

"He's also got a wounded tibia," remarked the woman who resembled an oread. She was standing beside the one who had been installed near the door; she was washing his face gently.

At the back of the room, Major Herbelle was examining the second casualty. The skull fracture was quite serious. A bullet had broken the tibia, seven or eight centimeters below the knee. "This torpor," Herbelle soliloquized, "doesn't seem to be a consequence of the wounds. It's true, though, that an explosion...the war will produce a great many nervous disorders..." He gave orders for the wounds to be bandaged, and headed for the other. "Nothing other than the skull fracture?" he asked.

"A bullet's gone through the left tibia," replied an aide.

"The left tibia!" cried Herbelle, in consternation.

"Yes, six or seven centimeters below the knee."

"That's impossible!"

"Why?" asked the young man, involuntarily.

"Because the other also has a tibia split by a bullet, and..." The major's eyes expressed a sort of religious horror. Leaning over the soldier, he groaned: "It's *the same wound...the same...*"

"Just like the skull," sighed the nurse.

The man and the woman dared not look at one another. The prodigy was manifest. It filled Herbelle with repugnance and caused the tall nurse to bow her head.

"We're dreaming!" whispered the doctor, his mouth marking his rebellion.

"We're dealing with a higher reality!" affirmed the woman.

"If they would just wake up," said the major, naively, "we could find out..."

"Their identity-papers!"

"Of course!"

Three minutes later, Herbelle held two sets of identity-papers, which resembled all military identity-papers, but which nevertheless filled the hearts of the woman and the two men with a kind of fear. *They were absolutely identical.* Each of them referred to Edouard-Henri-Pierre de Givreuse, born at Avranches on March 17, 1889. Each of them recorded a height of 1.74 meter, and advertized the *n*th company of the *n*th infantry division.

"It's the same identification!" Herbelle concluded.

“But no authority would have consented to give two identical sets of identity-papers to different individuals!” observed the young man.

“Unless the authority was deceived, at least,” retorted the major, in a voice impregnated with a strange bitterness. He leafed through the papers feverishly, searching for some difference, but found none. On the contrary; a small ink-stain was identically reproduced in both documents. But what can it mean?” Herbelle moaned, putting his fists to his temples. “Of what supernatural trickery are we victims?”

“So you admit that it’s supernatural?” said the nurse.

“Oh! No, I don’t admit anything...I don’t know anything...I must be hypnotized.”

The young man scrutinized the documents in his turn. “The paper’s well-worn,” he murmured. “The sheets are scarcely holding together.”

“Ah!” exclaimed the major. “Does one appear to be older than the other?”

“My word, no. They’re equally fragile.”

“If they were false, at least—that would be a relief...”

“Aren’t there any men from the same regiment here?” asked the nurse.

“Not in this hut—but surely in one of the others...”

At that moment the wounded man opened his eyes. He looked at the people standing next to his bed in puzzlement, then voiced the plaint of all men in pain: “I’m thirsty!”

The nurse lifted his head and helped him to drink. He swallowed greedily at first, then with a weary slowness. Little by little his gaze cleared. “Am I wounded?” he asked.

The major and the nurse looked at him in bewilderment. “Yes you’re wounded.”

“Ah!” He seemed thoughtful. At intervals, his lips trembled and his eyelids fluttered slightly. Eventually, he whispered: “I remember...I fell in the forest...”

“On the heath!” the doctor corrected.

“The heath? No—in the forest, near the edge. We were beating a retreat. A shell-burst struck me in the head...but I carried on going...I think I dragged myself...and then...” A deep crease formed between his eyelids. “Then...let’s see... where did I get to? I don’t know any more...” His voice weakened; his eyes clouded over again.

“Your name is Pierre de Givreuse,” said the doctor, hastily. “You were born in Avranches in 1889?”

“That’s right. My name is Pierre de Givreuse.”

At the far end of the hut, the aide was making signs. “Do you have a brother?”

The pale face showed surprise. “A brother? Me?”

“Yes—a brother who looks like you.”

“I’m an only son.” He released a long sigh. His eyelids fluttered, then closed.

“It’s terrifying!” said Herbelle, passing his hand over his forehead.

“It’s not terrifying,” replied the nurse, making the sign of the cross. “It’s a higher reality...”

The major had just caught sight of the aide’s signs. He hurried to the far end of the hut. The other Givreuse still had his eyes open, but they were already misting over.

“Is your name Pierre de Givreuse?” exclaimed Herbelle.

The question appeared to revive the wounded man slightly. “Yes,” he replied, “Pierre de Givreuse.”

“Born in Avranches in 1889.”

“Yes.”

“Do you have a brother?”

The wounded man appeared to make a considerable effort to think; in a drowsy voice he muttered: “I have no brother...no brother!” His eyelids were closing.

“Try to remember!” Herbelle demanded—but Givreuse made no reply.

An hour later, Herbelle brought two slightly-wounded soldiers from the *n*th regiment to the bedside of the first Givreuse. “Do you know this man?” he asked.

“He’s only in my company!” one of the men replied. “He’s a pal—a good bloke. His name’s Givreuse.”

The major turned to the other soldier. “What about you?”

“No mistake, sir, that’s for sure. He’s not in my company, but I know him well—I’ve hung out with him.”

“But there’s another Givreuse in the same company?”

“Another?” exclaimed the first infantryman. “Well, he’s invisible then—I’ve never seen him.”

“Nor me!”

“You’ve never heard mention of a second Givreuse who resembles this one?”

“No, never.”

Herbelle shook his head sadly, then said: “Follow me.”

He led the men to the second Givreuse. “Look!”

They stood there open-mouthed. “You could knock me down with a feather!” muttered the man from the same company as Givreuse. “It’s the same man. A double!”

“A double!” repeated the other.

Herbelle said nothing.

The two soldiers murmured “Oh!” and “Well!” repeatedly; then the first declared; “It’s too much for me...but perhaps he’s in another regiment.”

Herbelle had them taken back to their hut. Something redoubtable had been added to the universe, and the doctor stood still for a long time, paralyzed by the dream, enveloped by a strange shadow in which there was a glimmer of the Abyss.

## II.

They remained unconscious for 60 hours. They were transported to Gavres, to a hospital where their presence produced a strange emotion, which bordered on fear in a few of the women. For various reasons, Major Formental did not install them in the same room. Their case interested and shocked him. This was a duplicate man. In the magnificent and horrible mystery of life, he saw a definite end—death without aftermath—but he was nevertheless religious at heart. By contrast, the head nurse, Louise de Bréhannes, had an indomitable and immutable faith stripped bare of mysticism.

On the Tuesday morning, Louise de Bréhannes and Formental met up at the bedside of one of the two Givreuses. They had called him Givreuse I in order to distinguish him from the other, who had become Givreuse II. The soldier remained motionless, unconscious to human presence, voices and light. His sleep was profound; he was breathing regularly and effortlessly; the rhythmic movement of his breast was visible.

“Temperature 37.1,” said Louise de Bréhannes, “pulse 75.”

“I don’t understand,” said Formental, pensively. “Such an abnormal torpor shouldn’t be accompanied by so normal a state.”

“It’s simply a good sign,” affirmed Louise de Bréhannes. “The true cure of rest...” She wore an austere smile. A tall woman with flinty eyes, a jutting nose and shiny lips, she had a tyrannical manner.

Two young nurses were standing a short distance away. They were anxious. One of them murmured: “Long sleep often follows reincarnation...” Her name was Diane Montmaure; she was an occultist in whom shreds of evangelism persisted.

Formental heard her, and replied: “If Herbelle’s report is accurate—and the official documents support it—this is almost the opposite of a reincarnation...”

The occultist looked at the doctor. It was impossible to say exactly whether her hair was chestnut-colored or dark blonde; the play of light and shadow made the two shades alternate in their predominance.

Formental smiled wanly. “Thus far, the adventure surpasses both the classic supernatural and the classic natural.”

“What do you mean by the classic supernatural?” asked Louise, rudely.

“I mean all catalogued religious and mystical facts, Madame.”

Madame de Bréhannes started laughing silently. “What! On the contrary—the *Menechmes*... Sosie... We’re dealing with the most classical natural and supernatural...”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Menechmes*, or *The Twins*, is a comedy by Plautus, which served as the model for a play of the same title by Jean-François Regnard. Sosie is the valet of the eponymous protagonist of *Amphitryon*, another play by

“I don’t think so. Don’t forget that the two men don’t know one another at all, and that the soldiers of the *n*th regiment have only ever known one Givreuse—and yet, each of the Givreuses claims to have been born in Avranches in 1889, and their individual identity-papers are as identical as they are. Finally, that they have *absolutely identical wounds*.”

“Might not one be the other’s *double*?” suggested Diane Montmaure, timidly.

“A double is, by definition, a sort of shadow. Here we have two bodies of the same kind.”

“They’re both extremely light,” the other young woman put in. “The weight of a child!”

This remark made an impact on Formental. “They must be weighed,” said Louise de Bréhannes. Formental gave the order. The trolleys that transited wounded men to the operating theater came to fetch the two Givreuses. They were weighed.

“37 kilos 200...37 kilos 215 grams,” announced an aide named Charles.

“That’s practically the same weight...and that is indeed an abnormal density—half of the expected density,” said Formental feverishly. “Measure them, Charles.”

Charles went to fetch a horizontal apparatus of American design, on which the two wounded men were extended in turn. “Slightly less than 1.74 meter,” Charles pronounced.

Formental checked it carefully. “Yes, about two millimeters less. Let’s check the other...”

“Almost exactly 1.74 meter,” Charles soon replied. “A trifle more—one millimeter.”

“The identity-papers register 1.74 meter. The slightest difference of position would be enough to explain the difference. They definitely have the same stature and the same weight...abnormal. The logic of the mystery—*the logic of the absurd*—is confirmed. And they’re still asleep!”

“Because they haven’t entirely quit the other world,” murmured Diane Montmaure.

No one replied. Even Louise de Bréhannes was in a sort of trance, in which terrestrial life was fading into astral life.

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Plautus, whose plot was similarly recycled by Molière; the name became synonymous with that of a double because Sosie’s features are duplicated in the play by Mercury in the course of carrying out a mission on Jupiter’s behalf.