

XII. The White Beast

Having woken up several hours later, Robert carried out an exploration in the neighborhood of his fire while it was still dark. After a hundred paces or so, he suddenly found himself on the shore of the sea; a deep bay was hollowed out into the interior like the estuary of a river. The reddish sand, almost violet in places, was sewn with pink, purple, orange and yellow shellfish; some of them, although they were few in number, were sky-blue.

He found the remains of a crustacean of huge dimensions, whose bizarre structure caught his attention. The body, which was wider than it was long and was covered by an imbricated carapace, was almost as large as a man's. The short legs, out of proportion to the body, being only a few centimeters long, could only have permitted the animal to walk extremely slowly. On the other hand, two antennae armed with formidable pincers extended like inordinately long arms. It was an animal designed entirely for defense, formed to live in some fissure in the rock, but doubtless terrible if it were attacked.

Robert broke off one of the pincers, as much to conserve it for the sake of curiosity as to use it as a weapon in case of need. He continued on his way beneath the magic light of the two moons, which painted the landscape red and pink. He amused himself, as he had often done on terrestrial beaches, by collecting shellfish, whose presence under the sand was signaled to him by little holes of a regular form. By this method, he captured triangular bivalves as big as osiers and which looked as if they were formed by two small and stony tricorne hats. He found them delicious.

He had just reached a shallow pool of clear water when he thought he saw some kind of small cephalopod swimming there, with many tentacles, each no larger than a terrestrial earthworm. He put out his hand. The animal had already disappeared, doubtless having buried itself without leaving any trace. The sand nearby was scarcely damp.

Robert noticed a sort of rosette formed by a large number of little holes, reminiscent of the imprint that might be left by a huge colander. He immediately assumed the existence of some fantastic shellfish. He began to dig in the sand with the giant crab's pincer. Soon, he had contrived to uncover a long white worm with a red head—then a second, and a third. Each hole corresponded to a worm, but all his efforts to extract them from their hiding-place were in vain.

The engineer abandoned himself to speculation, wondering whether he might be in the presence of marine animals living in a colony, like certain insects. He had ceased digging; at the moment when he was paying them the least attention, all the worms disappeared at once. The sand closed over them instantly, resuming its level surface pitted with little holes, which were shrinking with every second that passed.

"That's strange!" cried the young man. "I must solve this mystery."

Arming himself with a large seashell shaped like a spade, he began to dig. At first, it was a waste of time. As his work went on, the minuscule holes disappeared completely; to his great surprise, he no longer saw any of the white worms with the red heads.

The hole became deep and was invaded by degrees by seeping water. Suddenly, though, there was a subterranean tumult. Thousands of worms surged forth, grouped in a bouquet reminiscent of a thick bush of white and pink coral. This writhing mass was iridescent, sparkling like opal or mother-of-pearl beneath his eyes.

Robert instinctively stepped backwards. Suddenly, with disconcerting rapidity, a form leapt up, jumping on to the sand.

Robert froze, struck by fear. The monster that he saw surpassed the horror of the most extravagant nightmares. Imagine the rough approximation of a human face fashioned out of viscous transparent gelatin. The lidless eyes had the dull and glacial gaze of an octopus, but the nose with quivering flaps and the enormous mouth furnished with black teeth gave it an expression of melancholy ferocity and disdainful sadness.

This fantastic face was surrounded on every side by thousands of white tentacles, which the engineer had initially taken for marine worms.

The young man felt more frightened than he would have been if confronted by a lion or a tiger. This unclassifiable creature suggested a creation arrested at the molluscan stage, having achieved a hideous sketch of a cross between a human being and a cephalopod. To Robert, it was an extraordinary revelation; he forgot the real danger to which he was exposed.

The intelligence that we possess, he thought, has not been strictly confined to the order of mammals, of which humankind is the supreme ornament! And he had a frightful vision of planets populated by plant-men, insect-men and reptile-men equaling, or even surpassing, the intelligence that we have attained. Why not? Even on the terrestrial globe, certain animals—the elephant, for example—possessed near-human intelligence. Perhaps, had they not lacked a single convenient instrument—the hand—better adaptation to their environment, or more fortunate evolutionary circumstances, they might have held a rank equal to ours.

Robert had always thought, moreover, that—simply by virtue of the fact that our brain can conceive them—all the conceptions of our intellect, even the most bizarre, must exist somewhere. Every creation of our imagination, every affirmation of our reason, responds to a reality. Negation alone has no referent, and there certainly exists a psychological location in which all things affirmative and creative are complete and consistent, however contradictory they may appear.

Robert was lost in these thoughts when his attention was abruptly recalled to his strange adversary. The human cephalopod was now laid out on the sand like a flattened disk; it resembled one of those naïve representations of the Sun imagined as a human face surrounded by rays. Then, just as it had changed its form, it changed its color, becoming the same shade of red as the sand, with which it was almost confused. Like cuttlefish and other mimics, it possessed the faculty of taking on the color of surrounding objects; like the chameleon, it passed successively through every shade.

Eventually, modifying its appearance further, it became a shapeless and gelatinous mass, as if a tub of glue of uneven viscosity had been upturned there. All appearance of a human face had vanished. Robert's initial fear returned. He was about to draw away when the monster suddenly reared up, compounding his amazement with a further transformation.

Now it was a wheel, which ran over the sand with vertiginous speed; the long white tentacles were animated by a movement so rapid that they seemed perpendicular. At the center, the hideously swollen face jeered ferociously, the lips simultaneously slack and twisted by a diabolical fury. It had changed color again, assuming a blood-red hue, in the midst of which the white and bulging globes of the eyes were frightful.

As he watched that rapid movement over the sand, Robert had imagined at first that the cephalopod, alarmed by his presence, had been put to flight, intent on finding another, more distant, hole in which to hide—but not at all. He soon perceived that, after executing an enormous circuit, the monster was retracing its steps, still in the form of a fantastic wheel, and describing a series of rapidly-decreasing circles around him.

Evidently, he concluded, this is the tactic that this Martian cephalopod ordinarily employs with respect to its prey. It must fascinate it, dazzle it and hypnotize it, after a fashion, with its sudden turns and perpetual changes of color and form—but I won't wait for it to hurl itself upon me. And Robert resumed walking across the strand, in the direction of the red forest.

The cephalopod, however, initially to his considerable surprise and then to his great terror, while continuing to whirl around with dizzying speed, found the means to continue to place itself between him and the tree-line. Robert realized that, whatever he did, his gaze was irresistibly drawn towards that undulating mass—which, without ceasing its gyratory movement, continually changed shape and color, alternating the moonlit gleam of a precious stone with the semblance of a rag caught up by a furious whirlwind.

Despite all his efforts, he yielded to the fascination.

He could not prevent himself from following the movements of that abject and astonishingly human face, and those large and glaucous eyes—which glittered periodically with phosphorescent light.

He felt his own eyes growing tired; dizziness overwhelmed him; his gait became unsteady. Every time he found himself coming closer to the monster, he took a few involuntary steps to the left or the right. Not only was he not making any progress, but he did not notice that he was being drawn, little by little, in a direction opposite to that from which he had come, where the water formed a sort of marine marsh covered with algae and organic debris of every sort.

Finally, however, he rebelled.

"If I can't escape this spell, I'm lost!" he murmured. "This creature must be avid for new prey; it doubtless intends to catch me in its sticky embrace and drink my blood through the thousands of suckers at the extremities of its tentacles—but that won't happen! This human squid must surely be constituted in the same fashion as its terrestrial relatives. We shall see!"

With a firm hand, Robert Darvel gripped the giant crab's pincer with which he had armed himself and marched straight towards the cephalopod. The latter moved away and continued its evolutions, perhaps in

the hope that Robert would follow it and that it could thus draw him further towards the sea—but the young man was having none of it. This time, he continued to advance in a straight line towards the firm ground, without appearing to take any further notice of his enemy. The latter drew closer then, as if to engage him in combat, but keeping out of range of the club.

Robert was entirely occupied in following this new tactic when he felt a sharp pain in his leg. With an instinctive gesture, he bent down and put out his hand. He realized then, to his horror, that another cephalopod, hidden in the sand—having doubtless joined the other in the hunt—had already wound several of its tentacles around his leg and had started to suck his blood.

He saw himself lost, ingloriously devoured by the hideous creatures in this sandy marsh. A fury took hold of him. With his improvised club he set about striking the half-buried cephalopod like a madman, severing the tentacles whose suckers were attempting to fix themselves on his flesh by the dozen.

Entirely absorbed by this struggle, he had forgotten his other assailant. He had just freed his leg, with great difficulty, and stood up straight, when he let out an indescribable cry of anguish. A crushing weight had suddenly fallen upon his shoulders; he felt himself enveloped by a mantle of soft and sticky flesh. It was as if there were a seething mass of crawling creatures upon his face and neck, their glacial viscosity arousing in him a horrific revulsion. As you will have guessed, it was the first cephalopod, which had been wheeling around him for so long, and which had hurled itself upon its prey at last. It had profited from the diversion provided by the other's attack, as it had doubtless planned in advance.

Robert's blood ran cold; it required an incredible strength of will to brace himself and not fall down in a faint. He felt the monster's flaccid lips fix upon his skull, while thousands of suckers wandered over his flesh, doubtless searching out the location of the veins and arteries before positioning themselves. He was bowed down by the crushing weight of the disgusting creature. His legs flexed.

A frightful odor, stale and brackish at the same time, invaded his nostrils and assailed him inwardly to the point of nausea—but he battled furiously against despair.

He shook himself, dug his fingernails into the gelatinous mass, and felt liquid running along his fingers. It was no use.

As the moments went by, suckers fixed themselves on his neck and his cheeks, and he felt his strength ebbing away. Madly, he ran as fast as he could in the direction of firm ground, but the monster would not let go on that account. It had him, and it was holding on to him. To compound his distress, Robert's foot caught on a spur of rock; he lost his balance and fell full-length. That put an end to his effort. His life was ebbing away, one drop at a time, sucked out of him by thousands of devouring mouths.

Robert Darvel lost consciousness...

When he recovered his senses, he felt extremely weak.

He was dazed, his head aching as if he were emerging from a narcotic-induced sleep. Then he felt pricking pains on his neck and his face, as if he had been bitten by thousands of mosquitoes while he slept. At the same time, he had the sensation of being smeared with something viscous, as tenacious as glue.

He sat up, with difficulty, and looked around; what he saw immediately reminded him of the horror of his situation.

A few feet away from him, the hideous cephalopod to which he had almost fallen victim was writhing desperately in spasmodic agony, in the grip of a creature that Robert first took for a gigantic bird, but which subsequently seemed more closely to resemble a huge bat.

The young man guessed almost immediately what had happened.

While the cephalopod was busy devouring him, it had been surprised in its turn by an enemy that doubtless had a fondness for its flesh, just as the albatrosses and the seagulls of our own world eagerly make a meal of cuttlefish and squid washed up by the tide.

A moment of reflection persuaded Robert that he could not expect any benevolence towards himself from such a savior. Gathering his strength and his courage, without even mustering the curiosity to look behind him, he made his way painfully back to firm ground and went to lie down, exhausted, on a bed of moss protected by the gigantic trunk of an old red beech-tree, near to the fire he had lit.

He soon fell into a sleep as overwhelming and profound as death.

XIII. The Vampire

Fate dictated that, after contending with the monsters of the sea, Robert would have dealings that same night with those of the air. Only a few minutes after he had lain down to sleep, he was awakened by a sensation so painful and so singular that he thought himself prey to a nightmare. It seemed to him that someone had climbed on to his breast and was pressing down on him with all his weight to choke him. At the same time, he felt a painful prick on his neck, close to his ear.

Instinctively, he reached out a hand, and it was with a feeling of profound horror that his fingers brushed something warm and velvety, like the down of a bird or the soft furry hide of a bat. He wanted to cry out, to call for help, but was overtaken by such a rush of fear that he could only emit a plaintive moan.

His awakening and his brief fight with the unknown vampire that had selected him as its prey had only lasted ten seconds. The sky was entirely covered by clouds and the darkness was profound. A few feet away, Robert saw the glitter of the incandescent eyes of the monster that was beating its wings above him, doubtless ready to hurl itself upon him again.

The young man thought himself lost. He now understood that this planet, which he had thought deserted, was populated with frightful creatures, deformed relics of primitive creations, and that he would be devoured with being able to expect help from anyone. Despite the terror that chilled him to the bone, however, the sudden thought of a possible means of defending himself lit up his mind like a flash of lightning.

“The fire!” he cried, in a hoarse voice. “The fire! These nocturnal monsters must be afraid of flames!” And he ran out of his shelter like a madman to the place where the fire he had lit the previous evening was carefully covered over with branches.

“Provided that it hasn’t gone out!” That idea made his teeth chatter with fright.

Fortunately, that was not the case, and Robert had the joy of discovering that a great mass of red-hot embers was lurking beneath the branches and the ashes.

As quick as thought, he drew out a flaming brand and hurled it with all his might towards his enemy. The light of the flames briefly illuminated a truly diabolical apparition: a creature worthy of taking its place beside the most hideous demons imagined in the Middle Ages.

Imagine a bat almost as large as a man, like nothing so much as the giant fruit-bats of Brazil or the vampires of Java.¹ The wings, however, were much less developed and the phalanges, grouped at the extremity of the forearms, formed a veritable hand armed with sharpened nails. Furthermore, the inferior limbs seemed also to terminate in hands, and it was with the aid of these claws that the vampire was supporting itself, gripping the main branch of a beech-tree, when Robert glimpsed it briefly by the light of his flaming projectile.

For the unhappy exile from the planet Earth, everything increased the horror of this apparition: the dirty yellow color of the membranous wings; the face, similar in every respect to that of a man, which expressed cunning and ferocity; the protruding blood-red lips; and, most of all, the blinking eyes, scarlet-rimmed like those of an albino, set in a bloodless face with a short, upturned snout like that of a bulldog. Long rounded ears, disproportionate to the head, completed the hideous ensemble.

Robert distinguished all these details with an ineradicable clarity, and he was so stricken by it that he let the second firebrand he had taken up slip from his fingers. Fortunately for him, his missile had hit its target. The vampire, singed in the abdomen and dazzled by the flame—which its night-accustomed eyes doubtless could not tolerate—released a cry of pain followed by a series of lugubrious groans and tumbled from the height of its observation-post, twisting as it fell.

In response to this unexpected success, Robert threw himself forward, armed with a stout firebrand and ready to complete his victory—but the vampire, which appeared to have a great revulsion for the flame, hopped to the right and the left, as awkwardly as a kangaroo, without ceasing to groan in an almost-human voice. It ended up leaping on to a thick branch and disappeared from Robert’s sight just as he was closing in on it and thought he was on the point of getting hold of it.

¹ In fact, vampire bats are native to South America and fruit-bats to Indonesia; actual vampire bats are small, not at all like fruit-bats, but the literary vampire bat usually bears little resemblance to its actual counterpart.

Somewhat reassured, the young man went back to his fire and threw some sprigs of dry wood on to it. A blazing fire sprang up—one of those joyful, spitting fires whose warmth is vivifying and whose brightness puts the phantasmagorias of the night to flight.

Robert sat down, his apprehensions calmed, and reflected on the singular aggression of the creature from which he had had a miraculous escape. Like all solitary individuals, he had the habit of thinking aloud.

“I don’t believe that I have anything to fear by day,” he said, “from that frightful creature that began to suck my blood while I was asleep.” Mechanically, he touched the little round wound, still bleeding, behind his ear. “These vampires are essentially nocturnal. I’ve been warned now and, as the saying has it, a man on his guard is worth two. For the moment, it’s a matter of maintaining a good fire and a careful watch. As soon as day breaks, I’ll set out in search of some cavern, whose entrance I can barricade with stones and branches when the evening comes. I’ll improvise a lamp with the pith of rushes and the fat of birds... Then I’ll always have my fire to defend myself.”

Despite this chain of reasoning, and others with which he sought to reassure himself, Robert could not help shivering with fear at the thought of the horrible creature whose image appeared to him as soon as he closed his eyes. At the least rustle of the foliage or the slightest quiver of the reeds, he got up and cocked his ears anxiously. He thought that he could still hear the monster’s velvet wings beating softly in the darkness.

What if it brought others back with it? he asked himself, tremulously. *What could I do against a flock of vampires once I’d used up all the brands from my fire?* And he saw himself knocked to the ground, torn apart by a crowd of creatures with blinking eyes and bloody, bloated lips set in livid albino faces.

The vertigo of the unknown overwhelmed him. Would he have to fight against other strange perils and previously-unknown animals in this melancholy world, which now seemed to him to be exclusively populated by terrifying creatures?

Haunted as he was by these obsessive thoughts, it was with a sentiment of profound joy and relief that Robert watched the Sun rise like a pale ball amid the mist, above the vast extent of water and brown reeds. He laughed, he sang, he jeered at the famous vampires now. With the advent of the Sun, he had recovered the fine self-confidence that makes great men and enables great things.

“Bah!” he declared, laughing. “I’m the worst of cowards. With my muscular strength increased tenfold by the low planetary gravity, I’ll put any and all vampires to flight. In the meantime, I’ll get ready for dinner.”

In preparing himself to meet a known peril, Robert became braver and more joyful. Then again, the Sun was gilding the clouds prettily, the pools of water were gleaming in the light, and countless singing birds were rising from the grass. Robert felt full of strength with which to meet the challenges of the new day, which seemed to be smiling at him through the veils of mist.

Standing before a lake as smooth as glass, he revisited the wound on his neck philosophically. It was not really serious: a red stain slightly swollen at the edges. The brief consultation made him think, though. “Damn it!” he exclaimed. “It seems that the vampires know anatomy. That little sore is situated directly over the course of the jugular vein and the carotid artery. It definitely wasn’t a moment to soon, as they say, when I woke up.”

Robert applied a compress of aromatic herbs to his wound, one of which seemed to him to be a close relative of sage, and others of mint, Melissa balm and rosemary, all of which were plants of his native world. They only differed from their relatives in scarcely noticeable details: leaves that were browner or more serrated, flowers that were smaller and more variously colored.

“There!” he exclaimed. “Some curious specimens, of which I shall make a gift to the Natural Museum of Paris, if ever I succeed in returning home.”

After that, he went to his larder, which the vampire had fortunately not devastated. He prepared himself a succulent grill, accompanied by a few dozen water-chestnuts, which took the place of the bread and vegetables of terrestrial meals. He took up his bow and arrows, threw a few armfuls of wood on his fire, and marched off, after having attached what remained of his game-birds to his back with thongs of braided rushes. He was, however, careful to break reeds every 15 paces or so as he made his way through the marsh, like the protagonist of a fairy tale, in order that he would be able to find his way back to his lodgings and—more especially—his fire whenever he wished.

He walked quite cheerfully for a quarter of an hour, almost like a tourist, satisfied with the state of the sky, which gave no hint of any rain that might extinguish his fire. Suddenly, his path was blocked by a hillock covered with tall red and yellow willows, of a variety unknown to him, which glistened in the rays

of the morning Sun. He took a few steps into a pathway which seemed to proceed in a straight line through the trunks, as if made by human hands, and then stopped abruptly, both dazed and amazed.

He had emerged into the very center of a kind of Martian village, whose innocent and welcoming appearance encouraged him to go further forwards.