

THE MAN WHO COULD READ MINDS

Prologue

One of my relatives, who is a physician, has numerous amusing or boring books on his bookshelves; but he does not use them like you and me. He does not read them for the truths or the nonsense found within them; he regards them as remedies... exactly like remedies. He has classified them as pharmacists arrange their drugs in bottles.

Here are the books procuring sleep. He has had to limit the choice of those narcotics strictly because I have no need to tell you that, especially in the field of modern literature, soporific poppies are prolific. He has only had to collect the finest flowers of what our most sprightly academicians produce.

There are the works that have an emetic effect; they are abundant in sickening descriptions; many of them were composed in the famous Naturalist period.

On another shelf are novels that generate tears. My doctor recommends them to people who have got a speck of coal dust in the eye. The lachrymal flux expels the damnable particle, the rhombohedral form and sharp ridges of which cause such an excruciating pain.

Elsewhere are the aphrodisiacs. That is a pretty little corner of the library. I'm sure that you would ask me to introduce you to my cousin in order to visit it.

Alongside the aphrodisiacs are lined up the contrary remedies, the refrigerant duodecimos prescribed in the guise of nenuphar and valerian, the novels of Henri Bordeaux, treatises on morality and other calming potions. Brrr!

And here, finally are the stomachic books that generate laughter. Good God! How rare they are! Some authors advertise the pretention on making you split your sides, and only provoke yawns. In that regard, many humorists are catalogued by my cousin among the most efficacious soporifics.

I desire very keenly that, in that medical library, the novel that I am offering you might take its place among the digestive specifics, hilariants, tonics, cough mixtures and restoratives. I would have great pleasure in distracting my neighbor. I am not, however, striving for that effect, for, as they say "it has to speak for itself." I will confide to you what my cousin the doctor thinks about it.

Many of my colleagues describe the routines of everyday life for you precisely. They tell you stories exactly like those of which of you are an actor or a witness. You have been there and done that. If you are in commerce or industry you do not want to read in the evenings about frauds and bankruptcies. If you are married to a lively young woman you detest novels about cuckoldry.

Personally, I have resolutely avoided all plausibility. When polite Folly appeals to me I climb into her little airplane. She enables me to perform loop-the-loop, wing-waggles and spiral descents like a dead leaf. She has taken me into the clouds; that is the most exquisite country. Our novelists seem reluctant to make excursions there. Why? I don't know. But what did not their most illustrious forbears—Rabelais, Cervantes, Swift, Swift, Voltaire, and our good Master Anatole France, the historian of *Penguin Island*—do? Singing and dancing, they launched forth into the celestial realm of Fantasy.

Oh, my ravishing lady readers and my very dear gentlemen, I am not demented enough to slip surreptitiously into the company of those divine buffoons; but you love them, and I love them too; and I only aspire, in shaking my fool's bauble, to be their very humble disciple. They are not content to make people laugh. Certainly, they know how to activate their peers' zygomatic muscles, but they have another design: they want to communicate a little wisdom to their readers.

Secretly—very secretly—I caress the same hope.

My hero, Jean Pilgrim, manufactures strange spectacles that permit the observation of what is happening in the minds of others. Imagine that we all had spectacles of that sort! Oh, Madame, how would you hide your little rendezvous? Oh, Monsieur, how would you dissimulate your rascalities? Virtuous politicians, loyal diplomats, honest businessmen, upright financiers, you would be in a pickle; people would see through your petty intrigues only too clearly.

But I shall refrain from recounting in advance the ups and downs of my novel. The little that I am saying about it is only to lure the curiosity of my readers discreetly, and make their mouths water. Thanks to their admirable perspicacity, they have doubtless already divined that all the persons at whom my miraculous spectacles are aimed are forced to be sincere. And that, I dare say, Mesdames and Messieurs, is precisely what gives my naïve story an immense range—for sincerity, take note, is what is most lacking in the people of our time. If they are not seeking continually to dupe one another in order to enrich themselves, they are dissimulating their sordid little interests under great principles in which they do not believe.

In brief, if individuals and peoples had the courage to come together honestly for their common good and apply between themselves the verities that they all recognize in the depths of their conscience, the Earth, instead of being a lunatic asylum and a charnel house, would soon become a paradise. We are not yet there, unfortunately, but salvation is in the efforts that we are making in order to get closer to that blissful moment. Salvation, I repeat, is in sincerity and courage. It is in Pilgrim's spectacles.

Down with all hypocrisies!

Now I have no more to do than to organize my little advertisement, like my excellent colleagues. I shall have it announced everywhere that, profoundly obscure yesterday, I shall be the greatest of men tomorrow and will surpass all novelists, living or dead. My publisher will launch the five hundredth edition before having sold the first. My portrait will be exhibited in all shop windows, as an aviator, a matador and an acrobat. In many display windows, too, the public will contemplate objects of which I have made use: pens, pajamas, pullovers and mechanical razors.

Every day, from two to seven, except Sundays, I shall have a little table in the Place de la Concorde, at the foot of the obelisk, and I will sign as many flattering dedications as people wish, to anyone who asks. And in order to give more spice to this book, I announce that two months from now, an expurgated version will be published for the young and for chaste souls.

Paul Gsell, 1928.

Sincerity is to love what the sun is to a flower.
(Lao Tsu, *The Book of the Way and the Truth*)

Sincerity would save the human race.
(Confucius, *Moral Dialogues*)

I. A Prodigious Invention

Jean Pilgrim, an intern at Cochin,¹ was very agitated as he went down the Boulevard Saint-Michel one day in July 19***. He was walking very rapidly, stopping, taking a few steps backwards, resuming his forward course and then stopping again.

During one of those pauses, a little old man tapped him on the arm and said: “The water in the Seine is really too dirty...”

Pilgrim considered the stranger with surprise.

The little old man went on, quietly: “Don’t go drowning yourself, my friend.”

“!!!”

“To be sure, your mistress is beautiful, but she doesn’t merit being loved. And above all, she isn’t worthy of anyone dying for her.”

“!!!”

“You’re wrong still to love her.”

“!!!”

“Oh, I know, her body offers charming mysteries, but many other admirers know them as well as you do.”

“What gives you the right...?”

“Undoubtedly, the small black birthmark she has on the inside of her left thigh is exquisite.”

“How do you know?”

“My friend, I know many other things.”

“Like what?”

“You have just surprised your mistress with a dandy who promptly ran away from your wrath.”

“That’s true.”

“You howled your fury and you’ve sworn to break with the slut.”

“Who are you?”

“But you have her under your skin so much that you’re very close to retracing your steps in order to return to her. However, your despair is tearing you apart and you want to die in order not to see her again, so you’re heading for the Seine.”

“Are you the Devil?”

“If I were the Devil, I wouldn’t wish you well. Don’t go to drown yourself, young man. I’ll give you the means to forget your amour.”

“Are you a benevolent genius?”

“There are no benevolent geni. I simply possess the gift of reading souls.”

“Reading...?”

“Souls, yes, Monsieur. I read yours, and I feel sorry for you. You’re the victim of the frenzy of your twenty-five years. Exasperated as you are, you think all is lost because a silly girl has deceived you. At your age, in a moment of rancor, one commits suicide for less than that. I won’t let you commit that stupidity.”

“But that power of which you boast, the faculty of reading hearts, no one has ever...”

¹ In 1928 the Hôpital Cochin, named after Jean-Denis Cochin, the curé of the parish of Saint-Jacques-de-Haut-Pas, who founded it in 1780 for the workers and paupers of the quarter, was the most famous public assistance hospital in Paris; it is still an important research and treatment center.

“No one, indeed...but I have it.”

“That’s not possible.”

“Would you like me to tell you what you’re thinking at this moment?”

“Go on.”

“Well, you’re experiencing a terrible hatred for all women.”

“Indeed!”

“And you’re remembering with disgust the fat slut who plucked the flower of your innocence when you were fourteen years old.”

“That’s strange.”

“You had sold your Quicherat dictionary to a book dealer for a hundred sous. You noticed that whorish Venus. She asked you how much you’d give her.”

“That’s prodigious.”

“She thought that a hundred sous wasn’t enough and specified that you would also have to give her your umbrella.”

“That’s amazing.”

“It was your mother’s. You’d taken it because you’d mislaid your own.”

“I can’t understand it.”

“The beauty, going upstairs with you in a hotel, told you that she was in a hurry, that there was no need for you to undress...”

“Let me touch you, Monsieur. I’m wondering whether I’m dreaming.”

“You’re not dreaming. A little while later, your tender father gave you a slap and deprived you of dinner to punish you for coming home late and having lost your mother’s umbrella. Oh, the series of your amours began in an inauspicious fashion.”

“But how can you know...?”

“Would you like to know my secret?”

Slowly—very slowly—the little old man took off the spectacles that were straddling his nose. Then, fixing Pilgrim with an indefinable gaze, he said: “Put on these spectacles.”

Pilgrim hesitated. He kept the spectacles in his hand while staring at his interlocutor. Then he put them on, suspiciously.

What happened gave him vertigo.

Instantaneously, an iridescent vapor formed around the old man, reminiscent of soap bubbles. It was like a large, light veil deployed before the passers-by, the automobiles in the road and the houses of the boulevard. And on the undulating sheet, trembling like the warm mist that rises from meadows on mornings in August, Pilgrim perceived innumerable images, which seemed to be painted but which were in continuous motion, coming forward, retreating backwards, imposing themselves momentarily and then dissipating as if expelled by a gust of wind. Words and phrases were inscribed rapidly, appearing to dispute space, fading, vanishing, returning, and fleeing again.

He read:

I’m Ludovic Bernard, professor of psychiatry.

I’ve heard mention of that scientist, Pilgrim said to himself. He was famous twenty years ago, and he suddenly disappeared. Is it him I have before me?

In an apparent disorder, but which clear scenes dominated from time to time, he saw an entire life of study unfurl before him in half a minute: books, microscopes, test-tubes, laboratories and hospitals. And phrases were continually galloping, commentating on the scenes: cries of discouragement alternating with exclamations of triumph. One precept returned persistently: *Be good, be good. Take care. Do no harm to your fellows. Be good.*

Pilgrim could not weary of following the play of that prodigious magic lantern.

He repeated to himself: *What a fabulous invention! So it’s Ludovic Bernard whose thoughts I’m reading at this moment. He’s the one who possesses the secret of these spectacles, who has made the greatest discovery in history. Is it possible to dream of anything more improbable than the gift of reading minds distinctly? And now that troubling chimera is realized. I’m trying it out myself.*

Pilgrim was experiencing such a profound astonishment that he had forgotten his despair momentarily. In his inquisitive mind, scientific curiosity before such unexpected phenomena drove away any other preoccupation. He was breathless, almost anguished.

But the old man started talking to him without opening his mouth or moving his lips. The phrases floated in the vaporous halo.

My young friend, you're letting your astonishment show too much. People are looking at us; your attitude is attracting their attention. Constrain yourself, and resume a natural appearance, for I'd be annoyed if we had to furnish explanations to idlers.

Pilgrim replied in a low voice: "Let's walk a little. But you're overestimating my strength of mind in asking me to overcome my emotion."

Without unclenching his jaws, the old man said: *Do you understand now the usage you might make of these spectacles?*

"One could employ them usefully in thousands of circumstances."

La la—don't get carried away. It's your mistress I'm thinking about.

"Eh? What about my mistress?"

Go and look at her with these spectacles. Either I'm much mistaken, or you'll obtain some profit from putting this advice into practice.

The evocation of the adored and detested woman had revived Pilgrim's torture.

"All right!" he said. "But where shall I find you again?"

Still without speaking aloud, the old man replied by means of sentence that appeared silently in the iridescent nimbus: *I'll wait for you at my home.*

At the same time, Pilgrim saw on the dancing vapor the entrance to a house in the Rue Gay-Lussac, the number of which was fixed in his memory. He also read: *Note that I no longer call myself Ludovic Bernard. I've changed my name. I'm only known under the nickname of Père Toutfou.*

Pilgrim had no astonishment left for any further eccentricity on the part of his new friend. He shook his hand fervently, put the precious spectacles very carefully into the case that the old man handed him, and departed like an arrow for the Rue Monge, where his mistress had an embroidery shop.

In the shop, an assistant said: "Madame hasn't come out of her room."

He went in quietly.

His mistress, sated by amour, was asleep on the bed. She had not even repaired the disorder in which Pilgrim had surprised her a little while ago. Her crumpled chemise exposed her youthful brown-tipped breasts and her milky abdomen. On the flesh of the left thigh the famous black birthmark was smiling maliciously. In the hollow of the pillow, displaced obliquely, her short black shiny hair, heavy with moisture, formed an aureole around the pretty head and, shaved behind the ear, allowed the sight of a blue-tinted adolescent nape, freshly shorn.

Pilgrim observed his mistress with alternating hatred and lust. He would have liked to strangle her. He approached his clenched fingers to the sculptural throat, as firm as a young tree, scarcely marked by pale streaks at the places where creases habitually formed. Then he pulled his trembling hands away.

In her sleep she made a movement, and seemed to be extending her parted lips toward him, magnetic and perfumed, as if inhaling pleasure.

Almost vanquished, he leaned toward her and looked at close range at her closed eyes, fringed with long, thick lashes, which were fluttering imperceptibly. But the fatigue of the darkened eyelids recalled his grievances.

And Pilgrim put on the spectacles.

Then, alongside the profile of his mistress, he saw the silhouette of a masculine face whose lips were adapted exactly to those of the embroidery merchant. At the same time, he read: *Victor, my Victor, I love you, I love you.*

He uttered a hoarse howl, redolent with murder.

She woke up with a start.

Pilgrim was leaning over her, foam at the corners of his mouth, his eyes bloodshot.

In the semi-consciousness of the awakening, she was happy, for every woman retains the firm hope of subjugating a furious lover.

He wants to kill me, so he loves me, she thought. I need to recapture him. A medical student is always useful. Does one ever know? An inconvenient pregnancy, or some other accident. Pilgrim would be there. I need to hang on to my little intern.

“Aha!” said Pilgrim. “You need to hang on to your little intern?”

“What?” said the embroiderer, anxiously. And, pursuing her train of thought: *I need to act all the more prudently because this Pilgrim is the son of a good family, and in addition to medical care, he gives me a good monthly allowance.*

With that, she hastened to say: “My little Pilgrim, I adore you.” Inscribed on the aerial aureole was: *That’s not true. It’s Victor that I love.*

“Aha! It’s Victor that you love!” cried Pilgrim.

She looked at him anxiously.

“What! You know his name? But why be anxious about Victor? Victor is my brother.”

“Your brother, with whom I caught you naked?”

“I was going to tell you; Victor does massage and, as I have a weakness in the knee, he softens my kneecap. You can imagine that a brother is never more than a brother. It’s you alone that I love.”

Pilgrim read these silent words: *He’s so stupid that he’ll believe me. All men are easy to deceive, but nothing is simpler than putting one over on a young bourgeois like him.*

The lips went on: “You’re my unique amour, you’re my life.”

“Liar! Liar!”

“Calm down, my Jeannot,” she said. “I love you, I swear to you.”

But behind her head the truth fluttered: *Victor is my favorite. I also love Gaston and Julien. And I have, out of habit, amity for this Pilgrim. Four men don’t frighten me. But it’s evidently Pilgrim that I love the least, because he’s the best brought-up. As a daughter of petty folk, I prefer rough fellows to educated man, just as I prefer highly spiced food to bland fare.*

“So you love Victor, Gaston and Julien at the same time?”

“How do you know that?” *Already, a moment ago, he said exactly what I was thinking. The man’s a magician, a sorcerer, a demon.*

“Slut!” *To think that I loved her to the point of death. I called her my adored Loulou, treasure of my life, my own doll. Have I been stupid! I nearly went over the parapet of the Pont Saint-Michel for that?*

And, sniggering: “Four men don’t frighten her!”

At that evocation of the idea that she had just had, Loulou was gripped by an indescribable terror. She experienced the prodigious fear that seizes any mortal who acquires the certainty that the bone in the forehead is no longer a barrier hiding the thoughts within, who perceives that a gaze is rummaging in the cranial cavity, tracking the secrets in the most mysterious coverts of the brain. She stared at Pilgrim and started quivering like foliage in a squall. Her teeth chattered so forcefully that the sound resonated like a *danse macabre* in the silent room.

She did not take her eyes off her interlocutor, and remained speechless for a long moment.

Suddenly, she uttered a fearful cry, leapt from the bed, stood in front of Pilgrim and falling backwards in a heap, she was prey to a terrible crisis of nerves, her back arched, her toes clenched and her head hammering the parquet. She howled continuously.

“Scream!” said Pilgrim. “That’s my vengeance. You’ll come round when the Devil wants. I’m cured of my folly. Adieu. I hope I never see you again, Madame Everybody’s!”

And he went out briskly, slamming the door.

He ran like a dart to Ludovic Bernard’s house.

Passing under a low arch, he asked at the porter’s lodge for Père Toutfou. Without even turning her head to indicate the lodgings of that scorned tenant, the good woman, who was simmering a reeking stew, said: “Stairway at the back of the courtyard, at the top.”

In truth, Pilgrim had no need of that information, for he had seen that damp courtyard a little while ago while talking to the aged scientist, with its spiral staircase and tiled steps.

The staircase ended on the fifth floor; a ladder was offered to the intern. He climbed it and knocked discreetly at a worm-eaten door.

Ludovic Bernard came to open it.

“Ah! Well?”

“Cured!” said the radiant young man.

“I told you so!”

He invited Pilgrim to sit down on the only stool in the lodgings. He sat down himself on the edge of a strap-bed, which, with a table and Pilgrim’s seat, composed the whole of the furniture.