

THE ULTIMATE PLEASURE

Introduction

I. The Fault

It was thirty years earlier that the great misfortune had occurred. Before that, for a long time, wars and massacres seemed to have thrown humanity into an endless cycle of destruction. One day, however, a definitive peace appeared to have arrived; the era that had opened then had been named the Great Fraternity.

It was then, by an atrocious irony of destiny, that the prodigious cataclysm had occurred.

Soon, social life was no more than a memory.

Time went by. The terror gradually decreased. People attempted to restart the old governmental machines that surprise had dislocated. Soon, there was hope that relationships between the peoples might be renewed. France attempted to find out what had become of America—for all the cables had been destroyed and wireless telegraphy received no response.

Missions were organized. Aircraft and balloons reached the West, where it was hoped that they would find life in the process of adapting to the new and tragic circumstances.

At that moment, frightening news spread. Near the Fault, and increasingly further away, in accordance with an inexplicable progression, people were dying in a new and strange manner.

Blood, suddenly becoming too fluid to remain imprisoned in the vessels, was oozing from their bodies like sweat.

Fear gripped the world tightly. The epidemic extended. Scientists set forth to attempt to investigate, confront and circumscribe the new disease. During weeks of anxious waiting, terror anguished four hundred million civilized people.

Before the key to the monstrous mystery could be discovered, however, the Bloody Sweat appeared in the old world. It was first seen in Spain, and then Algeria. Shortly afterwards, the Eastern Mediterranean fell victim to the atrocious disease. The Balkans were depopulated in a matter of months. In November it reached Holland and England, and it was learned that the central Plateau was beginning to perish too.

It was then that a few of the scientists sent to the source of the evil returned. Only sixteen out of the two hundred and nine who had departed returned to their homeland. What they said was even more terrifying than the reality already seen.

The terrestrial crust, ripped to its depths from Peru to the Far North, constituted an immense volcano. But the most horrible thing was that an unknown gas was emanating from it, whose penetration into the human lungs produced the quasi-gaseous fluidity of the blood that caused it to spread from the vessels like sweat.

The gas had been given the terrible name of Necron.

That was not all. The viscous metallic mass of the subsoil, laid bare, was producing immense quantities of cyanogen, carbon monoxide and free chlorine. The terrestrial atmosphere was destined to become unbreathable, even for those that the Necron did not kill. So rapid and powerful was the oxygenation of these toxic gases in the light that the depletion by the Fault exceeded oxygen production.

In sum, the quantities of oxygen absorbed had already disrupted the proportion of the atmospheric constituents. The terrified people saw some mediocre plants becoming enormous, and others dying. Under

the strange influence of these vital changes, nettles grew with a vertiginous haste and vigor, sweeping over the world. Some were already seen that were as large as oak-trees.

It was the End of the World.

Labor ceased everywhere. The last relics of civilization disappeared. In parallel, the frenzy of pleasure-seeking and the fury of asceticism increased. Their partisans massacred one another.

The lands where life persisted took on the aspect of forests full of wild beasts. Only France still had scientists, who maintained the struggle against the Necron, the Fault and the end of everything with a desperate will. The coasts of the Mediterranean had sunk into chaos. Nothing more was heard from Germany, but no one was unaware that the Balts were putting all foreigners to death. The inhabitants of shores isolated themselves as in lacustrian times.

Still, however, hordes of the wretched fled toward Siberia, without knowing where it was, as the crusaders of the year one thousand had set out for Jerusalem.

It was thought, suddenly, that the respiration of chlorophyll would ensure the purity of the air in forests, and there was a desperate flight toward regions where trees were abundant. Soon, however, the sylvan overpopulation terrified the first to arrive, and they murdered the newcomers.

Cannibalism reappeared. Rural populations occupied woods like fortresses, and millions of unfortunates prowled the roadsides like wolves.

In Paris, a special terror reigned, ferocious and concentrated. The crowd there was so nervous that not a day passed without bands of people putting others to the torture who were suspected or accused of being carriers of the bloody sweat. Rich and poor confronted one another in pitched battles. The rich accused the poor of propagating the disease; the poor accused the rich of hiding and monopolizing "the remedy."

Hundreds of dreamers and intellectuals were burned, having been suspected, because they did not appear to fear death, of "knowing the secret." Communal suicide became commonplace among people of feeling. In memory of Socrates, twenty philosophers and highly cultured individuals poisoned themselves with a decoction of hemlock and died while one of them read the *Crito*.¹

But the bloody sweat invaded the Languedoc. A crazed and disheveled population flooded toward the center, destroying everything. The defense of the Ile-de-France had to be organized against those people, deprived of everything human.

It was then that a formula against death by Necron emerged from a laboratory. It was the fruit of labors long pursued by Jacques Landève. That scientist had already isolated the vital gas that he called Bion, and he won the immense but ironic glory, at the moment when the end of the world seemed nigh, of having created, based on the chemical series of the albimunoids, a protoplasmic body that lived, reproduced and excreted.

At that time, in Paris, retrenched in three blocks of buildings in Passy, guarded and defended by negroes, there was a combative group of intellectuals who were also in search of "the remedy." They included all the branches of constructive intelligence: chemists, engineers, physicians, physicists and physiologists. Incapable of despair, those men already possessed a kind of extended occult power. They recruited adherents for all possible purposes, seeking arms to serve them.

Jacques Landève submitted his discovery to them. A powerful laboratory trial hastily studied the possibility of sanitizing determined spaces. It was concluded that, given certain superhuman conditions, it might be possible to preserve a fraction of humanity.

¹ The core of the dialogue in question, between Socrates and Crito in the former's prison cell, is the argument that Socrates sets out for his refusal to escape, even though his friend promises to facilitate that eventuality, and the great man's determination to accept the death sentence passed on him.

Humanity survived.

II. Survival

The leader of the Society of scientists grouped around Jacques Landèvre was named Tadée Broun. He was a man of indomitable energy. He gathered together nearly a thousand people, who would be the masters and leaders of the new society. They were subsequently named the Thousand by the people.

One unique duty was imposed on those sovereigns. They were not to take account of any individual life among the few million unfortunates submissive to them; only the struggle against the Necron and the atmospheric poisons was important.

Time was pressing. They drew up a plan for the necessary measures. They had to create monstrous chemical factories to produce millions of tons of the products of salvation so far only obtained in grams in laboratories. That required iron and coal. It required giant dynamos of copper, lead and nickel. All of that, or substitutes, had to be extracted from the earth locally—where else could they find millions of arms except in Paris, the last refuge of dying humanity? And what efforts, on the part of all those individuals, hurling themselves without distinction of sex or age into fearful, frantic, titanic labor, would be indispensable!

In addition, it was necessary to nourish that host. With what? They would, in consequence, have to fabricate chemical aliments from immediately obtainable substances: oxygen, nitrogen and carbon. Not to mention clothing those flocks; the effort of creating primary industries alone surpassed the largest possibilities. They did not recoil. The raw material of labor was there: thirteen million people! They would be subjected, like steel being shaped into a piston-rod.

It was done.

That living paste was manipulated, like a metal melted in order to be poured into a mold. Tadée Broun already had five hundred thousand serfs, better nourished and cared for than the Thousand themselves. With that small army he took possession of a power that no one, in any case, disputed with him. There was a fight to the death against the universal depression, fatalism and obstinate indifference of all those who believed that the end of the world had come.

To bring those amorphous masses into the factories, to enslave them to an urgent and gigantic task, seemed an insane enterprise, but Tadée Broun was not discouraged.

Because it was necessary...

After vain attempts, the decision was made to act by means of terror. Tadée affirmed that it would galvanize the mass, and that nothing would stand up to it.

What he imagined then surpassed in atrocity the great misfortune itself. First, he gathered together sixty thousand people and took them to a vast plain not far from Paris, under the “protection” of eight hundred machine-gunners. He left them without food for two days and then, on the third, had sixty people chosen at random sawed in two, alive, on top of immense scaffolds.

The alarm of the crowd quickly attained what he called a “motivated” degree.

He fed them that evening, and the next day he made them file past the active machine-guns. Then they drew lots to select one person in every hundred, who would be crucified by the ninety-nine.

A horror soon reigned in their souls that surpassed in power the terror of the bloody sweat.

On the fifth day, Tadée Broun had forty thousand dehumanized serfs at his disposal, which he was able to utilize in the abandoned factories. They began work on the combination of Titanium, Bion and Geocoronium that would make the Necron disappear.

For a month, Tadée Broun softened up his workers. He recruited others by varying his methods of terrorization.

Soon, there were twelve hundred thousand.

Then, the great work made progress.

Later, it was forbidden to mention that redoubtable era in public conversations between members of the Thousand. It retained its power to terrify through time, even in the hearts of grim and pitiless leaders.

The subsoil around Paris was emptied, and was soon as hollow as a sponge. Iron, coal and copper were discovered there. In the sixth year, an enormous deposit of oil was found. Vertiginous factories were

created. In the second year, six million human beings were working. By the fourth, the totality of known living humanity belonged to Broun's factories.

That total was eleven million individuals.

To nourish and clothe that enslaved mass, fabulous enterprises emerged from the earth. The famous chemical aliments produced a mortality of four per cent in the first year. They persisted...

The death toll rose to eight per cent in the third year, the most terrible. They did not have time to worry about it. The Necron in the atmosphere was nine thousandths below the mortal dose. The mortality decreased thereafter, doubtless spontaneously. Tadée Broun was victorious.

In the fifth year, the département previously known as the Seine was no more than a Babelesque factory in which, in pitiless activity, and in unspeakable suffering, terrible masters permitted life to overcome its destiny.

That struggle against death finally came to an end.

Although human life had virtually disappeared from the terrestrial surface, it persisted there. Devoid of morality, pleasure and desire, an atrocious life was obstinately maintained, in spite of everything.

In the seventh year, the mortal gas seemed to decrease in virulence.

It was a strange thing, that Society created by Tadée Broun and his companions. It no longer knew either smiles or joy. The two castes that it contained, the people and the Thousand, were further apart than any previous aristocracy had ever been from those it commanded.

Twenty years after the Fault, one might have thought that geological epochs had constituted the physical and mental abyss hollowed out between the mass and its masters.

The Thousand were the serfs of the scientific idea, and knew nothing else. They were aware of pleasure, and even its perversities, but everything outside of their duties was sad, somber and negligible so far as they were concerned.

The people had not forgotten laughter and joy, but everything in them was frightfully debased. An uncertain mysticism, a dolorous anticipation of the Messiah, and the obstinate desire to deceive the masters was all that maintained their souls. Dragged into the factories for sixteen hours a day, between electrified fences, brought back and forth under the constant mortal menace of Necron bombs, they lived a precarious and vegetable existence. The disciples of Old Broun had gradually rendered automatic all the means of defense against the proletariat, of whom it was necessary to anticipate occasional revolutionary desires.

Paris had, therefore, been abandoned by the Thousand. A complex and scrupulous police force, using turncoats and women, kept watch of the dwellings of those millions of unfortunates. Paulin Vialy, who directed that delicate organism, was the second person in the Thousand. Methodical organizations of tunnels and telephones constituted a perfect network of surveillance.

In Paris itself, a kind of popular Municipality had regulated questions of accommodation, the distribution of food and fabrics for clothing. A single cloth for ten million bodies was retailed in special well-defended shops that were in communication with the factories where it was produced, and with the City of the chiefs. The latter had been built when the Necron had become less dangerous. It was situated to the north-west, and a barbed-wire fence defended its borders. Charming, and comprised of dwellings build in accordance with the most varied caprices, it was now a subtle and secret nucleus of debauchery, whose actresses were drawn from the factories. Sometimes, with the aid of Vialy, hunts for beautiful girls were carried out in Paris.

There was no longer any ordinary commerce, since the mass received, in return for work tokens, nourishment, clothing and the right to shelter in some house or other, perhaps sumptuous or ruined, the former always being preferred.

Nothing, therefore, was manufactured for sale. An immense black market persisted, however, both among the Thousand, who were beginning to treasure old things from before the Fault, and among the people, where a sentimental value was obstinately attributed to innumerable useless or ridiculous objects.

Alimentary foodstuffs were also traded, which the Thousand pursued ardently, and in spite of their vanity, a mysterious attraction was still exercised on minds by the wealth of old: gold coins or jewels.

Thousands of insubordinates were hidden in Paris, and even crossed the defenses of the city, although they were redoubtable. Their remembrance was a kind of tradition and constituted the words of numerous popular songs. Everyone hoped for the advent of "the hidden one" whose arrival would liberate the enslaved people. A considerable number of secret societies and criminal associations added a leaven to that living and obscure dough.

The laws imposed by the Thousand provoked a muted and stubborn resistance, especially the one that condemned old people incapable of working to death. The most shameful compelled the immediate fecundation of every nubile female.

Jealousy between all those wretched people, however, helped to maintain them in their misery. Spontaneous denunciation was rife. In the corridors, the access stations where workers were embarked to take them to the factories, with such precision that they were not allowed a single free moment, grilles disposed between rotating doors and right angles, isolating each individual, ensured an inviolable discretion for thrown pieces of paper that dropped into the tunnels. By means of anonymous confessions thus obtained and stimulated by the secret operations of Vialy's police, everything concealed was discovered. A system of disguised bastions within Paris itself, armored shelters and tunnels capable of bringing negro police to any part of the vast city, forced the tranquility of the mass, which remembered with terror mobs drowned in their own blood.

Besides which, in the case of a decline in production or absence from the factories, a terrible system of collective responsibility sufficed to master troublemakers completely.

Thank to all of that, thirty years after the Fault, the sovereignty of the Thousand seemed indestructible. Sensualists now, and vicious without ceasing to be devoted to their work, they sought beautiful mistresses above all else.

There was always much talk of Revolution in Paris, and, in spite of many vain attempts, the crowd still hoped to succeed in vanquishing their rulers. Like a threat, however, at the height of Sacré-Coeur, an immense dial in the center of the city indicated the proportion of Necron in the air. The gas was mortal a level of one part in ten thousand, and everyone knew that only hard labor and science could maintain the proportion of the gas below that redoubtable figure...

That day, the dial indicated one in seventeen thousand. It was five o'clock. The heat was heavy, at the start of spring.

Over shaft 104, in the east, where the damned worked at a depth of three thousand meters, the smoke sketched a monstrous cypress in the air.

The sun was shining upon the dwellings of the Thousand and caressing with gilded brushes the tenebrous dirt in which Paris lived.

The sky was the color of pure water. In the distance, beyond the grim circle of immense factories, where the Necron was doubtless master, the new verdure reigned...