

Louis Forest: *The Incredible Adventure*
(1902)

This is the story of Paul de Lembergen.

His father, enriched by the exploitation of Cuban sugar, arrived in Paris one day in order to obtain treatment for his diabetes.

He was a handsome man with a caramel complexion, sweet speech, honeyed laughter, a candied gaze and fondant gestures. He put his son in the Lycée Louis-le-Grand and hastened to consult a Parisian physician highly reputed in Havana for once having saved a famous creole who was not ill.

Paul's father was a widower.

The doctor did not cure his malady but he cured his widowhood by enabling him to marry his elder daughter, Georgette Vaudois.

The old Cuban died three years later, leaving his wife with two children. Honorine Vaudois is Paul's fiancée, and the sister, fifteen years younger, of Georgette. By his marriage, therefore, Paul will become the brother-in-law of his late father and the brother-in-law of his stepmother, who will become the mother-in-law of her sister, who will be, in her turn, the daughter-in-law of her sister and the daughter-in-law of her late brother-in-law. The children of Paul's father, in addition to being, so to speak, the brothers of their uncle and the nephews of their cousins—if Paul has any sons—will also be the brothers-in-law of their aunt, while Paul's children (still hypothesizing a fertile union) will be the grandsons of their late uncle and the nephews of their grandmother.

At the lycée, Paul was immediately considered to be a phenomenon. The headmaster was obliged to employ serious threats to prevent the physician attached to the establishment making a report to the Académie on such an interesting case.

The young native of Havana had entered the class on the fifteenth of October, not knowing French and completely ignorant of its syntax, and knowing nothing about our history. By the following first of January, he was first in French composition, having developed admirably the subject: "A son writes to his mother describing the Musée du Louvre." Paul had never set foot in the celebrated galleries, and had only heard vague mention of them. That sufficed for him to beat all his comrades.

He continued in the same vein.

He was never seen with a book in his hands; he never worked during the hours of study. He did not learn his lessons, finding that he had no need to write his assigned work, catching flies or sleeping voluptuously while others were scraping pens or engraving *amo, amas, amat* in the lobes of the brain while poring over Latin grammars.

In spite of that inveterate idleness, however, refractory to any punishment, and his somnolent appearance, he knew everything, better informed than anyone else. From time to time, when the whim took him—not very often—he amused himself by astonishing his professors with the vivacity of his mind and the clarity and surety of his science. He was either null or perfect.

One day, as a pupil in the third form, he found half a page in the courtyard torn out of a book by a bigger boy preparing for his baccalaureate. He scanned the few mud-stained lines, a dozen phrases of an abridged memento of a summary of a manual of a treatise in philosophy, in which there was question of the Kantian theory of judgment. A week later, in a drawing class, he scribbled in black pencil around a head of Cicero copied from his bust, a dissertation on the opinions of the moralist of Königsberg. He had almost finished when the study-master, a graduate in philosophy, seized the paper and, after having read it, declared enthusiastically that the argument was a masterpiece of logic and a model of ingenious reflection, possessed of excellent coherency.

Paul's work was communicated to the headmaster. The headmaster showed it to the professor of philosophy. The professor of philosophy wanted to make the acquaintance of the young prodigy. In the

conversation, young Lembergen corrected an error on the part of the old scholar on the subject of Herbert Spencer.

“You’ve read Herbert Spencer, then?” asked the professor.

“No.”

“But where the devil do you get everything you know?”

“I don’t know anything,” Paul de Lembergen replied, phlegmatically.

After having failed the baccalaureate once and received it, at the second attempt, with the unanimous congratulations of the professors, Paul de Lembergen hesitated at first between several careers.

Being rich, he would have been able to follow any dream, as a rentier.

He did not want to do that, and bought, successively, a factory making strong-boxes and an establishment of horticulture. Then, one morning, he sold both businesses and went to enroll in the history course in the Faculty of Letters. As a student, he lived extravagantly, sometimes associating with cut-throats, burglars and hooligans, dirty clients of the Parisian dens of vice to which the police take foreign princes, and sometimes frequenting the most refined, elegant and aristocratic milieux. He was only seen at the Sorbonne very rarely, which did not prevent him finishing first in the final examinations.

After a year in the provinces he was appointed as a professor of history at the Lycée Condorcet in Paris. All of that exceptional intelligence and all of that abnormal instinctive knowledge of everything concluded, therefore, in a banal career in education.

For three years, Paul de Lembergen was a model professor, a symbol of universitarian conscience, regularity itself. A few months ago, he fell madly in love with his sister-in-law, to whom he had not previously paid any attention.

Almost all his leisure time was occupied with absorbing labor of which no one had any knowledge except for his fiancée. Although temperamentally over-excited, Honorine was not talkative, especially when it was a matter of Paul. A large shed, constructed in the courtyard of the house in Neuilly in which Lembergen lived, served him as a mysterious laboratory.

No one knew anything more about his studies. If anyone asked: “How do you spend your time between those diabolical planks?” he replied: “Bah! Everything and nothing,” or: “Patience! Perhaps one day I’ll tell you things that aren’t banal.”

We didn’t insist, in spite of our curiosity, for it would be easier to extract milk from a locomotive than to make such an obstinate man talk.

We met up almost every evening in his drawing room, Guy de Rommelle a former cavalry lieutenant who had handed in his resignation in order to trade in postage stamps, Siegmund Bergmann of the *Berliner Lokalanzeiger* and I, whom my parents had destined for the notariat and who had fallen into literature. When midnight chimed we left, and on the way, we took Honorine home to the Boulevard Péreire.

The day before yesterday, as we were going home in that fashion and a frightful nocturnal squall was curbing our heads and searching our cloaks, Honorine seemed to me to be very nervous. Among remarks, half of which the wind carried away, she said to me:

“Oh...Paul...the brain of a god!”

Here begins an extraordinary story.

Paul de Lembergen, after having arranged the chess-pieces, sat down on a sofa, stuffed his pipe, lit it, and became meditative.

Paul de Lembergen’s pipe resembles its owner. He has the custom of saying: “I wouldn’t sell it for a hundred thousand francs, and it cost me two sous.” No one has ever offered the hundred thousand francs, so that declaration never engages its author; it only signifies that he loves his pipe.

It is a simple clay pipe. The bowl is fitted to the slender stem at an obtuse angle. When Paul de Lembergen reflects he does not lower his head like everyone else; in the contrary, he raises it, and it makes an angle with his thin, long body equal to that of the bowl with the stem of his puffer. We have measured it. Furthermore, the heel of the pipe, bisected, appears to be the little brother of Paul de

Lembergen's nose. Around the mouthpiece, where his teeth rest, our friend has personally wrapped a precious thread that winds tightly in artistically-knotted spirals. Since he once broke both wrists while trying to stop an enraged donkey, he wears bracelets from the origin of his hands to the mid-point of his forearm, woven with the same thread as that of his pipe.

That is not all.

The name Paul de Lembergen sounds Germanic. His ancestors were, in fact, Swabian. In 1430, one Hugo von Lembergen acquired a certain reputation when it was discovered that he had successively murdered his eight wives, in the fashion of Bluebeard. The Lembergens are otherwise undistinguished by history. In 1698, Ulrich von Lembergen, condemned to be hanged for I know not what crime, escaped and ran away to Havana, where he married a creole. Gradually, as a consequence of several marriages made locally, the German blood was greatly diluted in the family. It is only enounced any longer by the eyes, which are obstinate in remaining blue. Thus, Lembergen has a mat complexion, brown and warm, comparable to that of his pipe where it is not wrapped up.

Those physical resemblances between Paul de Lembergen and his pipe are trivial compared with the psychological resemblances.

Psychological! Do pipes have a soul, then?

I do not know whether all pipes are thus endowed, but one could swear on one's honor that Paul de Lembergen's has one. Sometimes it has a placid character, of slow, measured, even painstaking reflection, sometimes it gets hot and bothered to the extent of becoming scary. Sometimes its smoke rises sagely and calmly; sometimes it emerges volcanically in acrid and precipitate swirls.

Like his pipe, Paul is ordinarily dull, his imagination tranquil, to say no more. He is not talkative, absorbed in his dreams without sudden starts, and his speech does not shine, But when he gets excited, when he is pushed, he is transformed. Then his forehead lights up, his eyes shine, and he become eloquent. He stupefies his audience with the strangeness and the violence of his speech.

Just like his pipe.

His pipe seems frail. One would think that one could break it by blowing on it. But steel is no more resistant. Several times, it has fallen on the floor; one thought it would be smashed but on examination, one could not see a scratch. Paul de Lembergen, apparently paltry, almost ill and feverish, is solid and hard, as strong as Hercules.

Just like his pipe.

Is there any need now to explain at greater length why our friend values his pipe so much? We know that he has two amours: Honorine Vaudois, the strange girl with the yellow garnet complexion, and his pipe.

You will, therefore understand our fear when, yesterday evening, *after having put on his red beret*, Paul started to laugh—oh, laughter that made us feel ill, nasty and savage laughter—and declared to us: "Messieurs it's eight thirty-five. At eleven forty, I shall break my pipe."

In popular parlance "to break one's pipe" means to decamp, to bid the company farewell, to pack one's bags, to swallow one's tongue, to kick the bucket, to turn up one's toes, to pop one's clogs, to pass over, or to unscrew one's light-bulb—in a word, to die.

Did Paul intend to commit suicide?

He surprised that question in our eyes, and hastened to explain: "Don't worry, I'm not speaking metaphorically or figuratively. I really will break my pipe—the pipe I hold between my teeth, which is smoking its last smoke at present, at eleven forty."

Guy de Rommelle, Siegmund Bergmann and I looked at one another. I also tried to read some sentiment in the face of Honorine Vaudois. The young woman was smiling, and did not appear to be afraid.

Siegmund Bergmann leaned toward me and murmured in my ear, so close that he tickled me with his breath: "Note that he has his red beret on."

For some time, our friend had abandoned himself to violent crises of excitement every time he camped on his head a sort of crimson wool beret that his fiancée knitted for him. He had complained one

day of neuralgia, and Honorine Vaudois had claimed that she could cure him by means of warm headgear. Paul did not lend credence to that vulgar remedy for long, but as the hat came from the woman he loved, he had hung it on the wall, on the nail supporting a trophy of Cuban weapons. The sofa on which he habitually reposed during our evening meetings was placed directly beneath that bellicose ornament. Paul only had to reach out his hand to seize the cap. It happened quite often, therefore, that without any precise intention, he stretched out his arm, initially to tap with his index-finger a few times on the butt of a rifle, and then to take the red cap mechanically in order to amuse himself by slipping his little finger through the mesh of the knitting, while one of us read aloud harmonious and incomprehensible verses or exposed lengthy theories of social regeneration.

Frissons of anxiety vibrated in the nape of our neck when Paul de Lembergen toyed with the red beret. That headgear produced such extravagant effects on him!

When he was coiffed with it, he became extraordinarily animated, and said crazy things. Was it not insensate to want to break his pipe, such a dear pipe, so well cared for? He could have announced his intention to murder Honorine Vaudois and we would not have been more anguished.

The mysterious influence of the red beret made me tremble.

“You’re going to break your pipe, then?”

“At eleven forty.”

“You no longer love it, then?”

He threw his arms toward the heavens to attest his amour. “I still love it. The sacrifice will cost me.”

“It doesn’t draw any more, then?”

“As well as in its finest epoch.”

“Then why?”

“Ask Honorine.”

The young woman smiled: a unique, exquisite smile, silky and pale...

People who lack imagination might claim that, since there is no silk in the eyes, and no color in a gaze or in an expression of sentiment, a smile can nether be silky nor pale. So much the worse for them. I’m not telling this story for them. I don’t care about them.

Words with a golden sound glided through the pale and silky smile.

“It’s a vow,” Honorine Vaudois explained.

“A vow? What is this enigma?”

Paul de Lembergen stood up and went to stand in front of the fireplace, like a young man about to deliver a monologue. With an abrupt gesture, he covered his left ear with the red cap.

“My friends, my friends,” he said, staring at the circles of moving light that the lamp designed there, “I’m little known to the public; I’ve never attempted to attract the world’s attention to me. I am informing you that I’ve had enough of that obscurity, enough of repeating the same course every year to different cretins, enough of being only a tranquil universitarian, while I sense a fulminating genius palpitating within me, thoughts seething within my skull, a single one of which might turn the globe upside-down. I shall tell you, since you’re my friends, that in a week, the name of Paul de Lembergen will be famous throughout the entire world, and curious women will be striving to discover the secret of my gaze in my photograph, displayed in showcases.

Siegmund Bergmann whispered to me: “Delusions of grandeur.”

“I fear so.”

After a time of repose, Paul de Lembergen continued, increasingly animated: “I have, in fact, conceived a theory of the world that...”

“That’s it,” Guy de Rommelle interrupted. “He’s mad. You’re mad, my poor Paul. Tomorrow, I’ll take it upon myself to send you to Doctor Calamardini. A few cold showers will be salutary for you. A new theory of the world! That’s a well-characterized madness. It’s thus that a large number of mental illnesses permit the first diagnosis of derangement. Aren’t you Jesus Christ as well? It only lacks you presenting yourself as the savior of your contemporaries and the awaited messiah! Or, what might perhaps be even better, jump on the first train departing for a mountainous country, and go to repose in the

isolation of a serious altitude. My word, I'm not joking. You're worrying me with your theory of the world..."

"Perfect, perfect!" replied Paul de Lembergen. "Among the ineluctable laws that support my theories, I've listed the following: every person to whom I explain my discoveries will begin by thinking me unhinged. If my other predictions are verified with the same exactitude, I shall have nothing more to do than rub my hands. That's all right, that's all right... but grant me two minutes before cutting off my speech.

"I have, I tell you, conceived a theory of the world that no other philosopher has ever imagined. My doctrine is a universal key, which will transform the sciences—or, rather, the science, for there is only one science, divided arbitrarily into independent parcels by human weakness. I'll spare you all the ideas that have preceded mine on the subject, those of Democritus, Epicurus, Lucretius, Gassendi, Descartes, Leibniz, Kant, Copernicus, Kepler, Newton, Laplace and a hundred other metaphysicians or physicists who have, more or less, by different routes, sought to explain a part of the mystery, or the entire mystery, of the universe. Nor will I recount to you the incredible chain of reasoning that I've forged. I've been working for more than ten years, and I certainly couldn't expose that long labor to you even if I talked for a week without stopping. Let it suffice for you to know that, departing from the essential quality of the molecules of matter, which is to attract one another in direct proportion to their masses and in inverse proportion to the square of their distance apart, and also departing from an original theory of the ether, which has furnished me with the laws of elasticity and capillarity, and departing, finally, from the theory of waves of light and that of the identity of electromagnetic waves and light waves, after Maxwell, I've obtained results so new and so compelling that you'll soon bow down almost to the ground, calling me 'dear master.' My friends, I'm not content with theoretical estimations or calculations on paper, even though they can fulfill the glory of a man. I've constructed apparatus with my hands that will crush you with astonishment, veritable machines to render the impossible possible..."

Siegmund Bergmann has a methodical mind, which never runs two ideas at once. He attempted to canalize, so to speak, Lembergen's divagations.

"What relationship is there between these famous machines and the execution of your pipe at eleven forty?"

"This: my work was already complete five years ago. It has already been five years since all my calculations were finished, all my theories fully demonstrated, five years since my apparatus as almost ready. I say 'almost' because, by virtue of a veritable satanic persecution, one single difficulty among the ten thousand that I've overcome, resisted my efforts. The obstacle appeared to me to be insurmountable. I've stayed awake all night searching for the solution to the last problem that stopped me. Discouraged, I was about to send everything to the devil when I got engaged. You know that, in order to relieve the migraines caused by the continual tension in my brain, Honorine made me a present of the red beret. Bless the day when I received that gift! The red beret, by the warmth it maintained in the forebrain, by the more ardent blood that it caused to rise to my head, multiplied my intellectual strength tenfold, and one evening, at eleven forty..."

"You'll remember that Sunday evening. I sent you telegrams telling you not to come to the usual meeting. Well, that evening, drunk on genius, thanks to the red beret, I discovered the means of breaking the infernal obstacle by which my life was poisoned..."

"But what about the pipe! The pipe!"

"I'm getting to that. To whom did I owe the definitive success? To Honorine. Without her, would I have thought of covering my head, in the house, with a woolen hat? I wanted, therefore, to prove my gratitude to her. 'Beloved fiancée,' I said to her, 'for the victory that I owe to you, tell me the secret wish of your soul, the wish whose realization would give you the most pleasure, the wish that you haven't yet dared to reveal to me, which you're keeping for the supreme moments of intimacy; later. I swear to satisfy it.'

"Honorine replied to me immediately: 'Don't smoke anymore; the smoke upsets me, and I only tolerate it here for love of you.'"

Lembergen's words had immediate effects. Siegmund Bergmann snatched from his mouth the cigar that was embalming the whole room, and crushed the lighted end under his heel. Guy de Rommelle spat on his cigarette to put it out. For myself, I put on a pretence of not having understood and hypnotized myself to model round eyes while drawing on my superior caporal. In truth, women can't imagine how indebted to me they are!

"Now, my friends," said Paul de Lembergen, "no longer smoking is the equivalent for me of having a leg amputated, if not two...but after all, I had promised, and I had to keep the promise. However, as the sacrifice seemed painful, I asked for a few days' grace in order to get used to the idea of renouncing the dearest of my habits. As a deadline, I fixed for myself the fifteenth of September at eleven forty in the evening. At that moment it will be exactly a month, to the minute, since, poring over my retort, emotional and anguished, I saw the birth of the miraculous material that will open the world to me..."

"Oh, my friends, those thirty days have passed, for me, like those of a condemned man for whom the scaffold is waiting. Nevertheless, the last week has been lighter, and has gradually suggested to me a new principle, which is giving me today one of the greatest joys of my existence. I have reflected on the notion of 'sacrifice.' I have ground it down, alloyed it with all known philosophies, and I have finally found that the highest human sentiment is that of sacrifice. A sacrifice for another, in full consciousness, coldly, with a full awareness of the harm one is doing to oneself, is a nobility of divine essence. No other quality of the soul can claim more beauty. The man who sacrifices himself thus finds the highest place above animality in the pure realm of intelligence..."

"I love Honorine. 'Love!' The word has been galvanized. I only employ it for want of a better and superior term, impregnated with a thousand nuances with which I would like to dress the vocable. I love Honorine. Now, veritable love, not the vulgar passion that we are accustomed to admire, cannot be understood without the spirit of sacrifice. Sacrificial love surpasses banal love as a mathematical verity surpasses a political verity. It is transcendent in essence, while the other is only material or human in essence. I wanted to raise myself up to sacrificial love. And that's why, after having considered that settlement as a misfortune, I shall soon break my pipe...gladly!"

When Guy de Rommelle emerges from his calmness, he extends the arch of his eyebrow and his monocle falls out. The stamp merchant coughed in an artificial fashion to attract our attention. "Ahem! Ahem!"

One can attribute to "Ahem! Ahem" an *ad libitum* meaning. I divined that the noise signified: "He's definitely out of his mind."

Undoubtedly Paul de Lembergen understood it thus, for he shrugged his shoulders impolitely.

"Your theory," commenced Siegmund Bergmann, "has the fault that..."

He did not get any further.

Honorine had risen to her feet and traversed the room.

She placed her little finger on the dial of an Empire clock and remarked, while looking at her fiancé: "Paul, it's eleven thirty-nine and twenty seconds."

"Ah!"

Our friend drew another five or six rapid puffs from his pipe; then he emptied out the ash and contemplated, tenderly, the little instrument that had so often kept him company like a living being.

"My poor, poor pipe!" he said.

"It's eleven forty," replied the implacable young woman.

"Let's go!"

Paul de Lembergen approached the fireplace, and with a dry click he rapped the head of the pipe against the marble. We heard a *tock*, but the pipe did not break.

Paul recommenced the experiment. The pipe remained entire.

Our friend examined it carefully, and murmured: "That's extraordinary! I took so many precautions not to break it! It's made of stone!"

A third, more violent attempt had no more result. Not only did the pipe not suffer from it, but no splinter was detached from it. It remained entire, integral, in Paul's quivering hands.

"Bizarre! Bizarre!" said Lembergen, his eyes illuminated by anger.

For the fourth time he tried to annihilate his pipe; for the fourth time, the impact had no effect, “Damn it! Is it bewitched?”

Then we witnessed a frenetic and ferocious combat. His fingers clenched upon his adversary, the force of whose inertia overexcited him, Paul gave himself entirely to that passionate and novel duel.

The battle was terrible.

The pipe was obstinate in living. Paul threw it against the marble twenty times without breaking it. In order to give himself more energy he accompanied his gestures with frightful oaths. He shouted, exasperated by the resistance, becoming redder than his beret. Long droplets of sweat ran down his cheeks. His cravat was unknotted, his neck flexed like an accordion.

We were oppressed, spectators of a captivating struggle. The pipe moved us to pity. Its stubbornness in not dying inspired admiration and compassion in us.

“Leave it,” begged Siegmund Bergmann, who admits murderous wars in his capacity as a politician, but is moved by the death of a fly. “Leave it!”

“No...no...I want to be...I will be...the master,” cried our friend, foaming at the mouth, his eyes bulging. “Understand that if I don’t succeed in taming it, it’s the end of my happiness...of love...oh, bitch of a pipe!”

He tried once again—in vain—to vanquish it.

Breathless, his breast heaving, he paused for breath, and to reflect.

“Do you believe that it’s very intelligent to exert yourself like this?” asked Guy de Rommelle. “And for what purpose? For an almost incomprehensible whim. You don’t want to smoke any longer? Throw the pipe into the street, or the river. There! What’s the point of giving yourself all this trouble, when the solution is so simple?”

“Stamp merchant, your mind is limited,” replied Lembergen, in a dull voice. “Do you know what the religion of symbols is? Do you know that...?”

He did not complete his thought. His face was illuminated by an idea. He bent down, put the pipe on the floor, placed himself directly against it so that it was in contact with his shoe, straightened up, as stiff as a Prussian soldier insulted by his corporal, held his breath, raised his right foot and struck down with his heel. A pile-driver is not more precise, nor more forceful.

Immediately, the pipe was smashed. The central part formed a little heap of fine powder. The pipe had ceded once and for all, as if, finally resigned, it had released all its molecules and consented definitively to the dissociation of its being.

Paul de Lembergen took possession of the handkerchief that Honorine was holding in her hand and mopped his brow.

“Finally,” he sighed. “Now I can hope for a happy future. I believed, in being unable to break the pipe, that nature was against me, and forbidding me forever the sacred and superhuman domain of sacrifice.

“You have the philosophical tally-ho,” muttered Guy de Rommelle.

Paul de Lembergen poured himself three glasses of water, which he drank almost without pausing for breath.

When he was refreshed, Paul de Lembergen turned toward his fiancée.

“Honorine,” he said, “since I’ve been strong enough to vanquish myself without difficulty, why don’t I try my machines immediately? I feel marvelously well. I have a clear and logical mind. Do you want to?”

“Of course. What about these messieurs?”

“These messieurs, if they’re not damp chickens, will go with us, in order to witness my strange conquest.”

Bergmann and Rommelle consulted me with their gazes. I replied, in the same language, that it was necessary to accept Paul’s offer, in order to help our friend avoid the dangers to which his mental alienation might expose him.

“Well, are you with us?” demanded the madman.

“Certainly.”

“Bring your hats and cloaks, then, and come.”

Paul picked up a lamp in order to light our way, and conducted us into the shed where he was accustomed to shut himself away in order to work.