

THE BAD DREAM

I

At the troubled moment when a secret presentiment warned me that I was about to begin the most extraordinary adventure of my life, and when I dared to write down my impressions, not so much to analyze them as to assure myself of their rigorous objectivity. I regretted being ignorant of the art of writing.

Not that I don't know French. I know it too well, hence my disdain for the artifices of form, the rhetorical jugglery by means of which professionals liberate themselves so easily from syntax, not to say grammar.

To begin with, my momentary impressions are oscillating between the stagnation of the worst nostalgia and I know not what amused curiosity, which is suspicious of itself.

The oscillation exists, I'm sure, because it is intimately confounded with the pitching of the yacht that is taking me across the Mediterranean, a movement accentuated on the poop deck where I have taken refuge with my multiple perplexities since we lost sight of the land of France.

Where are we going?

I don't know—or rather, I only know vaguely, and, in any case, experience has taught me that it's necessary not to situate true stories in too precise a fashion.

All that I know is that we're heading toward the beautiful and flourishing city of Spalatrina, which a group of millionaires—American, as usual—have caused to surge forth entirely in a matter of years at an exceptionally chaotic and desolate point on the Syrian coast. Today it is a little land of luxury and dream, at the same time as a climacteric station much sought after by cosmopolitan neuropaths.

Except for a few private houses, Spalatrina consists mostly of beautiful promenades, spacious and admirably green parks where no one walks, the brightest of the winter visitors and holidaymakers going to ground in the sanatoria, palaces and family hotels scattered at the summit of the hill six or seven hundred meters above the level of the strand.

But it's necessary for me to explain first why I'm sailing to Spalatrina, under the tutelage of the owner of the yacht, my friend Gil d'Ax.

You might remember that Gil d'Ax is the amateur scientist whose audacious biological theories caused such a stir in Parisian intellectual circles nine or ten years ago.¹

It's neither by virtue of an inclination for the sciences and their obscurity, nor a taste for adventures, that I'm part of his retinue at present. The truth is that I might never have quit Paris if the odious denouement of a marriage hadn't suddenly made me the most lamentable of human wrecks.

My wife, whom I adored, deceived me after scarcely a year of common life. We divorced, for we were both too well-educated to lend ourselves to any vile patch-up. I fell ill with chagrin, ruminating impressions of broken charm, a decisive veil drawn over life, and irremediable disgrace. Rich, liking society and its pleasures, intoxicated by the healthy ardor of my nearly thirty years, I had not understood until then that there are sad, unhappy people, and that one can die. And then, in less than a few days, a woman took away my *joie de vivre* in the pleats of her skirt: the separation “that gives a kind of foretaste

¹ This character is presumably not the same person as the hero of Hoche's part-work *Gil Dax, Empereur des airs*. As noted in the introduction, however, it is probable that the present story is a belated adaptation of a story written in that period, given that its references to the recent invention of aviation would be direly anachronistic if the story were set after the Great War, but not if they were penned in the era when Gil Dax set out to conquer the empire of the air.

of death,”² the malady that is part of its approaching toil, floored me. No, I would never have believed that one can suffer mentally to that degree, that one can support life with a soul as crippled and devastated as mine.

My depression was soon complicated by singular and disturbing phobias. In the bosom of a crowd I experienced a horripilation bordering on a fit of furious madness, even if the crowd appeared to me to be mostly composed of sympathetic individuals. Furthermore, the sympathetic individuals ceased to be so as soon as they approached me, and such individuals to whom I was forced to address speech incited me to grimaces of disgust; others, with the faces of women, agitated me to the point that, as soon as I was alone, it was sufficient for me to see them again in imagination to shed torrents of tears. It was then that my friend Gil d’Ax took pity on me, and it is to his intervention that I owe the fact that I am heading today toward the Mediterranean Orient.

“Spalatrina,” Gil d’Ax said to me, “is the ideal refuge for the wounded and convalescents of social life. In normal circumstances your mental acclimation would be the affair of a few days. Assuming the worst, if you don’t adapt, you’ll still return to us cured, for the pure sky and the adorable and marvelous climate of the region reckon with the most inveterate neurasthenias.

No serious objection occurred to me, except that nature, for once, had taken the liberty of situating the remedy a long way from the evil, but Gil d’Ax had an answer for everything.

“All Promised Lands are at prodigious distances, otherwise they’d quickly ceased to be Promised Lands.”

² Author’s reference “Schopenhauer.”

II

Everyone aboard knows one another and salutes one another by hand—one would think them a vast family—an agreeable sensation and very restful, only afflicting for a newcomer like me. And I won't be one for long, for if I don't know all the friends the Gil d'Ax's yacht is transporting at the same time as me—many have been ill since the departure from Candia—my friend has promised me that my relations will be as smooth as oil once we land, because he will introduce me himself, successively, to all the people I indicate to him.

"I don't ask as much," I replied to that offer, "and for the moment I simply want to be informed about the ins and outs of a certain young woman or pretty lady, very brunette, accompanying a elderly couple, doubtless her parents, for she's spent almost all the crossing in their cabin caring for them, so I've only caught glimpses of her."

"Always women!" mocked Gil d'Ax. "I regret, however, not being able to satisfy your curiosity; the old couple and the young woman are unknown to me, very rich Italians I think. They were recommended to me by my friend Saint-Marceau, the novelist who is holidaying in Spalatrina at present with his wife and daughter. Furthermore, a young man is also accompanying those people, the beauty's brother, I believe."

"That detail had escaped me," I was about to reply, but the preparations for mooring and disembarkation interrupted our conversation, and from then on it was the landscape that required all my attention and that of my dog—for I have brought that comrade of my last five years, and I shall introduce him when the time comes.

Prevalent in the disorderly pell-mell of my first impressions, for the moment, are the prestigious plumes of the palm trees girdling the beach so sumptuously, the bold and seductive costumes of strolling women, and two hydroplanes posed at the end of a wharf like two giant seagulls alighted there. Then too, there is an emotion that is restful for a Parisian like me: no face or gaze reflects the slightest material care, and that is sufficient to create an atmosphere of security and pace, which my feverish being, ordinarily so tremulous, inhales with intoxication.

Come on, it's already necessary to decant.

"You're lucky," Gil d'Ax says to me as we're having lunch at the Libyan Palace, where I'm staying temporarily. "Whereas, the other side of the coin, the days and nights in Spalatrina ordinarily go by with a dreary monotony, extraordinarily, a mystery—a word that doesn't have meaning in these latitudes—is polarizing all imaginations at present.

"Oh dear," I said, pulling a face sincerely. "I would gladly have done without here the condiments that one is obliged to abuse in Old Europe."

"Wait, though; the mystery in question offers extraordinary aspects and has nothing in common with the gossip and scandal of which we habitually make a meal in Paris. It's a matter of a fellow who seems to have fallen from the Moon, all the more so as his apartment has been retained by Simpson's by telephone. No one knows where he's come from, in fact, since no steamer has moored in the harbor for a week.

"Where can he have come from? That's the question that is haunting all brains, and it's all the more logical because he not only doesn't seem to know himself, but doesn't even know where he is at present.

"In addition to the fact that he appears to have an almost derisory debility, with a greenish complexion, glaucous and glacial, it's said—glacial, at any rate, for all those who observe him—his brain offers bizarre lacunae. Certain words already old, which are employed currently throughout the world, seem completely unknown to him, such as the words autobus, airplane and, in general, all the new words forged by aviation, of the advent of which he seems completely ignorant, although he seems to be intelligent, speaking English and French perfectly. A typical detail: on perceiving the two hydroplanes moored in the harbor, he asked what those machines could be, and when someone replied that they fly in the air, he shrugged his shoulders with an incredulous and disdainful smile."

“Perhaps he’s simply mad,” I suggested.

“Pardon me!” said Gil d’Ax, laughing. “If he were mad he’d already have found a means of joining the Undesirables Club.”

“Pardon me in my turn,” I put in, “but what’s that?”

“A circle of excessively rich men, multimillionaires, who have been baptized by antiphrasis the Undesirables, perhaps also because they’re only tolerable to one another, and unless one is in their sphere one has every interest in not knowing them.”

And we talked about something else; as we were about to separate, however, Gil d’Ax gave me a pamphlet, a sort of geographical and administrative guide to the country, which, he said, would facilitate my natural and social adaptation.

Left alone, I circled my hotel room like a lion in a cage. I suddenly had the irritating sentiment of a disapproval of my entire person, the sensation of physical embarrassment and latent anguish that grips you in new environments foreign to your intimate being, a sensation that is only the reaction to the mental disturbance that accompanies any labor of adaptation.

And then, an adorable silhouette of a brunette Madonna is haunting my imagination, and I suddenly remember that, since the awakening of my sentimental life, I have always applied the maxim of I no longer know what La Rochefoucauld: “There are individuals who can only be cured of one woman by another.”

Then again, there is the inevitable fit of preventive jealousy: “Yes, but what about the young man who is surely part of her intimate entourage?”

It only remains for me to walk to the abode of Saint-Marceau, the relative responsible, according to Gil d’Ax, for the beautiful Italian whose image has gradually laid siege to all the districts of my consciousness.