

Jules Perrin & H. Lanos: *The World Above the World*

(1911)

*I. In which we make the acquaintance of M. Goldfeller,
the Gem King*

We had embarked on the special train at the station of Sommesous, and for 20 minutes we had been rolling along the line constructed with a view to linking the works to the Châlons-Troyes line.

It was a flat country, marshy and bare, the most wretched corner of Champagne. We were chatting without paying any attention to the landscape, whose sadness seemed infinite beneath a cloudy sky with rare clear patches; intermittent squalls twisted the already-leafless trees and spring, at its debut, was more sullen here than anywhere else.

“What’s that?” exclaimed little Luneau of the *Informateur*, all of a sudden.

“That,” said stout Blum of the *Young Herald*, with a clownish gravity, “is a reservoir.”

Stupidly, simply for the pleasure of tooting my horn in the concert of surprise and buffoonery that united us all—my colleagues and I—I said: “It’s the Tower of Babel.”

I represented the news syndicate of the viticultural press. I was young—scarcely 25—not an idiot, but still irreflective, and I let myself get carried away by the need for irony and denigration that superiority maintains over ignorance. We jostled for position at the windows of the carriage to in order to contemplate the prodigious construction whose mass extended out of sight beyond the grey horizon.

Its immediate appearance was that of a cylinder several kilometers in diameter, with a height that I heard estimated at 1800 meters by Baroux, the engineer-director of the steelworks at Saint-Dié. On a masonry foundation about ten meters high stood a mountain of steel, assembled, in a crazy multiplication of arches, cross-pieces, beams and metal joints, the succession of which, regularly-repeated, discouraged the eye. A large fortified ditch isolated the base of the tower, whose massive shadow darkened the countryside. In that endless plain, the spectacle was so colossal that we stopped joking in order to look at one another in amazement.

“It’s as big as Paris.”

“And it’s higher.”

The train increased its speed, which gradually became vertiginous, and the reason for that velocity became clear to us at the same time as the immense network of rails on which it was evident that we were in the process of making a tour of the base of the entire edifice.

“This,” said Scordel, the Undersecretary of State for Finance, who was a former journalist and had been gallant enough to make the journey with us, “is one of Goldfeller’s ideas; he’s giving us the honor of a tour, externally.”

Turning toward him, I said: “As you’re in the government, can you tell us why Monsieur Goldfeller has been authorized to construct this *reservoir*, as Luneau calls it. Is the intention to build a new Eiffel Tower on a larger scale? What’s the purpose of this...machine?”

Scordel adopted a prudent attitude, which contrasted with the good fellowship he usually professed in conveying official information to us. “But it’s interesting as a project,” he replied. “Nothing similar has yet been built as a metallic construction. Goldfeller is eccentric. Do you know him?”

He began to talk to his neighbors, thus avoiding any clearer response.

The explanations that Scordel did not want to give, Luneau—always well-informed—claimed to know. “Goldfeller is the savior of the Minister, Piérard. For several years work on the tower has taken up considerable manpower...no more unemployment...no one gives any more thought to the social question. Piérard governs as he wishes.” He lowered his voice. “It’s said...it’s said that Piérard himself received a huge bribe before granting authorization for the commencement of the works. At any rate, every time he’s interrogated in the Chamber about the real purpose of the enterprise, he avoids explaining it clearly. It was only after a question from Gentilhomme—the député from Châlons—that the government decided to furnish vague explanations. Hence the invitation from Goldfeller, slightly forced, for this official visit. What are we going to see up there?”

He pointed a finger at the summit of the monstrous edifice, around which our course was continuing—beginning to decelerate, however, while our train described a curve through the network of rails criss-crossing the landscape. We went through several depots containing engines and wagons, a succession of buildings and hangars cluttered with trains and materials, finally emerging into the vast glazed hall of a station.

At the platform we got down from the train. Initially, there was a confused hubbub, due primarily to the joy of escaping the sight of the obsessive mass momentarily. There was a crowd there—an entire crowd gathered for the visit: the President of the Council himself, accompanied by the Minister of Public Works and delegations invited from all the great state bodies; military men, engineers and magistrates; personalities representing all the arts; curiosity-seekers, friends of anybody and everybody; and women, whose carefully-composed costumes were beginning to be powdered with dust while walking along the carpeted gangways garlanded with green plants and flowers by which we emerged from the station.

We saw a stone wall and, a few meters above our heads, the vertiginous rise of the metallic carcass that was lost to sight in the sky. Closer at hand, that iron trellis was confirmed in its boldness and lightness by the very enormity of the proportions of all those buttresses and superimposed beams. The dimensions were without analogy, the aspect formidable and mysterious, like a forest of needles sprung from a cube of steel that served as its base, a wintry forest devoid of foliage, the color of rust, whose thick iron branches hid in their depths the secret of the man who was advancing to meet us.

“Goldfeller,” murmured Luneau.

Of medium height, stiff and spry, with a hairless face and a gaze of steel, his hair thick and beginning to go grey, we saw him appear under the enormous arch of a doorway opening in the foot of the tower. An orchestra, which I had not seen, struck up the national anthem, and heads were spontaneously bared, while Goldfeller walked proudly toward the ministers.

Around me, people were whispering: “Goldfeller... Goldfeller... the gem king.”

The name ran from mouth to mouth, whispered and murmured—then, as if acclaimed by an audience that had decided on flattery, a truly enthusiastic welcome was offered to the man by Piérard, the President of the Council.

“Government of the Republic...metallurgy...great interest...bonds of an old amity...personally happy...official consecration...”

Piérard’s voice, which is weak, only brought us a few shreds of sentences, but that was sufficient to augur the highly flattering tone of the assembly. At any rate, Goldfeller seemed unmoved by it; he listening, nodding his head, with an air of approval rather than gratitude: *Good, Good, you’re only saying what has to be said.* His dry voice, forceful and authoritative, rose up as soon as Piérard’s had fallen silent, and he immediately set out to describe and explain his work.

“At an average speed of 100 kilometers an hour, M. President, you’ve just made a circuit of our works in 20 minutes, which implies a circumference of about 30 kilometers. That’s a little more than the periphery of the fortifications of Paris. You can judge the base of the operation; I shall, if you will permit, take you to the culminating point of the construction-work.

Turning around, he retraced his steps; Piérard followed him like a docile subaltern. It seemed to me that the imperious voice of the man, who held his head high, those grey eyes, the greyish tint and the precocious wrinkles in that overbearing forehead, were not unknown to me. Where from?

People clustered around him, staring at him curiously, while he advanced, pointing at the elevator-room that was descending along the bare frame of the tower. Through the windows in the vast iron cage one perceived the luxurious installation, the Persian carpet with glossy reflections, the comfortable armchairs, the internal panels covered with paintings by masters.

An idea—an abrupt memory—suddenly occurred to me, which it was impossible for me to contain. I leaned toward Luneau. “Do you know who he resembles?” I said, in a low voice. “Cauchois—my math professor when I was at the Condorcet. It seems to me that I can still hear him calling me, dryly: ‘Bayoud, to the board.’”

In crowds, one can speak in a low voice, counting on the preoccupation of the individuals who are the actors absorbed in those sorts of ceremony. The man had to be endowed with supernormal perceptive powers for a few words produced discreetly to reach his ears. He heard them and, continuing to advance with a firm stride, turned his grey-tinted and clean-shaven face toward me; the slightly hazy veil that had seemed to cover my eyes was snatched away, like the door of a lantern. I

received full on, and from head to toe, the shock of fulgurant stare, under which I felt my legs grow weak. Then, indifferently, and with his eyes almost devoid of expression, Goldfeller stood aside, with an amicable gesture, to let the ministers and their retinue pass.

An electrical bell, an instant's delay, and the enormous elevator rose into the air, to the strains of a military march, played by a brass band installed on the platform above our heads.

Two other elevators had been sent down to bring the guests up to the summit of three works. While we jostled one another to get in, Luneau, always inclined to mock, with his meager head bobbing like an irritated cat's, whispered in my ear: "Whatever you say, Bayoud, Goldfeller or Cauchois, he's not a cold-eyed type—someone, at any rate, that it's better not to have as an enemy."

Confusedly, that was also my opinion, but I tried not to think about the incident, only conserving a slight resentment and a tendency to consider everything in the ceremony in an ironic and ill-humored light.

We reached the summit, and found ourselves on a sort of round road a large suspended avenue, perfectly macadamized. Goldfeller's dry voice dominated all others, giving explanations:

"Our first platform," he was saying, "is at 500 meters, the second at 1250...."

A whole crowd was swarming around us, coming and going: the population of workers harnessed to the cyclopean task, some in work-clothes, tools in hand or on their shoulders, others idling momentarily, taking a momentary breather, getting in the way of the select visitors and considering us with the slightly satirical eyes of workers that one has just seen at work. All nations came together there: northern blonds, pale and plaid; brown loquacious Levantines; thick-lipped Africans whose teeth sparked in slightly cruel laughter; Chinese; Annamites with skirts tucked between their legs; and little Japanese shivering in their black lustrine blouses, inflated by the wind—which was free and violent at that height.

Above our heads, on the iron framework rising from the original foundation of the edifice, immense cranes were turning, causing metal beams and girders to rotate. As far as the eye could see the motors were panting and skips coughing as they were emptied. The blaring of sirens and prolonged whistle-blasts punctuated the maneuvers, but only the sonorous song of hammers riveting iron rose clearly above the rumble into which all the other noises of the colossal city made of an infinite number of construction-yards melted.

"What do you think of it?" whispered old Bourdon, the doyen of reporters, impressed although he had seen a great many things during 30 years of service.

I shrugged my shoulders amid the crowd of people were jostling to get to the head of the procession. "You see," I shouted to Bourdon, from a distance, "if whoever undertook this construction hasn't got a secret objective...he's a mere madman."

I struggled, stuck between two giants whose resistant inertia ended up annoying me. "Let me pass, then!" I exclaimed, looking at each of them in turn.

Two workmen, it seemed, properly clad in European dress—but they were bizarrely exotic. One had a short muzzle, slightly green-tinted skin and bovine eyes; the other a straw-colored complexion and the gaze of a tiger, which filtered between slitted eyelids, with a meat-porter's fists at the ends of his arms. They stood side silently, letting me pass in front of them, but they continued to follow me, without taking their eyes off me.

I succeeded in getting close to the hero of the celebration and the ministers. I arrived at the moment when Goldfeller was introducing Piérard to a white-haired old man bowed down by a frock-coat, as if he were unused to wearing one. The President of the Council shook his hand effusively.

"Where have you been?" Luneau asked. "You've missed the introductions. Our host is bringing out his collaborators: chemists and physicists who have manufactured producers never seen before; if you believe them, they're going to turn the world upside-down, and everything is being studied here that is necessary to ensure the happiness of humankind. The old man with the white hair is...what's he called, Buridan?"

The stout Buridan of the *Express-Globe*, who had gone around the world flat out several times, mopped his brow as he retorted: "Rassmuss."

"Rassmuss," scoffed Luneau. "That's fine name for a sorcerer, eh?"

"Don't mock," Buridan interjected, with the nasal accent of an "old boy" of Battery Place. "Why are you always mocking, Luneau?"

"But what is all this?" I said. "What's it for?"

Buridan advanced his shaven lip, circumspectly. "All I can tell you," he affirmed, "is that Goldfeller's a very powerful man."

"Do you know him well?"

"I met him two years ago in Winnipeg, last year in Bombay, and I interview him in the company of the starvelings of India, for my articles on world poverty—remember? I saw him strew money around everywhere without counting it."

"And where does it come from, his fortune?"

"It's said that he's found out how to use Moissan's electric furnace¹ to good effect, and that he can manufacture precious stones as well as nature—that's why they call him the gem king."

"Pooh! Is he the one who found it? How do you know that he's not exploiting someone else's idea? Old Rassmuss, for example. The *bluff* king, at the most."

I was speaking loudly enough for the comment to raise a laugh. Looking around with a satisfied expression, I met the staring eyes of the two giants of a little while before, standing behind me. They too were smiling as they looked at me.

"What does it matter?" Buridan went on. "Here's a man who can make an idea fruitful that another might have left unproductive, and who's building a tower of iron, as the pharaohs rewarded themselves with the luxury of the pyramids and the sphinx; that makes work for the workman, raises the price of manpower and materials. Who's complaining? For the moment, it's resolved the social question."

"Hurrah for Goldfeller!"

"That's very true," said the director of the forges of Ancion, in the middle of a group. "At the present moment, unemployment no longer exists in the iron industry from one end of Europe to the other. All the available workmen have been drawn here, and the other countries of the world are furnishing their contingents, as you can see."

"But is there no danger for the future?" I remarked. "Vast as they are, these construction-works must come to an end. What then?"

What demon prompted me? What instinctive acrimony always drove me to search for possible flaws in an enterprise whose enormity alone was sufficient to win the enthusiastic unanimous consent of all the official visitors?

Goldfeller seemed not to have seen or heard anything, entirely absorbed by the concern of furnishing the ministers with the explanations they were rather timidly soliciting. In his wake, the procession advanced around the circular boulevard that overlooked, on one side, the vast rural extent, and on the other, that vast metallic forest, which, under the impulse of that man, was driving the accumulated effort of his rancor toward the sky. In its endless valleys and at the tips of its prodigious bristles swarmed a host of workers, in obstinate masses and audacious clusters, whose activity seemed eternal. Except that, as we passed by, through the construction-sites, the men arranged themselves into compact ranks, shouldering their tools; in response to an overseer's whistle behind us, the work resumed.

At intervals, a brief pause immobilized the entire crowd. The dry voice of the "Gem King" was heard, replying to a few questions in curt sentences, discouraging replies and persistence.

"The level of this circular boulevard indicates the general plane of the work; within two months, these metallic valleys will be flattened under a uniform ground."

"How high do you intend to go?" asked Scordel.

"1900 meters—a round number."

¹ The French chemist Henri Moissan (1852-1907) attempted to use an electric arc furnace to synthesize diamonds from the common form of carbon, but did not succeed.