

III. The Greenhouse

Once outside, and exposed, it seemed to me that everything was spying on me, and I threw myself precipitately into a little wood next to the greenhouse. Then, fighting my way through a tangle of brambles and creepers, I headed for my objective.

It was very warm. I went forward with great difficulty, with a thousand precautions, in order to avoid revelatory scrapings and stumbles. Finally, the central dome of the greenhouse and one of its lateral bulges loomed up in front of me. It presented itself side-on. Discretion demanded that I make some initial observations without emerging from the wood.

What struck me immediately was its tidy appearance, its state of perfect maintenance; there was not a single displaced flagstone in the surrounding pavement, not a single broken brick in the foundation. The carefully-fitted blinds had all their slats, and in the narrow gaps between them, the windows glistened in the sunlight.

I listened. No sound reached me from the château or the grey buildings. In the greenhouse, there was silence. Nothing could be heard but the immense chatter of a hot afternoon. I plucked up my courage. Having approached furtively, I lifted up one of the wooden blinds and tried to look through the window-panes—but I couldn't see anything; they had been coated on the inner surface with a whitish substance. It was becoming increasingly probable that Lerne had diverted the greenhouse from its original purpose and was now using it for a very different cultivation than that of flowers. The idea of vats of microbes, simmering beneath the warm lights, seemed quite plausible to me.

I went around the greenhouse. Everywhere, the same coating—of varying thickness, it seemed—intercepted my sight. The partly-open ventilation panels were high up, out of reach. The wings had no door; one could only get into them from the central part, at the back. As I continued going round, scrutinizing the brickwork and glass that was no less opaque, I soon found myself on the château side, facing my balcony.

That location, being too exposed, was perilous. Being war-weary, I thought it best to go back to my room, abandoning the ostensible exhibition-hall of bacilli without visiting its façade. I limited my investigation, therefore, to a dejected glance, which unexpectedly informed me that the mystery was open to me. The door had only been pushed to, but the fully-extended bolt testified that some stupid person had imagined that he had locked it. Oh Wilhelm, you priceless scatterbrain!

As soon as I went in, my bacteriological hypothesis was obliterated. A gust of floral scents greeted me—a warm and humid gust, with a hint of nicotine.

I stopped on the threshold, wonderstruck. No greenhouse—not even a royal one—had ever given me the impression of unbridled luxury that I felt immediately. In that rotunda, surrounded by all those sumptuous plants, the first sensation was that of being dazzled. The entire gamut of greens was played as a chromatic scale on keys of foliage, amid the multicolored tints of flowers and fruits, and those splendors were magnificently stages on the steps ascending toward the cupola.

My eyes nevertheless became accustomed to it, and my admiration gradually faded. Certainly, in order for the winter garden to have made such an immediate impact, it had to be composed of plants that were quite remarkable in themselves, for, in reality, no harmonic artistry had been put into their arrangement. They were grouped according to their classification, not under the dictation of a spirit of elegance, like some Eldorado confided to the care of a policeman. Their groups were brutally separated from one another, into so many categories; the pots were lined up in military ranks, each one bearing a label that was more suggestive of botany than gardening, exhibiting less art than science. That circumstance provided food for thought. After all, could I admit for a single instant that Lerne was still a gardener for his own pleasure?

In pursuit of information, I paraded my hypnotized gaze over all the marvels, incapable in my ignorance of putting a name to any of them. I tried, nevertheless, mechanically—and then that luxury, which a collective examination had shown me in the capacity of rarity, perhaps exoticism, began to appear as it really was....

Incredulous, and gripped by a feverish curiosity, I inspected a cactus. In spite of my lack of knowledge, I could not be mistaken about it, but its red flower confused me. I examined it minutely, but my perplexity only increased. There was no possible doubt: that fanatical flower with the insolent gaze, that firework that shot up green to burst into fiery stars, was the flower of a geranium!

I went on to the next plant: three bamboo stems rising from the soil, whose colonnettes, in the guise of capitals, were coiffed with dahlias!

Almost fearful, breathing distorted perfumes in short inhalations, I interrogated my surroundings and their miraculous incoherence was suddenly obvious. The reigns of spring, summer and autumn were combined there, and Lerne had doubtless eliminated winter, which snuffs out flowers like candle-flames. All sorts of flowers were there, alongside all sorts of fruits, but not one had sprouted on its native plant or tree.

Clusters of cornflowers garnished a stalk abdicated by hollyhocks, which now brandished a blue thyrus. The bristling branches of an araucaria now bore the indigo petals of gentians. And along a trellis, among nasturtium leaves and on the network of its serpentine stem, camellias became the siblings of varicolored tulips.

Opposite the entrance door, a clump of bushes rose up against the glass wall. The tallest of the shrubs attracted my attention. A few pears were hanging from it, although it was an orange tree. Behind it, two vine-stocks worthy of Canaan garlanded a trellis, their giant grapes as disparate as the stems; one bore yellow fruit, the other purple, but every product of one of them was a Mirabelle plum, and of the other a damson.

Then, on the branches of a minuscule oak on which several rebel acorns were obstinately forming, walnuts and cherries were visibly keeping company. One of them was an abortion; neither nut nor cherry, it formed a grey tumor streaked with pink, monstrous and repugnant.

Instead of resinous cones, a fir-tree was studded with chestnuts like radiant stars, and flaunted a strange contrast as well: oranges, the suns of Oriental orchards; and medlars, like the posthumous fruit of tress that have died of cold.

Not far away more fully-fledged miracles crowded together. Flora was jostling Pomona there, as the worthy Demoustier might have put it.¹ The majority of the constituent plants were unknown to me, and I only remember the most common, whose names are familiar to everyone. I can still see an astonishing willow, a bearer of hortensias and peonies, peaches and strawberries—but the prettiest of all these hybrids was surely the rose-bush with asters for flowers and little red apples for fruit. One bush in the middle of the rotunda mingled the disparate foliage of holly, lindens and poplars; pushing them aside, I was able to verify that all three emanated from a single stem.

It was the triumph of grafting, a science in which Lerne had made prodigious strides in the last 15 years—so much progress that the spectacle of his results had something disquieting about it; when he improves on life, man produces monsters. I felt a kind of malaise.

By what right does one disturb Creation? I wondered. Is it permissible to turn the age-old order upside-down to this extent? Can one play this sacrilegious game without committing treason against Nature? If these doctored subjects were even in good taste! Deprived of genuine novelty, though, they're nothing more than bizarre alliances: varieties of vegetable chimeras, floral fauns, half one thing and half another. On my honor, whether this work is graceful or not, it's impious—and that's all!

Whatever he had wrought, though, the professor must have toiled long and hard to bring this work to completion. The collection proved that, and there was other evidence of the scientist's labor; on a table, I perceived a number of vials, sharp grafting-knives and gardening-tools, which glittered like surgical instruments. Their discovery sent me back to the flowers, and on closer inspection I understood all the indignities to which they had been subjected. They were plastered with various sorts of gum, wrapped around by ligatures that were almost bandages and streaked with notches that were almost wounds, from which dubious fluids leaked. There was a gash in the bark of the pear-bearing orange tree. It looked like a gently weeping eye.

I was becoming irritated. Would one ever have thought it? I was assailed by a ridiculous anguish as I gazed at the surgically-modified oak... because the cherries put me in mind of drops of blood.

Plop! Plop! Two of them, having ripened, fell at my feet like the first drops of a rainstorm.

Already, I was no longer possessed of the calm necessary to consult the labels. They only informed me of a few dates, and that Lerne had covered them with indecipherable Franco-German terms, further obscured by erasures.

With my ears pricked and my forehead in my hands, I needed a moment's rest before recovering my composure, and I opened the door to the right wing.

A little aisle extended in front of me. Its glass ceiling filtered the daylight, attenuating it into a blue-tinted twilight, which was singularly cool. My footsteps resounded on the tiled floor.

There were three aquaria gleaming within the room: three tanks of crystal glass so clear that water seemed to be holding together of its own accord in three geometric blocks.

The two aquaria to either side contained marine plants. They did not appear to be much different from one another. The rotunda had, however informed me as to the methodical way in which Lerne classified everything, and I could not believe that he had separated two absolutely identical tanks. I therefore looked attentively at the algae.

Their fronds combined to form the same submarine landscape on either side. To the right and the left, arborescences of every color encrusted the rocks with their rigid and bifurcated stalks. The sandy bottom was strewn with stars reminiscent of edelweiss, and sheaves of chalky rods sprouted here and there, at the end of each of which sprouted a sort of fleshy chrysanthemum, yellow or violet. I can't describe the host of other corollas; they often resembled unctuous calices of wax or gelatin; the majority offered indefinable hues and imprecise

¹ Charles-Albert Demoustier (1760-1891) was the author of *Lettres à Emilie sur la mythologie* [Letters to Emily on the subject of Mythology], which mingled verse and prose but always retained a pretentiously colorful style of expression.

contours; sometimes they were mere edgeless nuances in the midst of the water. Bubbles emerged by the thousand from an internal tap, and their tumultuous pearls raced madly along the dendrites before rising up to burst at the surface. On seeing them, one might have thought that it was necessary to sprinkle that aquatic garden with air.

Having summoned up my schoolboy memories, they informed me that the two floral displays, dissimilar only in detail, were composed exclusively of polyps: equivocal creatures such as corals and sponges, which naturalists consider intermediate between vegetables and animals. Their ambiguity never fails to excite interest. I tapped the left-hand tank.

Immediately, something unexpected appeared, swimming by contraction, like an opaline Venetian goblet that remained malleable. A second, purple in color, crossed its path. They were two jellyfish. The tap of my finger had, however, provoked other movements. Like yellow and mauve pompoms, the sea-anemones withdrew into their calcareous tubes, then re-emerged to blossom rhythmically. The arms of the starfish and spines of the sea-urchins undulated lazily, grey, crimson or saffron yellow in color. As if stirred by an eddy, the entire aquarium came to life.

I rapped on the glass of the right-hand tank. Nothing moved.

That was conclusive. The division of polyps into two receptacles permitted me to obtain a better grasp of the link they constituted—which, uniting the animal and the vegetable, makes humans relatives of blades of grass. At this junction between two organized kingdoms, the active creatures on the left formed the base of their own scale, and the inanimate ones on the right the summit of theirs. The former were beginning to turn into animals, while the latter were settling for being plants. Thus, the gulf that seems to separate these two antitheses of the world is reduced in structural terms to slight, almost invisible divergences—distinctions less striking than those between the wolf and the fox, which are doubles and almost brothers.

Now, that infinitesimal distinction of organization, which science regards nevertheless as insurmountable because it separates inertia from spontaneous movement, *Lerne had bridged!* In the tank at the back, *the two sets of species were grafted on to one another.* I observed there some sort of gelatinous leaflet of the impassive sort, grafted on to a mobile stalk, which was now also able to move. *The grafts adopted the estate of the plant that supported them;* penetrated by a vivifying sap, indifference became animate, while activity was paralyzed by the force of a rigidifying sap.

I would gladly have made a careful inspection of the various applications of this principle, but a jellyfish, this time linked to some sort of seaweed, was struggling madly within that mossy net, and I turned away, prey to disgust. This final stage of grafting, in spite of the difficulties, completed the profanation in my estimation, and my eyes searched the blue twilight for less disturbing visions.

The professor's apparatus was ready for his use. A dresser accommodated an entire pharmacy. Four tables with unsilvered glass tops alternated with the aquaria, carrying an arsenal of knives and torturers' pincers...

No! Lerne had no right! It was as infamous as murder! More, even. The odious operations he performed on virginal Nature combined the horror of murder with the ignominy of rape!

As I abandoned myself to that righteous indignation, I heard a noise. Someone was knocking. Ah! That will be the hellish torment of my ears: to hear, beyond the grave, that tiny little tapping! In a flash, I felt every nerve in my body. Someone was knocking! With one bound, I was in the rotunda—and my face must have been a terrible sight, for the fear of an adversary drove me, instinctively, to make it frightful.

There was no one on the threshold, and no one in the grounds.

I went back in. The noise started again. It was coming from the wing I had not yet explored. Losing my head, I ran toward it, heedless of my temerity, at the risk of finding myself face to face with peril.

I was so overexcited that I bumped my head on the door as I jerked it open. Enervation and extreme fatigue had reduced me to that weakness—and I still wonder today whether they might have hallucinated me slightly, and caused things to seem even more bizarre than they actually were.

An intense light flooded the third hall and permitted me to reassure myself without delay. On a workbench there was a cage, set upside down, which was jumping about, thanks to a rat imprisoned within it. When the rat jumped, the cage jumped—whence came the noise. On seeing me, the rodent became quiet. I did not attach any importance to that interlude.

This place, less tidy than the preceding ones, looked like an ill-kept greenhouse. Bloody towels thrown on the floor, however, and scalpels lying randomly amid unemptied test-tubes, testified to recent work that might excuse the confusion.

I started my investigation. The first two witnesses to appear did not tell me much. They were two modest plants in ceramic pots. Their Latin names have vanished from my memory—which I regret, for they would give my narrative more authority as well as more resonance—but who, on hearing their common names, could not conjure up a picture of a spray of plantain and a tuft of hare's-ear?²

² The French name for hare's-ear, *oreille-du-lapin* [rabbit's-ear], is more apt in context, given the subsequent reference to a rabbit, but the plant known in English as rabbit-ear, *Linaria vulgaris*—also known as toadflax—is

The former, it's true, is an exceptionally long and supple species. As for the second, there's nothing odd about it; following the example of its namesake—a very successful counterfeit from which it takes its apt name—it conscientiously produces imitations of a dozen large auricular lobes. On two of these silvery hairy leaves and one of the plantain stems, at the base, a bandage displayed its bracelet of white cloth, seemingly stained brown by tar.

I sighed in relief. *Very good!* I said to myself. *Lerne has inoculated them. This is only a repetition of what I've already glimpsed, or perhaps even a preliminary experiment—simple, timid and awkward, if I'm not mistaken—a step on the way to the eventual phenomena of the rotunda, which prepares for them as they prepare for the atrocities of the aquarium. To follow Lerne's progress, I should have started here, continued through the central Eden, and concluded with the polyps. Thank you, God! I've seen the worst...*

My train of thought was running on in this fashion when the plantain stem twisted like a worm. At the same time, an iridescent grey mass made a jerky movement that betrayed its presence behind the workbench. There, in the middle of a pool of blood, lay a rabbit with silvery fur. It had just died, *and nothing was left of its ears but two bloody holes.*

A presentiment of the reality of the situation covered me with sweat. It was then that I touched the furry plant. Having palpated the two treated leaves, so similar to ears, I felt that they were *warm and tremulous.*

My recoil hurled me against the workbench. My hand, clenched in revulsion, was shaking with the memory of the contact, as if it had touched some hideous spider; it collided frantically with the rat's cage, which fell over. At once, the rat leapt up inside its cage, writhing, biting and struggling furiously, like a creature possessed. And my bulging eyes went incessantly from the plantain to the animal and back again, from the stem that was still quivering *like a slender black snake* to the rat that *no longer had a tail.* Its wound had healed, but, following its somersault, the poor beast was dragging a sort of slack belt after it—a vestige of another experiment—which was attached to its side by a green shoot that had been inserted there.

That shoot, moreover, appeared to me to be etiolated.

Lerne was, therefore, going further up the scale of living beings! Now, he was grafting parts of superior animals and plants of various sorts on to one another! Infamous, but increased in magnitude, my uncle inspired in me the disgust and admiration due to a criminal god. His work was, however, less estimable than repulsive, and I had to pull myself together violently in order to continue my exploration.

It was worth the trouble, even if it was only an exploration of hallucinations. What remained for me to discover surpassed the nightmares of a madman: frightful, to be sure, but also comic, by virtue of a certain aspect of sinister burlesque.

Among the patients, which one displayed that horror most starkly: the guinea-pig, the frog or the shrubs?

All things considered, perhaps the guinea-pig was not so very remarkable. Might its pelt not have been green and grassy by virtue of the reflection of all those plants? That's possible. But what about the frog? The shrubs? What could one think of them? The frog the color of grass, its four paws buried in humus, planted in the middle of a pot like a plant with four roots, its eyelids closed, its attitude insensible and bleak? The dates that had not moved at first, and which no wind stirred—of that I'm certain—and yet, when they did move, moved in every direction? Their palmate leaves swayed very gently...it seemed that I could even hear them, but I wouldn't swear to it. Yes, the trees swayed, and came closer together with every oscillation, and suddenly gripped one another with all their green-fingered hands, and embraced convulsively, in anger or affection, either to do battle or to make love—how do I know? It's the same gesture, always brutal.

Beside the frog was a white porcelain dish filled with a colorless liquid in which a Pravaz syringe was submerged. A similar dish containing a similar syringe was set next to the shrubs, but there the liquid was red and was coagulating. I deduced that they were sap and blood. The dates having let go of one another, my trembling hand advanced toward them, and I counted the beats, as rhythmic as a pulse, that were perceptible beneath the bark...

Since then, I have told myself that one can feel one's own pulse when taking someone else's, and that fever was doubtless making my fingers vibrate with its measured flux—but at the time, how could I doubt my senses? Besides, the continuation of the story does not tend to incriminate my lucidity at that moment; instead, it testifies in its favor. I don't know whether the intensity of memory, in a case of possible hallucination, is an argument for or against that morbid state; at any rate, I recall the image of those monstrosities, emerging from the disarray of bandages and bottles amid the scattered gleaming scalpels, very clearly indeed.

Was there anything else to see? I checked the corners. No, nothing more. I had followed me uncle's work step by step and—as chance would have it—in the same order as its stages and its progress, rationally speaking.

I returned to the château without hindrance, and then to my room. There, the artificial vigor that had sustained me died away. While I undressed I tried, unsuccessfully, to recapitulate my campaign. It was already taking on the semblance of a bad dream, and I no longer believed in it. Could the vegetable kingdom be fused

clearly not the one to which Renard is referring; the Latin name that the narrator cannot remember is *Bupleurum rotundifolium.*

with the animal kingdom? How absurd! Even if plant-polyps are nearly animal-polyps, what do an insect and a leaf for example, have in common?

Then I felt a sharp pain in the thumb of my right hand; a little white dot, ringed in pink, was protruding there. While I had been going through the wood, something had stung me—but I was unable to decide whether it was the vengeance of a nettle or an ant. That sting having recalled my sense of possibilities, I had no further pretext for not accepting those accomplished by my uncle, and I continued my reflections along the following lines:

To sum up, Lerne has attempted to amalgamate vegetables and animals and to contrive an exchange of their vitality. His methods, judiciously progressive, have succeeded. But are they ends or means? What does he want to get out of it? I can't see that his experiments are susceptible to any immediate practical application, uses that a speculator could exploit; therefore, they aren't ends. It seems to me, moreover, that their succession is directed toward some further improvement, which I can imagine vaguely without being able to distinguish it clearly. My aching head seems to be stuffed with cotton wool. Let's see...perhaps the professor is also carrying forward other research projects converging on the same goal as these, knowledge of which would clarify the ultimate object. Come on, come on! A little logic! On the one hand—Lord, I'm tired!—on the one hand, I've seen vegetables grafted on to one another; on the other hand, my uncle has begun to mix plants and animals...oh, I give up!

My overtaxed brain refused to reason any further. I glimpsed, confusedly, the fact that in the matter of grafting, an entire branch of study had been neglected, or, at least, that the greenhouse was not its location—but my eyelids were heavy. The more I attempted to induce or deduce, the more confused I became. Last night's apparition, the grey buildings and Emma loomed up, aggravating my bewilderment with anxiety, curiosity and desire.

In brief, never had a feather pillow been the haunt of such gibberish.

It was a riddle.

Yes, certainly: a riddle!

Although the sphinxes still surrounded me, however, I could now distinguish them more clearly through the smoke—and as one of them had the lovely face and breasts of a young woman, I feel asleep with a smile on my face in spite of everything.