

THE CHIMERICAL QUEST

I

Then the maid exclaimed: "It's someone for Monsieur!"

And she pulled the door shut forcefully, to hide the secret of the next room.

Silence filled the drawing room: a thick silence, so heavy that one had the impression that it was about to break the windows. It took a few minutes for Paul Duffaure to distinguish a noise in that silence. On the mantelpiece, between two candlesticks, a clock was alive, and its heart was swinging tranquilly to the rhythm of the seconds.

The furniture was Empire, excessively waxed. The rep of the chairs was showing its weft. A goat-skin, promoted to the rank of wolf-skin by the will of the dyer, covered a Récamier chair whose feet had lost their bronze claws.

In the center of the bouillotte table a white rose was shedding its petals. Its stem was short; attentive hands doubtless cut it every morning to prolong the flower's agony. The ceiling was eczematous, the carpet had leprosy. One sensed the humble poverty of apartments cleaned twice a month by an unenthusiastic housekeeper.

Mediocre engravings seemed to be hung at random, but that was only an appearance. *The Battle of Navarino* hid a stain and *Napoleon at Rivoli* masked a rip in the wallpaper.

Paul Duffaure approached several photographs grouped in a frame. One was of a soldier hunched in a trench-coat with stiff creases, who fixed you with a proud stare; another was of a young woman, perhaps pretty, who was brandishing a tennis racket; a third represented a chubby baby whose hair was ornamented by a ribbon tied with a butterfly knot.

Through the window, part of Bordeaux harbor was visible. The rising tide was bristling with little waves of yellow and viscous water. Opposite, a ship was being unloaded, and wheat was flowing in golden torrents. The gray mist was lowering the sky as far as the roofs.

The maid reappeared.

"Monsieur asks you to wait a moment..."

Short and stout, with eyes like a chicken, round and inexpressive, she shifted her weight from one hip to the other on the threshold. She did not hide her surprise that a stranger desired to see Monsieur Legrand, because the latter hardly ever received visits.

She was beating a retreat when the visitor slipped something into her hand.

"To thank you for being so obliging," he said.

It was a five-franc bill, which she turned over and over stupidly. The unexpected tip almost frightened her. "You're very kind," she stammered, eventually.

In order to interrogate her, Paul Duffaure adopted the falsely amicable tone of a minister visiting a hospital.

"Have you been in Monsieur Legrand's service for long?"

"Oh, yes, Monsieur," said the maid, with hypocritical modesty. "It will soon be twenty years."

"You knew him when was unimpaired, then?"

The maid's simian brow furrowed. "What, Monsieur?"

"When he had the use of his legs."

"Yes, Monsieur. He was as nimble as you or me. Unfortunately, the war took his legs."

"He's an amputee, then?" asked Paul Duffaure.

"Paralyzed by a bullet in the back."

To give more emphasis to her assertion, the maid bent over, dragging her slipper, feigning a sudden ataxia. Unimpressed by the mime, Paul Duffaure continued his interrogation.

“In spite of his infirmity, Monsieur Legrand works?”

The maid shook her head energetically. “No, Monsieur...he no longer works.”

“Doesn’t he occupy himself with scientific research?”

“Oh, if that’s what you call work...” In a smile of commiseration, she showed her false teeth, as tightly-packed and regular as the seeds of a corn cob. “He does, in fact, occupy himself with research. It distracts him, poor fellow...”

“Is his laboratory in the house?”

“The corner where he potters around? A shed at the back of the courtyard.. That’s where he spends his days.”

“Have you heard mention of his latest discovery?”

“Oh la la!” she exclaimed. “Have I heard mention of it? Every day, Monsieur...every day, for years.”

“In what terms?”

She blinked slyly. “He’ll tell you that himself. He has his ideas about that, you know...anyway, here he is...*au revoir*, Monsieur.”

She swiftly beat a retreat. The castors of an armchair squeaked on the parquet, and Monsieur Legrand appeared.

He was a poor exsanguinated and emaciated individual, wrapped up warmly in faded plaid. The hair of a poet sprang up in a gray flame above his forehead. The thin lips were pursed in a bitter—or perhaps simply dolorous—crease. The square chin indicated a solid will. In the depths of the blue eyes, a kind of timid pride was distinguishable, with hints of suspicion and generosity. Suffering having ravaged his features, he was reminiscent of an aged child.

A tall swarthy fellow, his Arabic features emphasized by a meager goatee beard, was pushing the armchair.

Before the visitor had even bowed, the voice of the paralytic rose up, slightly hoarsely: “Monsieur Paul Duffaure?”

“Of the *Echo*,” the young man specified.

“Ah! You’re a journalist? What do you want, Monsieur?”

“To see you. I’ve come from Paris for that...”

“You have time to waste!” sniggered Legrand.

The journalist blushed imperceptibly, and continued without being disconcerted: “I’d like a chat with you...”

“I’m listening,” riposted the invalid, pulling himself up in his armchair.

Paul Duffaure darted an indecisive glance at the Arab.

“Ali doesn’t count,” said Legrand. “He never leaves me. I can’t do without him since a stupid steel slug made me the rag I am. But have no fear—he’s discreet.”

Legrand’s gaze, keen and tranquil,” made Paul Duffaure ill at ease. In the refallen silence, the noise of the little smithy of the pendulum was amplified.

The journalist suddenly made a decision. “Monsieur, I know that you possess the secret of gold.”

The Arab’s eyes were distant, pensive. Legrand passed a fleshless hand through his hair. “Really?” he said, unemotionally. “Who told you that?”

“It has been affirmed to me.”

“And you believe it?”

Paul Duffaure hesitated. “Why should I doubt it, Monsieur? Science can render so many miracles possible.”

“So you believe in the transmutation of metals?”

“Yes!” said the reporter. He did not have the slightest preconceived idea, because he was utterly ignorant of the problem.

Legrand stirred in his seat. “Who revealed the nature of my work to you?”

“I promised to keep the secret...”

The invalid was not content with that reply. "It's probably that idiot Beyerlein?"

Paul Duffaure judged it superfluous to deny it. "Yes, Monsieur, it was him."

"Well, he'd have done better to hold his tongue."

"He's so enthusiastic..."

"What do I care about his enthusiasm? Enthusiasm is often only a proof of impotence. If I've told him anything, it certainly isn't so that he can blab. For the moment, my affairs only interest initiates. It's true that I wrote to him, because I imagined that he was involved in the Great Work. As he flatters himself on making progress along the path traced by the ancient hunters of chimeras, I wanted to confide in him. I see that he's betrayed me. Yes, Monsieur, betrayed!" He struck the arm of his chair with the sudden anger of a sick man. "Beyerlein had no right to launch you on my heels! For years and years I've been seeking in silence. My task demands concentration, above all else."

The journalist attempted to get a word in: "Glory is the finest recompense..."

"I have a horror of glory!" exclaimed Legrand, his face crimson. "I only ask one thing: to live long enough to complete my work. I'm not a charlatan, Monsieur!"

The Arab, his eyelids half-lowered, studied the intruder ironically. But Paul Duffaure knew his *métier*. Frequently rebuked, he never quit his victims without having extracted sufficient information from them.

"Monsieur," he said, "I'm not entirely a profane, for I'm passionate about alchemy."

"You've studied the science, then?"

"My God, I...yes, a little..."

The invalid looked him straight in the eyes, with such acuity that he dared not persist in his lie.

"I'm quite ignorant; nevertheless, I divine marvels. Followers don't have to be as knowledgeable as apostles. I'm ready to transcribe, faithfully and scrupulously, what you reveal to me..."

"What I reveal to you?" snapped Legrand. "Nothing at all! I have no revelation to make, Monsieur."

"However, you have found..."

"I've found nothing, and I won't find anything. Ali, show Monsieur out."

Without taking offense at the discourteous measure, Paul Duffaure persisted: "One moment more, Monsieur. Before throwing me out—which won't prevent me, I assure you, from making up an interview—listen to me for one moment. My director, Monsieur Gellé, willingly takes an interest in bold enterprises. If, by chance, his aid would be useful to you...he's extremely rich..."

"I'm not a beggar!" Legrand retorted.

The young man restated his idea in another form. "If his financial collaboration would be agreeable to you, I can do my best to obtain it."

Legrand passed his hand through his hair again. The gesture had to be habitual.

"Please excuse me," he murmured, after a few seconds of reflection. "I must seem boorish. I'm subject to fits of temper that have no other cause but my physical condition..."

"The journalist understood that he had almost won the game. Concealing a smile of triumph, he took pity on the fate of the sick man.

"Are you in a great deal of pain, Monsieur?"

"No, but the paralysis of the legs is complete. As soon as I try to stand up, I crumple up like a rag doll."

Paul Duffaure raised his eyes to the ceiling. "Oh, the war...!" he sighed.

"It was at Hartmannswillerkopf that I was left like this.¹ A banal story, in truth. After a patrol I was left between the lines..." He turned to the Arab still standing behind him. "My brave Ali came to find me. I owe him my life..."

"Three months before," the Arab put in, in correct but slightly guttural French, "Monsieur Legrand had saved me at Woëvre."²

¹ The Battle of Hartmannswillerkopf was a series of engagements fought during 1915 for the strategic possession of a pyramidal peak in the Vosges, which cost thirty thousand lives—mostly French—but ended in a stalemate, and both sides redirected their attention to more northerly points on the Western Front.

“Well, we’re quits,” replied Legrand. “The government of the Republic pays me a nice pension...” He ruffled his hair again. “I don’t have any reason to complain, because, fortunately, my daughter works. She’s a dentist. Thanks to her, I don’t want for anything. People have indulgence for my manias. They let me pursue my research, but they aren’t far from treating me as a madman...”

“Oh...!” protested Duffaure, politely.

“Even my daughter!” the invalid insisted, without acrimony. “Fundamentally, she’s not entirely wrong. It’s disquieting, a fellow looking for the philosopher’s stone. In the twentieth century, that takes on a slightly outdated appearance. And yet, my friend, my madness is an austere wisdom. There’s not the slightest fantasy in that struggle of man against inert and mysterious matter. I’ve continued the prodigious work of Al Farady, whose manuscripts I once consulted in Leyden. I’ve tried to understand Paracelsus, and instituted myself as the heir of Nicolas Flamel. It required learning a great deal, and forgetting a great deal. Saint Thomas Aquinas, Arnault de Villeneuve and Roger Bacon furnished materials for the edifice that death prevented Raymond Lull from constructing entirely.³ That edifice, I’ve finally concluded.” His voice became almost strident. “I am the man who is no longer awaited; I shall become the master of things and men.”

His eyes flamboyant, his diaphanous hand seemed to be holding the scepter of the world. A quasi-divine force emanated from that mutilated body. In the penumbra of the gently falling dusk, he was radiant with a supernatural light. And the tall Arab behind him appeared as straight and silent as an archangel.

Concerned with realities, Paul Duffaure said: “So you’ve made gold, then?”

With an emphatic solemnity, Legrand declared: “I have made gold.”

“That’s marvelous,” said the journalist. But his wonderment remained artificial.

As for the Arab, he looked down at his master indulgently, as a mother contemplates her child when he declares, which brandishing a wooden sword: “I’m a generalissimo!”

Legrand’s fever vanished abruptly. He seemed suddenly to shrink in his armchair. “Yes,” he muttered. “You’re like the others, you think I’m afflicted by mental alienation. I have all my common sense, though, Monsieur...”

“I don’t doubt it,” Duffaure affirmed.

“Yes you do, but it doesn’t matter. I’m used to the incomprehension of others; it no longer amuses or exasperates me.” He explained, more to himself than his interlocutor: “You can’t imagine how that secret weighs upon me, and yet, I dare not reveal it. It’s so formidable! But for the war, perhaps I’d never have found it. One works better when one can’t live like everyone else. Asceticism has its merits. Immobile, I’ve traveled an immense road. You, Monsieur, who are scrutinizing my face with perplexity, don’t know and can’t know what I’ve done. It smacks of prodigy. I’m poor, and experimental chemistry is very expensive. I lack materials. My first decigram of gold cost me several thousand francs—all of my daughter’s dowry!”

“You must already have recuperated that sum.”

“I haven’t produced any yet. I’d need radium.”

The journalist made a note. “Ah! You employ radium?”

“It activates the transmutation.”

Duffaure thought the moment favorable for obtaining precisions. “Could you give me a few details?” he asked, in his most honeyed tone.

“Oh, gladly!” said Legrand, ironically. “I apply the principle of my predecessors: splitting compounds in order to return to the component. The list of simple substances, which everyone knows to

² The reference is presumably to the French Woëvre offensive launched in April 1915, although the Woëvre plain, between Luxemburg and Toul, was a constant arena of confrontation between French and German forces in the Great War.

³ Most of the names on this list of famous supposed alchemists are familiar, the exception being “Al Farady,” which might be a corruption of the name of the 10th century philosopher Al-Farabi, or Alfarabius, who is credited with one book on alchemy as well as numerous others.

be arbitrary, is diminishing by the day. There are hardly any simple substances; there's doubtless only one of them, solid, liquid or gaseous..."

"Gold, perhaps..?" Duffaure suggested, timidly.

The invalid shook his head. "The gold state certainly isn't the primal state. It's rather the sidereal ether, a strange substance of fantastic density, which we call, ingenuously, the void, and imagine to be extraordinarily light. A void cannot exist in nature! We'd understand that if we had the notion of the fourth dimension...but I beg your pardon. I'm becoming tedious."

"On the contrary!" the journalist protested. And, returning his interlocutor to the subject that interested him: "With what substance do you begin?"

"With a metal whose specific weight is similar to that of gold: lead."

"Lead is considered to be a base metal..."

"That's a conventional idea! Lead is no more base than gold or platinum. That's what almost all my predecessors tried to transmute. More fortunate than them, I've succeeded."

"Astonishing!" exclaimed the journalist, in order to flatter Legrand.

"No more astonishing than the analysis of the air by Lavoisier, the synthesis of acetylene by Berthelot or the treatment of pitchblende by Curie..."

Paul Duffaure plunged resolutely into banality: "Science marches with giant strides!"

The invalid did not share that opinion. "It crawls, Monsieur, it crawls!"

"But the field of human knowledge is growing broader every day."

"We're still ignorant of the majority of fundamental principles; we're floundering in empiricism. Radium overturns the pretended laws of physics and chemistry, the theory of relativity demolishes the laws of gravitation. That doesn't prevent Einstein from being as far from the truth as Laplace or Copernicus. Nature doesn't yield her secrets kindly; it's necessary to tear them away from her. Gold is everywhere...perhaps in the air, certainly in the water. The sea contains a little more than six milligrams per ton..."

Paul Duffaure was not about to allow the illuminatus to lose himself in generalities. "Do you have gold here that you have manufactured? I'd be delighted to see it."

"Ali, the box!" Legrand ordered, laconically.

The Arab went out silently.

Satisfied, Duffaure cracked his knuckles. "Monsieur," he declared, emphatically, "You're going to become the most famous man in the world."

"And the most ashamed."

"Why?" asked the journalist, surprised. "Because of your wealth?"

"Oh, I won't take any personal profit from my discovery. Anyone will be able, like me, to make gold as he pleases."

"Everyone will be happy, then!"

Legrand laughed sardonically. "What an error! I have no intention of making humankind happy. A misanthrope, I hate humans as they are. It pleases me to do them harm."

"Do you think you're persecuting them by enriching them?"

The invalid rummaged in his hair. "You're young, Monsieur. You don't reflect much. In a few months, like everyone else, you'll execrate René Legrand, the wretch who will have permitted all his fellows to become billionaires."

"On the contrary, we'll bless him."

"Surely not!"

Ali came back in, carrying a wooden box, which he set down on the bouillotte table. The white rose abruptly shed the rest of its petals, but neither Legrand nor Paul Duffaure interpreted that as an omen. Ali turned the commutator, and the drawing room filled with light.

With his stiff fingers, the invalid tapped the box. "Gold!" he announced.

The word resonated like the chime of a bell. All the joys and dolours of the earth were in that syllable.

The Arab lifted the lid, and Duffaure, excited, looked inside.

At the bottom of the box he perceived blackish, spongy scoria, which seemed to him to be as devoid of value as iron slag.

“That’s gold?” he said, disappointed.

The paralytic observed him ironically. “Yes, Monsieur, it is. It really is gold—my gold, as it emerges from the crucible after the formidable work of fire. Were you expecting to find twenty-franc coins in my box?”

“It’s the color that surprises me,” the young man admitted.

“Heat has naturally blackened the surface.”

The journalist weighted one of the fragments in his hand. “Oh! How heavy it is...” He scratched it with his fingernail, without result. But someone had scratched the porous mass previously; Duffaure discovered a line of beautiful yellow gleams. From then on, he no longer doubted the nature of the metal.

“Keep it,” said Legrand. “Pass it over a touchstone in order to convince yourself.”

That demi-pauper was giving away gold, at least a hundred and fifty grams. It was so paradoxical that Duffaure wanted to refuse. He rummaged in the box.

“This one, then—it’s not as big.”

At the host’s table, when the fruit-basket is passed, well brought up people always choose the smallest pear. They are, however, no better considered for that than those who take the largest.

“It’s not a magnificent gift,” said the invalid, with a disdain into which he put a certain affectation.

“A precious souvenir for me,” protested Duffaure.

“You’ll have difficulty selling that unstamped ingot...”

“I don’t want to sell it, but to keep it.”

“Political economists claim that wealth one keeps is worthless.”

“I’ll photograph it to illustrate my article,” said Duffaure.

“Oh, that’s true, you’re going to publish an article,” Legrand mocked. “Not too many scientific heresies, eh?”

“Have no fear,” the other retorted. “True, good journalists almost all treat subjects about which they’re ignorant, and make what they’re saying comprehensible without understanding it themselves. Nevertheless, I need a few technical notes. Does the transmutation take a long time?”

“Only a few minutes—the time taken to bring the mass to the requisite temperature.”

“And you obtain pure gold?”

“Yes...it only remains to melt it and strike coins.”

“Thanks to you, then,” Paul Duffaure joked, “France will perhaps be able to pay her debts.”

“She won’t have to pay them any longer, because they’ll fall to zero. Creditors and debtors will be at the same point. That’s my dream, Monsieur! Every louis in circulation is stained with blood. To obtain a few particles of precious metal, people are dying of cold and hunger; others have their throats cut. From now on, they’ll have all the gold they want.”

“It will be El Dorado.”

The invalid’s face took on a malevolent rictus. “Or Hell,” he replied. “People will no longer kill one another in order to acquire wealth, but to be able to spend it usefully. That will be worse.” Foraging in his hair, he changed his tone. “When will your article appear?”

“The day after tomorrow. I guarantee that it will be a success.”

“As long as there isn’t a crime of passion or a parliamentary scandal that day.”

“That wouldn’t be sufficient,” Duffaure replied, cheerfully. “To push you into the background it would require a typhoon on the Basque coast, a volcanic eruption in the Auvergne or the assassination of the President of the Republic.”

“Serious people will accuse you of lying...”

“I don’t detest polemic.”

“Are you ambitious, or paid by the line?”

The journalist opened and reclosed his mouth without breathing a word. Yes, he was ambitious, but he was still in the first manifestation of that virtue: vanity. His hair was wavy and styled; he ruined

himself buying cravats and his shirt-front was false, but not very large; one might have thought that it was real, on condition of not biting it.

“After all, it’s good to be ambitious,” Legrand philosophized. “It permits one to remain young for longer than others. Unfortunately, my discovery will deal a rude blow to the greater number. Thanks to it, in fact, social inequalities will no longer exist. Everyone will be able to give his measure without being hindered by pecuniary cares. The deluded and the indecisive will suffer, but if you have the soul of a Caesar, I’m delivering Europe to you!”

That gift did not seem excessive to Paul Duffaure. He would have refused the direction of a modest factory, but would have willingly accepted a throne. Even kings think that, in order to lead people, it is useful not to know very much.

At that moment, a woman entered without knocking, with the bold step that one has in one’s own home.

“My daughter,” the invalid introduced her.

Mademoiselle Legrand murmured a “Pardon...,” to which the journalist responded with an exceedingly worldly bow.

She was beautiful: brunette, with a mat complexion and immense eyes. A certain charm emanated from her person. She had a perfect mouth and an opulent bosom. Men are sensible to such adornments.

“Monsieur is a journalist,” Legrand explained. “He’s come from Paris to contemplate me at close range.” He turned to the visitor. “I can’t remember your name.”

“Paul Duffaure,” the other repeated, humiliated by that forgetfulness. He straightened his jacket with a swift gesture and stretched out his right leg, because he was rather proud of his socks. On principle, he always made the most of himself in the presence of woman. The tactic had already been worth a few benefits to him, but he was still waiting for a resounding victory, without knowing over what enemy.

Mademoiselle Legrand embraced her father placidly, picked up the rose petals, and did not cast the slightest glance at the irresistible sock.

“You know,” the invalid continued, “I’ve let myself go...I’m divulging the secret of gold.”

“Too bad,” she said.

“Oh, Mademoiselle” protested Duffaure, with a sixteen-tooth smile. “Why too bad?”

“She’s regretting her tranquility,” sniggered Legrand.

“No, I’m regretting yours....”

There was an infinite tenderness in the young woman’s voice. She raised her hand, full of petals, and breathed deeply of the perfume of the dead flower.

“Mademoiselle,” commenced Paul Duffaure, with all the seduction of which he was capable, “don’t exaggerate the annoyances of celebrity. I concede that it’s sometimes aggravating, but it also reserves a few joys...”

“I have a horror of those joys,” declared Mademoiselle Legrand.

“You’ll see, Mademoiselle, you’ll see...!”

The young woman ceased sniffing the remains of the rose. “Papa,” she said, “Rosita wants to know whether you want a steak or a cutlet.”

The invalid laughed silently. “To be happy, it’s necessary to restrict oneself to that preoccupation: steak or cutlet...what do you think, Ali?”

The Arab, still motionless behind the armchair, appeared to wake up from a dream, and replied gravely: “Cutlet.”

“We demand cutlets!” cried Legrand. “Monsieur Duffaure, tell your readers, if they’re anxious to know, that we adore mutton!”