

THE SACRED FIRE

I. The Temple

“There’s a step,” said Lucia.

She was standing on the threshold with a torch in her hand. The door was at the bottom of a slope on the side of the villa. The entire house, save for that retreat, was plunged in silence and obscurity. There was no silver stripe in the gaps of the shutters to divulge the interior life. A trellis embroidered with ivy surmounted the triangular wall near the door to the tunnel, and the moon, aided by the nocturnal breeze, made the sharp and dreamlike shadow of the foliage tremble on the white façade. Lucia’s torch was also trembling, and paling in the pale air. The young woman, clad in a long black robe, evoked the image of welcome at the entrance to the catacombs. Saint-Maur saluted her with a smile over which a vertical finger put a cross of complicity. Then, making his companion the same sign to be quiet, he drew him inside.

There were ancient high-ceilinged cellars beneath the house. From outside, their existence could not be suspected, because the foundations of the house left no visible opening. Doubtless the ventilation of that part of the dwelling was enabled by secret passages, and lamps must burn there continuously. Such enclosed solitudes were found in the neighborhood of large cities, which served as the habitation of the mysteries. Every human city is ringed by houses for phantoms. With a divination of that vicinity, the dead too are sent into fraternal suburbs.

They were under the somber vault, and the door immediately closed behind them, as if invisible hands had been awaiting the signal. The two young men shivered at the sudden impact, but Lucia made a sign that they should follow her. Their silhouettes danced in the torchlight over their footsteps in the corridor, sometimes following them with the blackness of their movements, sometimes elongating over the vault, cut or twisted by the projection of a ledge. They passed several closed doors barred with iron, and two or three bays guarded by grilles, behind which stairways plunged into the darkness. At the turning of the steps down below, a night-light fanned the walls with a dubious light. Then the route went round a bend, and Jean Derève perceived the entrance to a vaulted room, into which their guide introduced them. She designated seats next to a table surmounted by candelabra, and disappeared.

Once alone, the young men consulted one another with their gaze, exchanging mute impressions. The fashion in which they had been brought was strange. A carriage had awaited them at the exit from Saint-Maur’s house, with a companion they recognized by means of words agreed in advance. They had been asked to permit their eyes to be blindfolded. That was the obligatory ceremony of excursions of this sort.

They remembered the vehicle going through the evening streets then, by roundabout routes deflecting all conjecture, and eventually rolling along a road that appeared to them to be outside the city, without them being able to determine in which direction they were going. A fleeting impression when they got down in front of the house and the blindfold had been removed had enabled them to suppose that they were at the end of some deserted avenue, near a wood. Perhaps all the twists and turns had not taken them very far, and the city was hiding close by, behind two or three curtains of trees.

They also knew that after their introduction, having made an oath of silence, they would be left at liberty to find the way back. That mystery, not of long duration, did not trouble them.

For the moment, they were solicited by the aspect of the place. They saw a kind of narrow cell, which must have been made for waiting, only furnished by dark wooden seats and a table. The walls, like those of the corridor, were made of stone separated by lines of cement; it was the décor of church walls and cloisters. That geometric disposition was the only ornamentation. They could have believed that they were in an Egyptian hypogeum, inhabited by a population of silent mummies gilded by immortality, or

one of the chambers located inside pyramids, linked by long dark corridors, over which the mass of triangular granite weighs, while outside were clouds of sand stirred up by the desert wind, the sun and the cries of birds.

There are mysteries that requite lugubrious clearings in the forest, with the rustle of leaves and the pale face of Hecate through the black braches and the frightened howling of shepherds' dogs. Others are celebrated underground, fleeing the gaze of the blue sky, where the intermediation of gnomes or vagabond sylphs is invoked.

No rumor came from the rooms that must be nearby, separated from one another by the walls of the foundations. A few minutes went by. Jean Derève became discouraged. He had only accepted the initial precautions with great difficulty. An anxious desire had caused him, after successive vain experiments, to entrust himself to Saint-Maur. Like many others, he was in search of a formula for life, but his desire had become an impatience. Why were these delays and veils of ceremony always disposed at the entrance to the sanctuary? Would the truth not have gained from being shown suddenly, stark naked? The memory returned to his mind of other initiations whose exterior preparations had only been romantic jugglery devoid of purpose. He did not think that mystery belonged equally to the rites of wisdom and error. It was appropriate that different things had similar appearances, in order that one could employ reasoning.

"We have to resign ourselves," Saint-Maur said, "to finding veils everywhere. Isis is always under the mantle. You're complaining about a darkness whose contrast alone makes light. The High Priest of Jerusalem only entered the Holy of Holies once a year. It would not have been the Holy of Holies if the crowd had had the leisure to penetrate it every day. Think of the cavern of Arabian tales in which the precious gems and sacks of gold are heaped up, the door of which only opens to those who know the magic word.

"You think that deceptive forms have duped us too frequently by their appearances. A fine knight of adventures, truly, the man who is astonished to encounter enchantments, monsters and mirages in the forest, and who would like to see the hospitable threshold of the castle appear at the first bend, without going astray. You know that the chatelaine ought only to be smiling, that the pages ought only to be walking clad in gold and lace, and the brass trumpets ought only to be sounding to welcome the weary and sad visitor whose mantle is torn by all the thorn-bushes. But even if the ritual walls that loom up before you only have symbolic value, they must be accepted.

"The winner of the ancient games penetrated his natal city on his return by means of a breach made in the wall. Honor is signified by effort. Pythagoras spent thirty years in silence and study before being initiated into the Egyptian mysteries. All things differing, one can at least approve of the ceremonies that remind us of the difficulties. Anyway, I can hear voices through the thickness of the walls."

An invisible bay opened nearby, and Lucia returned. She was holding two red cloaks over her arm. The two companions put them on and followed her into the corridor. Other turnings, cleverly adapted into the restricted space of the subterrains, formed a veritable labyrinth, the extremity of which, for the range of voices and light, was a long way from the exterior. A corner crossed showed them, in a square niche in the wall, a statue that they recognized as that of Harpocrates, the god of silence.¹

Lucia glided ahead of them; her black robe with moving pleats put bat-like shadows around her. One right-angled corridor was so narrow that they had to pass through it sideways one by one. It was a souvenir of epochs in which the research of obscure things had been regarded as a crime and the friends of the occult had been obliged to defend their dwelling. There are images that represent a vanished necessity. Events disappear but forms endure. Many present rituals have that significance.

Lucia knocked on a door that was suddenly perceptible, which had a resonance of heavy wood. It swung on its hinges soundlessly, however. A bright light struck their faces, at the same time as perfumes and the sound of voices, and the visitors had the sanctuary before them.

It was a vast subterrain in the form of a hemicycle, with a much higher ceiling than the corridors. Only a few steps led to the lower level. The entrance on the threshold of which the young men were

¹ Harpocrates was a Greek adaptation of the Egyptian god Horus specific to Alexandria; that origin allowed his subsequent association by modern occultists with the supposed Gnostic phase of the Hermetic tradition.

standing occupied the left of the diameter. They saw a bare room with the same regular design of stones. An odorous smoke blurred all the details. On each of the five arched walls with apparent ridges that formed the semicircle, wrought iron fittings bore yellow candles. Another, central light was coming from the long opposed wall; Saint-Maur and Derève supposed a hearth set back in its depth from the line.

In the low middle of the room, gray swirls of perfume were tinted with red light, rising like an exhalation toward the ceiling. The latter, posed over the bare walls, was painted pale blue, on which faint golden figures—lines, orbits and spheres—depicted the various systems of the world, with planets and comets, according to Copernicus, Ptolemy and the primitives. Around the subterranean men were standing clad in cloaks similar to those of the visitors, who remained on the threshold, somewhat nonplussed, awaiting a summons.

One member of the audience separated from the semicircle, conferred momentarily in a low voice with someone who could not be seen, hidden by a projection of the wall at the top of the staircase, and then came toward the young men. His face, like all the others, was almost entirely hidden by a vast hood, which the two newcomers did not have. There is no impression more anguishing than that of finding oneself with one's face uncovered, in a gathering of unknown and dissimulated persons.

The greeter, once having reached the highest step, said: "You do not know us, but we know you who you are. Before it is permitted for you to witness our sessions, swear to keep silent about everything you might hear and everything you might see. We shall leave you to return to our midst or to leave forever, as you wish. Everyone decides. But if you leave, you must forget, and never take the road that leads here with a profane. Make the oath.

"By what is it necessary to swear?" asked Saint-Maur.

"By the goddess."

They attested to the goddess that they would keep the secret.

The introducer took them by the hand and led them down the steps. Then they were taken to the center of the assembly. A man with his back turned to the hearth was in front of them, and in shadow, but the light was behind him, so he symbolized the obscure conductor toward it.

"What do you request?" he said. His voice was clear with a resonant timbre, enabling the supposition of a young man. His tone was reassuring.

Saint-Maur, instructed in advance, spoke first.

"We request the light."

The interrogator added: "What do you know?"

"Our ignorance," said Saint-Maur.

"You will still be ignorant, since you are human, and for humans, to understand is to be brought back to humanity. You will still see with your eyes and you will hear with your ears. No one can even conjecture what things are in themselves. In order to know them in their essence, it would be necessary to be at the center of everything and each individual thing in particular. Have you even penetrated the nature of your soul and its place in infinity? But there is no real center. The true world only exists in the vision of an intelligence; enable your mind to become a center. You will have found the absolute when you know that everything is relative and you know more relationships.

"Forms are held together and summon one another by a mysterious bond. The universe is like a sumptuous fabric. As soon as one seizes it, it unfurls entirely, embroidered with signs in gold and crimson. You will never lift, even in moments of ecstasy, the sacred veil of Isis, but you might surprise, at any moment, a different movement of the goddess and find her present everywhere. The name under which you worship the universal law is unimportant; it has no name and no face. The supreme thought that is manifest will only ever exist for you in its manifestations. The sole objective of science is to attain unity.

"The value of the word is purely that of a symbol. A sign of the identical unknown that we perceive in everything, it marks the front with an emblem that reminds us of that identity. Seek to know the laws, instead of asking in a puerile manner whether their creator exists, and under what form imitative of human form, and whether his name is Zeus or Jehovah. Astronomers know that it is only for us that the stars are named Aldebaran, Cassiopeia and Sirius.

“That is why you must refrain from mistaking the formula of our research for a reality. If anyone tells you that we worship fire, believe it, while not believing it. You are in the sanctuary of the most ancient religion. It is the one from which all the others have come. They have preserved some of its rites, mingled with crude and new superstitions, but all flames and all candles are lit at the same altar. We have chosen the symbol that appears to us to be the most venerable and the best. In order to speak to humans it is necessary to speak human language. All things are signs, however, and signs of other signs. After having seen, you can only conjecture.”

The man who had spoken appeared to be the high priest, or at least the initiator. When he fell silent, all the members of the audience sat down in chairs, the high backs of which bore figures engraved in the wood. They were arranged against the wall; the assembly thus formed the magical semicircle. The high priest occupied the center. The hearth was now visible in front of which he was standing: a vast niche hollowed out in the wall, arched in form, floored with paving stones, with a flue above it.

The flames of the burning wood, almost a furnace, shone violently, The pellicle of gray dust, the image of cooling stars, did not have time to form over the ardor of red embers. A perpetual breath of air stimulated them. To each side of the hearth, on the wall of the room, there were two fountains with the heads of chimeras in green bronze, to pour water into two round stone basins set on the floor. Everything seemed made to be interpreted.

The assembled audience no longer formed a perfect circle. That is a figure that represents the absolute, and the most fortunate image by which we can express our impotence to express it. However, like all definitions of the world or of God, it is a sterile formula. One cannot enclose being—or, to put it another way, becoming—within a closed line. Circumference indicates repose and achievement. Life is movement and perpetual exchange. But the semicircle preserves the possibility of the beyond. It is continued by two parallel lines that extend into the distance and whose appeal is prolonged to the limits of supposed space. And if we are, in our inferior nature, the reflection of a higher nature, as Plato thought, the semicircle aspires to completion by another, actual or created by us, but situated in infinity. The focal point placed in its axis is also the reflection of another focal point.

Those thoughts were engendered, confusedly, in the minds of the visitors. They had the impression of living, momentarily, in a milieu haunted by symbols. But symbolism is all of literature, all of art and all of religion. It is the reduction of things to unity, the discovery of the same rhythm in the diversity of planes. Christ only spoke in parables, and everything is similar. The secrets of ancient science and magic are enveloped in legend, like transparent veils. Great poets are those who encounter unexpected and accurate images—which is to say, new relationships.

The décor differed here from the usual banality, or rather, it had the perfect banality that is a harmony. Only the red cloaks, the color of which was a natural concession in the sanctuary of fire, put a romantic note into that discreet concert. Jean Derève evoked other séances. He reviewed the various initiatory interiors previously traversed, in which the cult of Isis, as well as that of the Great Architect,² was adorned with faded garments and cabalistic figures in gilded cardboard. How many temples had the sole aim of permitting the priests to live on the credulity of the fervent! He remembered naked swords crossed over the heads of the audacious, and Hebrew words pronounced on the threshold of equivocal sanctuaries by people so ignorant that they pronounced them purely because to them, they were Hebrew.

But perhaps, he thought, sadly, that was the foundation of everything, and images are always required to amuse the human child; the most delicate require more artistry in the line and the color.

Meanwhile, the high priest continued:

“Do not form a judgment of what you have seen before having meditated. All forms can only suggest, without representing, the unknown gods. The mages of all times have sought the unique principle. Some have believed that they had found it, and the result as the same, for the truth is revealed under one or other of its appearances to those who invoke it with a pious heart. There is no futile prayer, and sincere errors are errant on the route of the absolute. The act of faith to the veritable deity is

² The Great Architect (of the Universe) is the deity of freemasonry, within which tradition Martinism and modern Rosicrucianism evolved before separating therefrom.

composed of multiple invocations to all strange idols, and the name of the Supreme Being consists of the numerous syllables that denominate the numerous false gods. That is why, and to appease the secondary demons as well as the transitory powers, we have accepted as a departure the rite of the four elements. The quaternary is sacred. What does it matter whether we address our preliminary homage to mobile water, with Thales, to subtle air, with Anaximander, or to the earth, mother of humans, since everything is resolved in fire. Worship with us the four elements.”

Immediately, the faithful rose to their feet and started to march around the room, stopping at the third circuit. One of them went into a neighboring room to fetch a light column whose superior tablet was broad and covered by a black veil. The irregular pleats of the veil hid objects of worship.

“This black veil,” said the High Priest, will be for you the somber chaos in which all the elements are buried. What a powerful hand it required to bring them out of primal chaos!”

He lifted the cloth, a cup appeared full of water, which was water, a vase full of salt, which was earth, and a rose, to signify the perfumes of the air.

Then everyone remained silent. The High Priest had thrown the veil into the hearth. The elements were created. The somber object flew away into the chimney like a crimson flag. There were a few minutes of slight anguish. Then, slowly, in the calm air, a voice rose that appeared to come from the depths of the earth. Afterwards the accompaniment of an organ also very distant, commenced. And, changing the words in a minor key, the subterranean voice pronounced the orison of the water elementals:

*Masters of the ocean and all the shores
Who hold in power the moving ground of the waves,
Kings of caverns, the rain and clouds
Whom spring summons to the doors of enclosures,
You who come to open the source of springs,
And fecundate the bushes and the powerful oak,
Enabling to circulate in the network of veins
The limpid water changed into their sap and blood,
We here salute your magical power,
And your voice speaks to us with the sound of great waters,
But we also understand you in the music
Of the summer spring that cradles the birds.
Heights that reflect the profound immensity,
Depths that exhale you into the heights,
Give us the true sense of life and the world
In which eternal exchange is the true creator.
Pour into our hearts the love of sacrifice,
In order that, having become better and wiser,
For the divine redemption of error and vice,
We can offer you water, blood and tears.³*

The voice fell silent. The hierophant took the cup and poured a few drops of the ground, in libation. The cup passed from hand to hand, until the last. It was replaced, empty, on the sacred column.

Meanwhile the organ rumbled, and the sanctuary was surrounded by a tumult similar to that of great waters. The voice rose up again, but it appeared to be coming from a profound retreat. It was the earth elementals that it invoked:

O you who haunt the human vault beneath our feet,

³ The four parts of this invocation had previously appeared in the literary section of the November 1900 issue of *L'Initiation*. A similar ritual is described in Victor-Émile Michelet's "Holwennioul," published in his occult periodical *L'Humanité Nouvelle* in 1899, although that ritual also includes the swords treated dismissively here.

*And make it tremble over its profound gulfs,
In the name of the seven torches of the sovereign night
Lead us toward the light of which we dream.
Reveal to our eyes fixed on the mystery
The lost talismans of the holy city,
Which you keep hidden in the bosom of the earth
Under the seal of silence and obscurity.
Master of nocturnal laborers whose task
Is to reunite the gold of the dispersed veins,
As soon as we have labored relentlessly
With the sure hope of being recompensed,
Magnify our hearts for future labors,
You who inspire us with the occult and its desire,
And who wear, reigning over obscure splendors,
The sky on a finger, like a sapphire ring.*

As he had done for the water, the priest lifted the vase, took a grain of salt and placed it on his lips. The members of the audience did likewise, and the voice continued, imploring the elementals of the air:

*You whose breath creates and destroys all form,
Spirit who travels borne on the wings of the wind,
Your respiration populates enormous space,
Life is like a shadow to your moving gaze.
You guide, alternated beneath a magical power,
The ravens of night and the doves of day,
Enable, with the light of your mystic soul,
The breath of amour to penetrate our depths.
One day, to the eternal movements of this world
All wanderers will be encountered by others,
And, dreams mutated into profound verity,
Roses will grow on the branches of cypresses.
Like shipwreck victims battered by the tempest,
We are struggling in the horror and error of dusk,
But our hearts have known the preparatory calm,
And the dawn is as odorous as a censer.
Vast sigh that silenced the ancient creator,
Mouth of shadow exhaling the eternal mystery,
By means of perfumes, colors and music,
Baptize us in the subtle and fraternal air.*

Everyone respired the rose. The sacred objects were taken away; the assembly formed the circle again and, all its members prostrate, listened to the orison of the salamanders, the demons of the inferior fire.

*Eternal, uncreated Father of all things,
Whose triumphal chariot rolls over the world,
Real fire of Eternity, Cause of causes,
Inspire us with the prayers to be offered to you.
The throne where you sit dominates the expanse,
Nothing escapes the immense gaze of your eyes.
Every word pronounced is heard.*

*Grant our prayers, you who hide behind the gods!
Compared with your splendor, the stars are mere ash,
You shine in the height of the sky as within us,
Into our obscurity deign to send down
The light of which the suns are jealous.
Reign over us by means of heat and light,
Cold shadow is the mortal sister of the void,
Every ray surging from the primal source
Creates a new world in the gaping abyss.
We know that from your unique power are born
Souls, desire and amour, the golden torch,
Beneath the vain formula and the ancient image,
It is always you that humans have adored.
All the sacred mantles are only shrouds
In which resuscitate form and the only God,
And lamps are on the threshold of various sanctuaries,
As witnesses of the true worship, that of fire.*

For it was appropriate to invoke the supreme element with more solemnity, and to implore it first in its humblest manifestation. Terrestrial and perishable fire, to the surveillance of which the salamanders are appointed, is only the least reflection, in the distant obscurity, of the immortal and primitive fire. The latter respire the infinite. On the road that leads to it, as the highest image visible for us, is the Sun.

And that was the prayer to fire. The same servant stood up, and went to take from a cupboard firmed by a hollow in the wall, a red book, which he brought piously to the middle of the room.

He deposited it on a light and high table and opened it. The letters were black, arched in form. The yellow paper was tinted with nuances in which the appearances of smoke and flame were recognizable. The reader chanted:

“I salute you, Ignis, Agni, lamb of fire, Ormuz. Osiris, Mithra, who are manifest by way of Yama, the thunder, and by way of Athene, the lightning. Father of Phobos and Hephaestos, it is to you alone, under various names, that humans render homage, to you alone, O our god.”

A response ran through the religiously attentive audience:

“*Soli deo, deo soli!*”

“I salute you, you who are born and die at the solstice and emerge from the sepulcher on the third day, Adonis, Adonai, Jesus, god of the pyre and the cross. Merciful and cruel God, Moloch requiring victims, brazen bull with ardent flanks, eye that shines at the center of the triangle and flame that it summarizes, angel that appeared in the bush. I shall turn my gaze toward the Orient, where you triumph incessantly, and from which you rise toward the zenith, to succumb in the Occident. By your fall, the glorious sea is illuminated in its depths. The glaucous and somber populations that its abysses contain, have your revelation every evening. On your sparkling tracks people and humanity go.

“I shall turn my eyes toward the Occident where you flee in order to carry life beyond. The watchers look out for your approach, and the mountains are crowned by temples consecrated to you, O Helios, Saint Hélié.⁴ Rising sun, surrounded by a cortege of hours in roseate robes, pouring flowers of joy from their hands. Flame of the heart above the earth, lightning-flash, star in the sky, fire that consumes offerings and divine fire that receives them, shadow of the ineffable cause, blinding for mortal eyes, you who are born of two mothers and who have your cradle for a tomb, it is in you alone that we ought to believe and to whom we should sacrifice; to you alone, O solar god!”

The voice of the recitation was impregnated with fervor. Then it fell silent.

⁴ The reference is not to Saint Hélié of Lyon, but rather to the Abrahamic prophet usually known in English as Elijah, sometimes called Élie or Hélié in French; the author prefers the latter term in order to forge the link with Helios.

Perfumes poured from bronze cups over the red embers emerged slowly in dense white swirls of smoke, toward the vault, like the columns of an unreal temple.

A different voice continued:

“And I salute you also, among humans, the discoverer of fire, Prometheus!

“What unjust forgetfulness spreads its shroud over you, father and creator?

“It was a crime to want to possess the god, Had he truly made humans in an hour of wrath, that he was irritated by your theft? But bow down before his jealous fury, for he has allowed you to keep the shreds of the mantle, crimson and gold, that you stole. Everything that he wants is just and good. He has not chained you to your rock for eternity. The thrust of the sword causes a spark to spring from the rock, and you climb up again toward the gods to perpetuate your memory by means of the lamps that watch over the various altars. True Adam, you rediscovered the sacred fire lost by the first Adam. It is your story that all the sibylline books contain.

“O Prometheus!

“We have been the slaves of the clouds and the wind. Do you recall human life before the invention of fire. But he came to soften the curbed forms of iron for weapons and the plow. The earth gave wheat. Flame hollowed out trees and the first ship floated. Let it cry humankind! It conquered the face of night. When the god disappeared in the decreasing crimson of the horizon, having become blue again, instead of invoking the pale moon or obscure goddesses by means of incantations, we stimulated, in order to render homage to him, the shining shadows of the sun.

“Lamp!

“Vacillating torch of the miner who plunges, by way of sloping subterrains, into the region of heavy air.

“Lamp of the laborer curbed by night over the blank sheet or the page of a book; the light is in his soul as well as around him.

“Lamp of amour that fearful Psyche approached to the unknown!

“Spark come from above, what poet of works in the fabulous vanished night pronounced the breathless emotion of the first undulation of your blue flame?

“Glimmers of summer hidden in the hollows of old trees, from which we make them surge forth, like ancient shepherds, by striking two white stones, enabling the nymph with the golden hair to appear from the centenarian oak.

“Take homages in your hands, like garlands of red roses, and rise again toward the solar god.”

Silence reigned again; but it was troubled. Indistinct noises were coming from the door. Moans and sobs were heard. All of them directed their gazes toward...

“The adoration of fire,” said a voice.

The perfumes of cups flowered myrrh and aloes. An odorous smoke misted the room and oppressed hearts. The torches gleamed beneath a veil. A religious torpor almost suffocated the members of the audience, and in the atmosphere, in which red and fleeting gleams enlaced, fatigued eyes were ready to see the strangest forms, by means of the fantasy of evocation.

Meanwhile, the sobs continued on the other side of the wall. They were mingled with ecstatic plaints. A new pity seemed to be begging to be received. The High Priest headed toward the entrance and the visitor.

The door opened, and a man appeared: an old man with twisted limbs, a grimacing face furrowed by deep wrinkles, he evoked the supreme limits of age. His appearance was sudden and bizarre. A black robe with wide sleeves, secured at the waist by a rope, dressed ineptly a dwarfish and disproportionate body, with an enormous head covered in gray hair. One might have thought, on seeing the gaze of his green eyes, that he was a veritable gnome emerged from some fantastic realm. It is certain that envoys from the neighboring world live among us. The entire person of the old man inspired alarm.

He was seen to descend the steps jerkily, hopping from one foot to the other. He could not aid himself with the walls. His hands were hidden over his breast by a flap of his robe. With crawling movements, turning from one side to the other, he came all the way to the middle of the room. Each of his movements was accompanied by the same sobs, marks of madness of emotion. Suddenly, however,

having reached the center of the curved line formed by the initiates, as if at a real focal point, he straightened up and was almost august. His arms were disengaged from the folds of the robes, and the young men perceived a small object shining on his hands, raised and joined.

In the midst of bewildered starts and acclamations, Jean Derève, aided by his companion's smile, sensed present impressions fusing with a vanished memory. He knew the talisman that the clenched fingers were holding aloft. Curious about occult things, he had been amused by the story, as a poetic legend; but he had to believe it now.

No jewel approaches for beauty a fragment of an ardent furnace. Red is the color of blood and life; but precious stones are like dead beauties. If fire did not pale and fall into ash, if it could remain as it is in the heart of a hearth it would be the most splendid of rubies. No rajah of fabulous India possess anything similar in his treasures. Tradition requires the existence of that impossible jewel to be accepted.

A mineral whose nature could not be precisely determined served as a pretext for all that worship, and its mysterious nature was not in contradiction with the new suppositions that stupefied science sees realized every day. The properties of substances differ. That means that each contains and reveals a form of energy. Some are luminous. Others can, with brightness, produce a constant heat. In the midst of adorations and ritual precautions, they kept the fiery stone discovered by a Bohemian, whom the poetic imagination had made into a messenger of the sun. For, with the brightness of the most beautiful rubies, it was also a perpetual ardent coal. It burned without being consumed, and its redness, which passed from vivid to dark, for the various joy of the eyes, was not a deceptive symbol. Visible Fire, at its approach all hands, including those of the most pious, became profane. One could no more grasp it than a firebrand. It was intangible, like flame, lightning and mystery. That is a religious quality, for our corporeal person. And certainly, with the love of the extraordinary that is human, such an object can sustain astonishment better than fetishes of wood or stone. It has not always required as much for people to make a god.

It could be compared to the philosopher's stone, or the ember placed by an angel on the lips of Moses. According to the legend, the talisman had been conserved in a sanctuary in India, sheltered in a hollow granite container sculpted in a triangular form to signify the pure fire represented by the pyramids, and then, after several voyages, transported to Europe. A faithful follower, doubtless one of the last descendants of Asiatic worshippers, a guardian of the occult tradition, jealous of exposing it to the gaze of his brethren and of making it the occasion of ceremonies, had undertaken to set the jewel in a metal bezel. It is appropriate that every idol can be presented by the priest above the prostrate crowd, to receive prayers and vows. The discovery of a metal capable of retaining the stone without being damaged by the contact had demanded patience and an entire lifetime. Now, the man to whom its pious care was entrusted elevated in his hands a light reliquary, from the heart of which it cast its durable fires around. But by virtue of keeping the talisman captive in its metal circle during the hours of religious penalty, the hands of the worker, gloriously burned, were deformed and mutilated. It was said that they could no longer serve any other purpose than holding the reliquary in a definitive grip. Black and twisted, they retained the indestructible marks of the wounds made by the god.

Meanwhile, the uninterrupted groans of the old man were mingled with the invocations of the entire audience. Some, standing in various parts of the room, in ecstatic poses, seemed to be challenging the idol. Others, fallen to their knees, their heads buried under their cloaks, were sobbing hectically. Appeals in all languages were overlapping, for there were doubtless initiates in the modern city who had come from the most diverse regions, united by a common faith.

The scene became tragic. The red smoke undulated, making bodies appear, at the whim of the flames, in strange attitudes, like the forms that one dreams for a subterranean inferno. The High Priest remained motionless, sitting in his chair in the middle of that human swell, his eyes on the stone and the old man. He represented, in a fleeting vision, the bleak master of the Sabbath seen in ancient prints, his hand on his chin and his elbow on his knee.

The young men, nonplussed, and understanding that those men were unaware henceforth of the presence of strangers, feared some unexpected development. As they took refuge by the door, it opened slightly, and the silhouette of Lucia made a shadow. She beckoned to them from outside.

When they were in the vestibule, she closed the door behind them, through which clamors were now audible. They traversed the narrow and winding passages again. Jean Derève and Saint-Maur reached the room where they deposited their red cloaks. Then Lucia conducted them, in the diminishing echo of distant voices, to the external threshold.

She saluted them with a smile and the same gesture of silence. They had the bewilderment of a sudden contrast. Trees of all shades of green were agitating in the breeze. The sun was nascent in its freshness, and there was a slight joy in respiring, while mist was rising from the landscape in order to vanish impalpably, like another incense, toward the red disk on the horizon.