

Chapter One THE MENACING APPARITION

In the luminous spiral of the glass staircase, descending from the terrace, a gracious silhouette was blurred and dissolved, becomes increasingly vague; after a few minutes it ceased to be distinct when the thickness of the crystal paving slabs of several successive landings were interposed between it and the admiring eyes that were following it.

Then, Jean Chapuis raised his head, moved away a few paces and came to lean on the edge of the terrace of the magical Villa, the abode of the celebrated scientist Oronius, the father of the exquisite Cyprienne, who had just left him, and of whom he was the fortunate fiancé.

At his feet—which is to say, below the heights of Belleville, on which the troubling crystal Villa was built, where the laboratory of the greatest and most mysterious of scientists was located—the Paris of the twenty-first century extended.

The twenty-second hour had just chimed. In outdated epochs, people would have said that it was night. But did night still exist for the capital of the United States of Europe, equipped, thanks to the science of Oronius, with all the miracles consequent on the adaptations of his marvelous discoveries? From the top of the 1500-meter tower that had replaced the legendary Eiffel Tower, a timid trial of a metallurgical science in its infancy, an artificial sun projected torrents of light as dazzling as daylight over the entire valley of the Seine.

The most powerful arc lamps of old—the luminous intensity of which would have seemed very pale compared with that extraordinary source of light and heat—had rejoined in the past gas, oil and all the outmoded luminaries with which humans had experimented over the centuries. Now, a certain quantity of solarium, the last-born of the “luminous radioactives” isolated by Oronius, was sufficient to illuminate a whole world.

That was, moreover, only a step toward less costly and more fantastic realizations, Oronius having promised to appropriate directly the fiery arrows of the star, by means of profound vats of mobile mercury, and to distribute them at his whim.

Thus, night no longer existed, nor cold. In truth, humankind would have been able to do without the good old sun, the utility of which only remained certain in a few remote corners of the globe. One could judge now the fragility of the predictions of Camille Flammarion regarding the end of the world by cold. Oronius had already vanquished cold permanently. Perhaps the Earth owed him its present life.

It goes without saying that that uninterrupted daylight—sometimes natural, sometimes artificial, but succeeding one another without interruption—had profoundly changed the manner of human life, most particularly that of Parisians. Activity never ceased there; it did not diminish at any moment of the division of twenty-four hours, which remained the unit of time. Whatever the hour launched by the Tower, aerial Paris, like terrestrial Paris, continued to swarm with people going about her affairs or their pleasures. And if some revenant of olden times had been able to contemplate, as Jean Chapuis was doing, the spectacle from the height of the terrace of the magical Villa, he would certainly have asked the question: “But when do they sleep?”

Sleep! How amused they would be by that obsolete expression, that antique word devoid of any significance. Yes, how they would have laughed, those moderns of the twenty-first century: Jean Chapuis, preferred pupil of Master Oronius, or his gracious fiancée Cyprienne, who had just gone downstairs to take her daily repose.

That repose did not consist of going to lie down on what was once called a bed and stupidly closing her eyes in order to abandon herself to the semi-death of sleep. Bed? Bedroom? Words erased from the new vocabulary. In order to dissipate fatigue and restore the body to a condition to furnish further effort, one now went to the relaxation room. There, under the action of judiciously selected and combined radioactive currents traversing the body and the brain with their effluvia, all the cells of the organism

were rid of the toxins accumulated by physical or cerebral effort, cleansed, reconstituted, revived and rejuvenated.

The body and the mind were renewed, as all garments woven from asbestos fibers were renewed and purified by flames; for there were no longer any dyers, bleachers or laundries, but only *ustorians*, or burners, attached to electric furnaces of cremation.

Thus, the human machine, on emerging from the relaxation room, found itself ready for a new course of action.

Clad in one of the harmonious garments of repose, which had been readopted for interior usage, borrowed from the fashions of antiquity, notably Greece, Jean Chapuis allowed his gaze to wander distractedly toward the upper regions of the atmosphere, traversed by the purr of aerial autobuses and ferries continually landing on the mooring ports or rising from the ground toward the Palaces of the stratosphere.

In fact, it was now up above, in the serene regions surrounded by the first layers of the terrestrial atmosphere, that the fortunate went on vacation. Why remain in the midst of the tumultuous and noisy fever of Paris when, high above, bold architects had suspended in space, in an artificial atmosphere created by means of oxygen currents launched from the ground, and immobilized by an ingenious combination of gliders and electromagnetic forces, crystal “buildings”, the luxury and comfort of which ceded nothing to the most reputed of terrestrial palaces. The billionaires of that fortunate epoch lodged at an altitude of ten or twelve thousand meters in aerial palaces, bathed in light and surrounded by space; at their whim they could stare into infinity or contemplate the singularly shrunken panoramas of the poor earth beneath them. They lived above the clouds in the perpetual warmth of an atmosphere warmed and unified by Oronius’ solarium.

Nearer to humans—with regard to whom he professed the same love as his venerated master—the young engineer Jean Chapuis did not envy those semi-astral dwellings, in spite of the charm of their magical gardens enclosed by crystal cupolas. To the privileged few who benefited from them he preferred those whose laborious occupations maintained them close to the ground: ants whom progress had nevertheless rendered winged, by giving them the marvelous little flying machines that were named, because of their gracious appearance, dragonflies, which permitted everyone to transport himself at will from one place to another by the aerial route. At any moment they were seen flying in thousands, giant insects soaring along the radiant highways of the sky.

Flying over the magical Villa—so well-known to everyone and so popular, by virtue of the innumerable discoveries that Oronius had made to the benefit of transformed humankind—they sent greetings as they passed, via the wireless or speaking sparks. But that spectacle was too familiar to Jean Chapuis for him to be able to take any real interest in it. Did he not have other subjects of reverie, especially the most agreeable of all: his imminent marriage to the charming Cyprienne, whose beauty was only equaled by her marvelous intelligence, by which she was affirmed as her illustrious father’s daughter?

Moved and dazzled by the evocation of that promised near future, Jean Chapuis never wearied of admiring the predilection that Destiny marked for him by reserving for him, after the father’s lessons, the favor and love of the daughter.

Cyprienne loves me! Oronius consents to give her to me! I shall be the husband of that young woman in every unique point! he thought, ecstatically. *What mortal has ever known such happiness?*

As he thought rather than pronounced those words, a violent shudder shook his entire body, interrupting his dream. His features decomposed; panting with alarm, his eyes staring, he watched—without being able to wrench himself away from that contemplation, in spite of the horror that it inspired in him—a luminous patch that trembled and grew moving nearby over the glass slabs that formed the floor of the terrace.

It resembled exactly the patch of light formed by a beam of light emerging from a projector and seeking a screen in order to constitute an image thereon.

“Where has that fallen from?”

Making a superhuman effort, Jean Chapuis succeeded in raising his head; instinctively, his gaze searched the sky.

Stupor! There was nothing above him but empty air, an absolute void—or, the put it better, the immense vault, the limpid ceiling filled with the sunlight of the Tower.

What projector could have pierced that fiery sky? No sufficiently powerful luminous source was in view. Jean Chapuis could not see anything...

And yet, he felt something. He felt unknown waves coming from the enigmatic space traversing his body and colliding with the obstacle of the glass on which they displayed that luminous halo.

Suddenly it became a mist, appeared to suspend itself above the floor of the terrace, and became more precise, acquiring shape and substance.

Then, quivering with emotion, Jean saw before him a woman's face, a face endowed with the accursed beauty of the Angel of Evil, which was looking at him with glittering eyes.

Impossible to doubt it: that image, of a reality so gripping that it seemed to be alive in spite of its immateriality, held him under the fixity of its eyes. It seemed to want to search his consciousness, to steal his intimate thoughts.

Horror! It succeeded. He was laid bare—him, Jean Chapuis.

To crown everything, suddenly, a voice resounded in his ear, as strange and inexplicable as the image, which said: "*So you're marrying? You're marrying the daughter of Oronius? Beware, Jean Chapuis... beware!*"

Horrified by having been able to allow the secret of his soul to be discovered by a powerful enemy—oh yes, powerful, and disposing of an unknown force, since she had been able, in spite of his resistance, to exteriorize and lay bare his thought—the young scientist felt a cold sweat running over his entire body.

Losing all initiative, he became as pale and inert as a corpse.