

THE WAR OF THE SEXES [AMOUR]...AS IT IS

“Oh, the Crazy Rock! The rock...”

“Where?”

“There...it was there five minutes ago—and now it’s disappeared!”

“Hallucination.”

“No, no—I too saw, just now on that rock, another rock forming a vague triangle. That’s it’s no longer there is perfectly true.”

“Oh, the power of legend! You believe in it, then, this vagabond rock that appears and disappears in people’s faces, in any corner of the forest of Fontainebleau?”

“Oh, pardon me—only within a three-kilometer radius of Barbizon.”¹

“It must be a phantom of a painter of the Millet school. He doubtless had a heart of stone, and is manifest in the form that best expresses his remorse.”

This rather strange dialogue took place on the fourteenth of December 1913, on the threshold of one of the grottoes made of tangled sandstone blocks that abound along the footpaths of Cuvier-Chatillon. Three hunters were lurking there in order to try to surprise a superb wild boar they had been tracking since the morning. The barking of the hounds indicated that they might hope to have it within range of their rifles soon.

No sounds of flight, however, troubled the silence of their expectation. Only a little dry cough broke the sensuality of their ambush, and a curse expressed their disappointment on seeing a respectable old lady advancing at a slow pace. She was very simply dressed, but her entire attitude was so mystical, grave and noble that they bowed as she passed by.

She sketched the vague salute with which a woman of the world acknowledges the courtesy of a man who steps aside, and then she drew away, not without letting her gaze weigh upon the youngest of the hunters. The latter immediately thought that his heart was about to fail. The lady disappeared unhurriedly behind a rock, and it was only after an interval of a few minutes that he was able to murmur:

“Upon my word, if that woman’s eyes were shining in a younger face, you could get your black suits ready, Messieurs, because I wouldn’t be long delayed in marrying her. Sapristi! What softness! What a gleam! I still can’t get over it!”

“She’d do a lot better to stay by her fireside,” said the most heavily-bearded of the three Nimrods.

“Shh! Listen to the dogs. The beast’s coming toward us again... Flay was leading just now...I can’t hear his voice any longer...yes...a cry. The animal has thrown off the dog...look out...look out...”

An indescribable racket was indeed approaching, when a rifle-shot cut it short. A momentary silence followed, and then the barking redoubled in intensity.

Suddenly, a horrible brown mass, stinking, growling and low on its legs emerged between two tall rocks and raced along the path. Three gunshots immediately put it down, and its cadaver completely blocked the narrow corridor in which the drama had unfolded. The dogs, the beaters and a dozen hunters soon found a means of getting round it, however, and there was a long palaver before it was decided to carry it away. That was scarcely easy in that tortuous terrain, but the classic cortege ended up forming. Behind the porters of the victim, the victors followed in single file, all their pipes lit.

Before quitting the grotto, where he had remained somewhat apart, the one enamored of the old lady scanned the surroundings with his gaze...and stood there open-mouthed. There, ten meters away, the rock loomed up again.

¹ Odette Dulac spent the latter years of her life living, writing and sculpting in Barbizon, where there is now a street named after her. The town’s most famous former inhabitant was the landscape painter Jean-François Millet (1814-1875) who founded a “Barbizon school” of painting with Théodore Rousseau (1812-1867), to which numerous direct and indirect references are made in the novel.

Incapable of overcoming the irrational terror that invaded him, he started running forward, jumping over all the obstacles that he could, and colliding with his hunting companions.

“Have you got the devil on your heels?” one of them asked.

“Yes,” he replied, gravely. “The rock—the Crazy Rock—appeared in front of me.”

“Where? Where? Show us!”

“Don’t laugh! Obviously, I must be suffering...a hallucination, undoubtedly. But I swear to you that I saw it rise up and set itself in equilibrium on rock B.”

“The one that serves to attract the rock-climbers of the Alpine Club?”

“That I don’t know.”

A polite silence descended upon the group of hunters, whose mocking eyes looked the visionary up and down.

“Is the fellow a little touched?” asked Robert Dunant, who passed for the strong mind of the band, in a low voice.

“No, Monsieur,” replied one of the gamekeepers. “Or if he is, there are plenty like him. In the last six months we’ve almost all seen the phenomenon.”

“How is it manifest?”

Very simply. One is walking along, looking at everything and nothing. Without looking for it, one sees a gray mass, heavy and mossy, posed on top of larger block. That’s not surprising, is it? There are plenty of little rocks on top of big rocks in the forest. But when, suddenly, you no longer sees the solid triangle where it was a moment before, well, it gives you quite a shock; you get goose-pimples and turn round. I’m a gamekeeper, I’m not afraid of wild boar, nor poachers, but I don’t like to encounter the Crazy Rock. Madame Wiscorney can laugh at me, and try all the time to catch a glimpse of the thing in question, but personally, I’d rather not.”

“Who’s this Madame Wiscorney?”

“An old lady, very good, very worthy and very tranquil, who loves the forest even more than her house. She’s been living here for a long time with her granddaughter—a pretty girl of sixteen.”

“Quite bizarre!” the questioner murmured, striking a light. “That’s an enigma I’d like to solve.”

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Three hours later, all the hunters were finishing dinner at the Hôtel des Charmettes, in a room whose windows overlooked the main street. As befits those sorts of celebratory feasts, the menu had been succulent, washed down with generous wines and seasoned with spicy stories. Among those at table, admitted for the first time to the honor of hunting with his father, was young Montala. He was an adolescent of twenty-two, whose face had the beauty of a Roman mask and his body the suppleness and vigor of modern sportsmen.

There was also—at the third invitation—Louis Dubar, a young advocate still in training, and a very amiable guest. The latter had paid his entry fee in savory anecdotes, and he had just started a new one when he interrupted himself to say: “But...there she is! It’s her! Oh, that woman’s eyes!”

All the men looked into the street then, where the old lady they had encountered that morning at Cuvier-Chatillon was passing by on the opposite sidewalk. She was escorted by two adorable young women, equal in charm but different in type, one brunette and one blonde. Each of their elegant silhouettes had the finest of profiles.

No one saw Pierre Montala blush, for his father immediately said: “Ah! You noticed the Hindu woman’s eyes! Admirable, aren’t they? Those are her granddaughters accompanying her. They’re rarely together nowadays, even though they were born twins. Their mother died giving birth to them, and the two grandmothers, paternal and maternal, one Catholic and the other Buddhist, made a kind of theosophical contest out of the education of the two children. Each one wanted to prove the excellence of her religion for modeling the soul. Madame Wiscorney is a very curious individual, and is reputed to be one of the greatest Asiatic Initiates.”

“Much better to be a cordon bleu!” quipped Robert Dunant.

“Perhaps. All I know is that the two sisters only come together for a week or ten days every year. Their meetings give rise to joyful family scenes. Madame Wiscorney, sure of the heart and mind of Maya, gives her complete freedom to confide her impressions to her sister Ghislaine, but Madame d’Angeville, an intransigent devotee, is fearful on behalf of her little brunette of heretical theories, which might give rise to doubt. ‘Doubt! Demolisher of Temples and poisoner of wellbeing!’ as she delights in repeating, signing herself three times.”

“I assume that the young women talk to one another about other things than the Gospel and the Bhagavad-Gita?” said the incorrigible Robert Dunant.

“Undoubtedly, undoubtedly! But the two old ladies, both intelligent, know full well that amour won’t take long to mount an assault on their wards’ hearts. It’s then that one or other will triumph, and each of them is preparing her victory, one by taking her granddaughter to sermons and the other by taking hers into the forest. One believes in the demon, the other in the daimon...”

“Yes, but it’s still a question of a man!”

“Naturally! Whether one puts horns or goat’s feet on him, whether he reeks of sulfur or sweat, it’s always the poor male that turns the heads of virgins. ‘The work of the flesh,’ as Madame d’Angeville says, or ‘the Sacred Feast,’ as Madame Wiscorney calls it, is the most redoubtable adventure in the life of a woman!”

“I’ve never doubted it!” said the merry guests, in chorus. “A little glass in honor of the great uncomprehended!”

“Waiter! A fine vintage, for a toast to amour!”

Coarse laughter blended, and in a deafening racket, there was talk of “chicks” who... and of Lampitos² who... In brief, the ordinary good cheer of hunters after drinking gave Virtue a beating, with abridged memories.

Only Pierre Montala kept silent. Suddenly, as if Gallic chatter might shock a chaste ear—he cried imperiously: “Shh! Shut up! They’re coming back.”

The two grandmothers and the two young women about whom they had been talking were, indeed, going along the street. Maya was laughing while walking backwards. The dimples in her slightly-suntanned cheeks, compared with the brightness of her teeth, gave the impression of nests where little birds were dreaming. Beneath the gilded shadow of long lashes, her eyes, more green than blue, allowed an amiable gaze to fall on things, but so luminous that it seemed to make everything on which it settled sparkle. There was within them a little of the strange radiation that rendered Madame Wiscorney’s eyes so attractive and unforgettable.

Next to her, eyelids lowered, Ghislaine was walking serenely. The expression of confused and enraptured joy with which Raphael bathed the face of the Virgin listening to the Angel Gabriel was expanded over her entire person. One sensed an ardent gaze filtering through those dark lashes, on the alert, seeking in every man for the envoy of the Lord: the annunciator of the miracle of amour. The oval of her face was pure, the skin prettily amber-tinted. The design of her mouth was gracious and grave. She resembled Maya greatly, and yet the two sisters were only genuinely identical in the form of the nose and the arch of their eyebrows.

Morally, their characters had only one point of complete similarity. Both of them had the dogged, almost morbid faith in the Truth, with a capital T, that engenders fanatics. They were both believers! But they each had a different Credo.

As they pushed them gently toward the forest, the two grandmothers marched behind the young women, at the slow and rhythmic pace of nuns or priestesses.

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Poker, manilla or bridge had followed the hunters’ fine dinner. Pierre Montala and Louis Dubar had found ingenious pretexts for avoiding the Queen of Spades, and after having lost a few louis, Robert

² Lampito is the Spartan woman who assists Lysistrata to arrange a sex strike in Aristophanes’ comedy.

Dunant and Monsieur Montala went out to smoke a consolatory pipe. Without even consulting one another, the two friends walked toward the forest.

Why did they not go in the direction of the Plaine de l'Angelus, so calm, serene and airy? Because every man who has an enveloping taste for the softness that descends from heavy branches, and rises from a carpet of dead leaves, is invincibly drawn to the forest.

At Barbizon, the body seems to be seized by an irresistible magnet that emanates from the giant beech-trees and robust oaks. One believes that one is entering a cathedral of legend, and the sun itself only touches the ground beneath the foliage with the same discretion it exercises in piercing the most admirable Gothic stained glass. A lucidity compounded of calm and philosophy quickly dominates the conversations or reveries of strollers there. The mind soon opens up to all mystical enlightenment, because the vegetal magnetism exercises its benevolent magnetism on human nerves.

After a long silence, Robert Dunant said to his companion: "Will you permit me to find the love of your friend Madame Wiscorney for our old and beautiful forest excessive? It's not jealousy, but at her age, a woman is more suitably placed by her fireside than in the rocks. I trembled for her this morning. You ought to warn her about the danger of ricochets. One day, she'll be found dead after a hunt. Some maladroit poltroon will have killed her without meaning to."

"I've said all that to her," replied Montala, "but try to talk reason to the daughter of a Dalai Lama who thinks she's invested with a divine mission and has arrived at the age of white summits! She told me that she ought to have retired a year ago to a high mountain, to live among beasts and trees, in order to accomplish the final mutation of her soul."

"What are you talking about? So far as I know, only exceedingly rare Hindu sages risk such proofs? It's high time that the ascetics and the Christian cenobites renounced that petty game of grottos and caves without central heating."

"It is, however, the Promised Land of which that supremely intelligent and cultured woman dreams. Anyway, this is what she told me of her history..."

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"Madame Wiscorney has absolutely no idea from whose entrails she was born, or which mortal sowed the seed in the maternal womb. She believed herself for a long time to be the daughter of the Dalai Lama, who had found her in one of the bungalows that the Indian princes construct in the jungle to facilitate their tiger hunts. Those shelters also serve as refuges for strays and the belated. There is always a room at the disposal of a traveler in distress.

"One stormy day, the high priest was surprised by a tornado, and went into one of those so-called 'guest-rooms.' Between two lightning-flashes he saw, in a corner of the shelter, a poor little creature half-dead of hunger and fear. As soon as he approached her, the child, who might have been a little over three years old, put her hands together and nestled in the lama's robe with such a tender confidence that he didn't have the heart to abandon her when the tempest had eased. He even waited there until the following day in case her parents returned—but no one came to find the child, and no one ever knew whether Monsieur le Tigre had devoured two imprudent spouses, or whether the abandonment was the crime of an unnatural mother.

"When one is the Dalai Lama, one is very powerful; one knows all the mysteries of magical science; is surrounded by Houtouktous, Panditas, Kampos, Maramabas and Mahatmas; but one is ignorant of the mysteries or puericulture.³

³ The term "houtouktou," describing a kind of lama, was apparently first introduced to a French audience by Père J.-B. Du Halde's geographical account of China and Tartary, published in 1735; it crops up regularly thereafter in geographical texts and journalistic accounts of Buddhism and Tibet. A pandita is also a kind of Asiatic priest, but the other two terms in the list are either misappropriated or invented, initiating a pattern manifest throughout the text. I shall annotate those that play a significant role within the text for which I can identify existing meanings, but will let the improvised terms pass without comment.

“Having no one in his service but young monks even more incompetent than himself, he entrusted Tussilia—which means ‘the daughter of the bungalow’—to the gentlest and oldest of his scholars. He told him to make a Houtouktou of her—which is to say that he was to educate the child in the art of auguries, the science of trances and that of divine messages.

“The caprice of fate determined that Tussilia was prodigiously endowed for that destiny. She learned very rapidly, and thoroughly, the sacred language that permitted her, while still a child, to read the rarest and most ancient manuscripts. To cut a long story short, one day, when she reached her fourteenth year, hazard put her in the presence of her savior, the Dalai Lama of Lhasa, and the holy man interrogated her. He was so amazed by her responses that he retired to his oratory and started searching through the prophetic scrolls, in order to see whether some great mission might have been promised to the Child of the Bungalow.

“Toward midnight, he found a script several thousand years old, which he deemed to apply to Tussilia. Madame Wisconney has often recited the text to me, of which this is the tenor:

“To the priests that the spirits of the yellow race will inhabit will be sent, in the ozone of the lightning, a woman with bright eyes. She will bear on her right arm the mark of the ring with which Brahytina encircles the wrists of his elect. She will be ornamented by a perfect beauty, and her gaze will have the power to tame the white goros—which is to say, priests—of the west. It will be necessary to instruct her with all the secrets of the genesis of the world, for she must live in the darkness of the Occident, so long as her flesh shall flourish. But as soon as the sacred lotus of her body is half-withered, in order to respire the azure of Brahma it will be necessary for her to sow the Acquired Truths in the minds of pale caterpillars. For the Redemption of peoples will be nigh and the promised Messiah will be born of the daughter of her daughter.”

“The very next morning, the Dalai Lama summoned Tussilia and asked her to show him her bare arms. The Marambas surrounding the high priest were able to observe that in fact, a kind of scar, like those left by second-degree burns, marked the young woman’s forearm. I’ve seen the sacred sign, and it does resemble some kind of scar, but the doctors of theology in Lhasa declared unanimously that no doubt was any longer possible. The iron ring of the King of the World had definitely been secured in place there. It was in opening it to set her free that the spark of unknown Forces had burned the flesh of the predestined virgin.

“After a kind of scholarly examination, it was agreed that Tussilia would leave the convent of Lhasa and spend twelve months among the Taurens, and thirty-nine moons among the Parchment Dragons.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that she was to spend a year studying medicine and three years studying biology, geology and, above all, prehistoric verities.”

“Can’t they talk like anyone else, as MacNab would certainly say?”

“At sixteen, she knew by heart all the old texts sheltered from the air in glass bells and guarded by erudite and fanatical old monks. Bewilderingly, it appears that those men have the right to learn the verities of the Truth, but only on condition of voluntarily making it impossible for them to reveal it thereafter. In order not to succumb to the temptation of scything down the errors that pullulate in the world by speaking, they make a vow of exile. They go from one monastery to another, but always at a higher altitude. They never go near a valley. In the convents neighboring, or even confused with the eternal snows, they live on roots and water. They study, they learn what people would die to know, but never, once initiated, can they be forsworn.

“The man whose hunger for the unknown can no longer be sated by the monastery solicits from his superior one day his right to ‘the step.’ The doyen reminds him in detail of the harsh life that awaits him, but a being afflicted with ennui has even fewer ears than a hungry belly. After a blessing, he is given food and a map. With the stars for reference points and the thirst for science that preys upon him for sustenance he departs alone, never to return, along scarcely-traced tracks. He disappears.

“The man who does not die on the way arrives one day that he refuge he seeks. The door is always open. No one questions him. He responds to a few mute signs, and in the most profound silence. He is introduced into the room of the parchments. It appears that the greater the heights the monks attain in the

mountains and Knowledge, the happier and more fulfilled they seem. Sincerity and joy are the recompense for those vain studies. I say 'vain' because, for centuries and centuries, they have not been of any service to humankind.

"Great was the amazement of the monks of Tibet to see the Daughter of the Bungalow arrive among them, but no one doubted her mission, and she lived among the saints, the monks assigned by the prophecy. I'll wager, however, that a long time after she had quit them, the memory of her beauty and her smile still made the sagest of the sage dream.

"All that she has revealed to me of her mysterious studies is that she has seen, with her own eyes, plans of aircraft, submarines and automobiles dating back fifteen thousand years before Jesus Christ. She claims that writing has been lost three times on the earth. Thought-reading, which marks one of the phases of human evolution, has existed before. However, arts of speech and writing then became useless, and the spoken word and the pen became obsolete. Fortunately for the loquacious, and for poets, the universal silence of humanity is always followed by the fatal cataclysm that accompanies the somersault of the being known as the Earth, hindered by its growth in its cocoon of humus. *Flic, floc!* A wave from the depths inundates the continents...and everything begins all over again..."

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While chatting in that fashion, the two hunters had traveled along the Allée du Bas-Bréau and returned toward the village by a long curve through the woods, which finally brought them to the Chemin du Bornage. Robert Dunant was about to laugh at Madame Wiscorney's revelations when bursts of youthful laughter rang in his ears. He parted a honeysuckle bush and saw the uncommon spectacle of two men dressed for hunting playing tennis with two young women.

"I suspected as much," growled Montala. "Pierre hasn't held back. Look! In spite of the snobbery with which he's smitten, he's forgotten the nails in his shoes and is casually making a mess of the tennis court. No need to tell you why. He's in love with the blonde—and the cunning Dubar has had himself introduced to the brunette."

"Ha ha! If the twins are rich, two marriages might make the good fortune of four people."

"I wouldn't see any inconvenience in that, if Maya's husband weren't caught up, according to Madame Wiscorney, in the great drama of the Redemption of the World. He will, she says, be one of those who will bring, from air or fire, the necessary god or gods to the earth.

"Now, I don't want my son to be an aviator, or a mariner, or an explorer. He'll be a simple manufacturer, like his worthy father, and enjoy life. I don't trust people, myself. They've already killed one Messiah and martyred his apostles, in order to worship them later at their ease. Now, as all that has been successful before, they'll do it all over again for the next Redeemer. None of that for Pierre!"

"So you believe in the old Hindu woman's nonsense?"

"Does one ever know?"

"But tell me, what connection can there be between Madame Wiscorney and the Crazy Rock?"

"None. What are you thinking?"

"Nothing—I'm asking."

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Everything that Monsieur Montala had said was perfectly true. Madame Wiscorney really was a foundling, and the Tibetan convents had delivered the oldest secrets in the world to her. The young Hindu had been seventeen when she took advantage of a torrid summer to descent from the last monastery, that of Kampa-Dzong, set at an altitude of five thousand meters on the slopes of Mount Everest.

She had lived on the sacred glacier for a year. Then she had separated, reluctantly, from the seven old and wise monks who had treated her as the predestined daughter—which is to say that they had worshiped her as the promised goddess of the decadent race. She had had the prescience, on leaving them, that the role that had been attributed to her was a trifle heavy for her pretty shoulders, but she did not show it, and her white silhouette, draped in a white robe, soon merged with the masses of immaculate snow that she had to

cross over go around. A cloud enveloped her with its moist and icy softness. And at the monastery, silence resumed all of its majesty and eloquence—for it is the great educator of souls.

Tussilia marched for a long time in the solitude of rocks and forests. The animals watched her pass by, and an old python, blissfully digesting, even swayed its head to salute her.

After a month of traveling, she found herself prostrate at the feet of the Dalai Lama, in a mission at Tapchen. He blessed her, and brought her gently to her feet.

With him at the time, having come to talk international politics, was Lord Wiscorney, whom England had charged with circumventing the leader of the believers of Tibet. While the high priest and the young Hindu conversed in low voices, he abandoned himself to the charm of her exquisite presence. That day, Tussilia was wearing the gold lamé robe of the Taurens, disciples of Aliage-Nar. A broad jade bracelet hid the scar of the ring of Brahytina, and on a purple silk headband, a black triangle placed the seal of the Mahytmas.

Before taking her leave of her savior and the foreigner, the young woman fixed her gaze on that of the English diplomat. The latter went pale, was disturbed, and, involuntarily, took two steps toward the door after Tussilia.

No ambassador ever dragged out diplomatic negotiations for so long. And never, in Asiatic memory, had an Occidental been seen to study Buddhist theology with such ardor. It is necessary to add, too, that the Dalai Lama, having divined the passion that was burning Lord Wiscorney for the beautiful Initiate, did not hesitate to make use of that lure to obtain more from England than England wanted to accord to him. He interested the envoy in the mysteries of Temples, and gave him the child of the Bungalow for a guide.

After three months, literally enchanted, Horace Wiscorney asked for Tussilia's hand, and promised in exchange, in the name of his government, everything that the wily high priest of Lhasa wanted to obtain.

The predestined one was very surprised when the Marambas offered her, in the temple, with great ostentation, a kind of marshal's baton, handed to her by a short, stout Tachour. In the hollow of the bamboo there was a parchment scroll covered with wax seals and mysterious characters. Their purpose was to accredit the Initiate among the white goros who might dare to doubt her mission.

Afterwards, the Dalai Lama put the rings of engagement on the fiancée's fingers. He told her, weeping, that she was about to enter the darkness of the West predicted by the prophecy. She would marry the English ambassador, would go to live in the cold and the fog, in order to give enlightenment to a pale caterpillar. Death and tears would mark the required period of sacrifice, which would last forty-five years. Afterwards depending on the vigor of her strength, she would either return to Tibet in order to die there in the convent of the seven sages, or climb a nearby mountain in order to die there in accordance with the sacred rites.

Snow is the shroud of the true elect of God.