

THE SILENT BOMB¹

PART ONE

Pierre Damidoff, an engineer at the Bargineff metallurgy and explosive factory in Warsaw, pressed the switch. The electric wire transmitting the fluid was connected to a kind of copper howitzer, to the mouth of which a nickel cylinder equipped with a helical propeller had been fitted. The propeller immediately began rotating at high speed, and the cylinder, describing a rather lazy trajectory, flew through the window into the garden, where it exploded. A young faun dancing on a pedestal was, so to speak, volatilized, but not the slightest sound was heard.

“A terrestrial comet!” murmured the inventor, with an indescribable pride. “A silent bomb! This is only a laboratory experiment, but if the State furnishes me with the capital and the necessary machinery, I’ll be able to realize the sovereign engine of modern warfare within three months.”

Damidoff left the physics laboratory, carefully closing the door. He picked up the scattered debris of the bomb and examined the fragment carefully. Then he headed for the villa situated on the far side of the arbor, still talking to himself.

“An inestimable result!” he murmured. “It’s simple...everything is simple in nature. Anna was right: God employs the least complicated means to produce the most surprising effects; humans come closest to the divine method when they put simple methods to work. Poor Anna!”

While talking, the engineer had climbed the steps leading up to a door and gone into a study. He looked up at a portrait of a woman suspended between large photographs of two children, a boy and a girl.

“You’re the one who put me on the right track,” he said, nodding his head. “Bless you. What would have been used twenty years ago for futile and cowardly murder, for destruction without the possibility of rebuilding, will serve for the grandeur of the Fatherland, for its elevation to the head of the European powers—and that I swear on your memory, and on Nadia’s head. Even if I’m offered a fortune, the invention will have no other aim. Thus, I’ll be redeemed.”

The engineer opened a drawer and slipped some papers into it that he had taken from his pocket.

“To think,” he said, with profound sadness, “that the glory will go to the name of Damidoff, and that...”

The door opened.

“Papa, Papa, the mail!”

A little girl about five years old irrupted into the room and ran to her father, her arms laden with letters and newspapers. Bringing in the mail was her daily joy; no one in the house would have dreamed of depriving her of it.

The inventor closed the secret drawer in his desk and picked up the child, lifting her to his lips. He kissed her with a profound tenderness.

“Good day, little Nadia,” he said. “Did you sleep well?” His face darkened as he added, to himself: “Still pale...she’ll have her mother’s nervous malady, poor child.”

Nadia was, indeed, as frail as a flower, with a fine skin through which the meandering of the veins was visible. Her eyes had dark rings and her blonde hair seemed too heavy for her head, which she held at a slight angle.

Damidoff sat his daughter in a chair beside him and began opening his correspondence.

¹ *Author’s note:* the idea of *The Silent Bomb* was born in Paris on the Quai Voltaire, from a conversation with Monsieur Merlet, an engineer of the State Railway Company. Thrown to the four winds by courtesy of the universally known and esteemed Maison Mame, may it pass from the realm of dream to reality and become, indeed, a redoubtable protectress of Justice and Right!

First he opened several envelopes bearing the stamp of the Office of Powders and Saltpeters; then he reached one that caused him to make a gesture of surprise; he thought he recognized one of those of which he habitually made use. As there was no reason for it to have come from his own desk, however, he dispelled the idea and unsealed the missive.

He went pale. He read:

Jude Iagow, the moment to strike a great blow and wrench Poland from the grip of the imperial power forever is near. Within a month, the whole of Europe will be in flames. It is necessary that that moment finds Russia in complete revolution.

You have in your hands what is necessary for that. You have discovered a silent bomb. We believe that you have not forgotten your ideas of justice and liberty, nor your oaths. You know what you have to do. You know where to find the brothers in grief and hatred. We are waiting for you. Act quickly, or you are doomed. You know that our threats are never vain.

The Committee.

“My choice is made,” the inventor said. “My invention belongs to my fatherland. May my past be forgiven, and my name returned to me...but who told them, then? No one knows except Ivan. No, it’s not my son. Georges Chantepie? The Frenchman? That loyal soul? Bah! What about Nitchef? Nitchef...”

Brows furrowed, suppressing the anger that was riding within him, Damidoff put a whistle to his lips. A shrill sound resounded.

Leaden and limping footsteps sounded in the corridor; the door opened; a man with a strange face appeared. He had long, flat black hair. His eyes were slightly almond-shaped, his cheekbones prominent, his face flat, coarse, bestial and expressionless.

At the sight of him, the inventor’s anger died down as if by magic.

That brute? he thought. *Get away! Deaf, dumb and stupid—he’s incapable of it. No, I mustn’t...*

He indicated the window. “Open it. It’s hot.”

The temperature was, indeed stifling, although it was still early. The valet obeyed.

“Go!” ordered Damidoff, with a gesture.

Nitchef smiled at Nadia, who looked away, and left.

“Who, then?” the engineer said to himself. “The garden is enclosed and the walls are high; the laboratory is behind a clump of trees. Who can suspect? Who has been able to see?”

He slipped the letter into the secret drawer and resumed opening his correspondence. He pulled himself together, but he was more anxious than he wanted to appear.

His astonishments were not at an end. He had just removed the elastic band from the *Scientific Review*. His gaze had encountered a suggestive title, following an article by Dr. Mohr, a professor of neurology and head of a renowned sanitarium situated a few versts from the villa: “A New Invention and a New Phenomenon.”

He scanned the article, and was stupefied.

We cannot conceive of an explosion that is not accompanied by a noise. It is the molecules of the substance that surrounds us, the ether, colliding violently under the brutal pressure of foreign molecules, which produce the noise of the explosion, the BANG. The contrary phenomenon would throw us into an inexpressible astonishment.

And yet, the phenomenon of the silent explosion, which is produced continually in interplanetary space, can also be produced on our planet and within its ethereal envelope.

Sound is nothing but vibration, like light. Luminous vibrations are greater in intensity, that is all; but between the vibrations perceived by our hearing and the vibrations to which our retina is sensitive, there is a large unknown field. There are shrill sounds whose vibrations are too high in frequency for us to hear. Suppose that an explosion were violent enough to produce those unknown vibrations; that would resolve the problem.

We are told that a scientist, a researcher of genius, is one the point of having found a scientific solution applicable to engines of war. The formidable result is in sight. Let us say right away that experiments have not yet crossed the bounds of the physics laboratory, but the indications are there. From Papin's pressure-cooker, our modern dreadnoughts emerged.

The article was signed: *V.O.*

"The wretch!" groaned the engineer, his teeth clenched. "The wretch! He'll be the death of me...!"

He got up abruptly and went to the window,

"How hot it is! It's overwhelming!"

Pierre Damidoff leaned on the windowsill, while, indifferent to the drama that was being played out around her, Nadia drew fantastic arabesques on a piece of paper, twittering like a warbler.

THE RAY IN THE DARK

Before the engineer's eyes extended a garden planted with trees and flowers, closed by rather high walls. At the back, there was an iron gate that opened on to the Moscow road. On the other side of the road stood a kind of manor house, built of brick and slate. A woman dressed in mourning was passing, at that moment, behind the hedge of the grounds; her eyes were obstinately fixed on the villa, with the attitude and expression of a cat lying in wait. She was striving to pierce the shadows behind the engineer; he did not see her, entirely occupied with his memories.

Twenty years before, in the course of a ball given by the governor of Warsaw, a bomb had exploded. The host had been mortally wounded. Around him lay officers, wives, and innocent young women. The bomb, a coward's weapon, had struck blindly, as usual.

Jude Iagowski, a pupil at the College of Higher Education, present at the party and known for his subversive ideas, was dragged away from the body of his dying mother, whom he was embracing, and set before a military court. He vehemently denied being the author of the atrocity. Yes, he was affiliated to Free Russia, but he was not a nihilist. At least, his nihilism was purely theoretical. Furthermore, he was only affiliated with the secret society with the objective of achieving the emancipation of Poland, in accordance with the principle preached by certain philosophers that the end justifies the means.

That was already more than enough. He owed it to the absence of any proof that he was not put before a firing squad. He was condemned to the mines in perpetuity, while his close friend and brother in nihilism Pierre Damidoff was condemned for a fixed term.

The black hell opened for him.

Anyone who can read has surely encountered many descriptions of life in the Siberian mines. We shall not linger on that. Let it suffice to say that the gates of those prison camps might well bear the famous Dantean inscription: *Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.*

Jude Iagow suffered as much as a man can suffer. He suffered in his body, and he suffered in his heart, tortured by remorse. He could not rid himself of the memory of that scene of carnage. He could still see his mother's bloody body, dying while murmuring a supreme word of affection to him, and he thought: *Even if I did not do the deed, am I not nevertheless an accomplice to her death?*

And while he put his hands over his eyes, sobbing, uttering cries of despair and appeals for forgiveness directed at the dead woman, the specters of Schopenhauer, Hegel and Büchner,² the three apostles of German philosophy, sniggered behind his back, saying: "Ha ha ha! Naïve individual! That's how we undermine the social edifice of our neighbors, while waiting for our cannons to make the holes necessary for our big bellies. Ha ha ha! Are they poisoning you with that atrocious nourishment? Our dramatic authors will share it with the French. For ourselves, we know the substance and we take advantage of it without using it, and we mock!"

And Hegel, the naturalist philosopher, and Schopenhauer, the apostle of the incoherent will, and Büchner, the flag-bearer of gross materialism, appeared to the unfortunate convict as a cynically ironic trinity, surrounded by pestilential marshes in which an entire naïve humankind was bogged down. He bit his knuckles in anger, crushed by the certainty that the evil accomplished was irreparable.

But God had taken pity on his creature. He permits light to penetrate the deepest darkness, and permits beings born for sacrifice to bring hope to those in despair.

² The addition of the eminent physiologist and Darwinist Ludwig Büchner (1824-1899) to this set of "apostles of German philosophy"—which will subsequently be further augmented with the name of Nietzsche—might seem a trifle odd to the modern eye, but his *Kraft und Stoff: Empirisch-naturphilosophische Studien* [Force and Matter: Empirical Studies] (1855) was so insistent in its scientific materialism that it got him sacked from his university post, and prompted him to write further works fervently attacking the ideas of God and the soul. The ill-fated playwright Georg Büchner (1813-1837), who spent much of his life in exile in France and Switzerland before achieving posthumous fame, was Ludwig's brother. There is no evidence in the present novel that the author knew anything at all about Hegel, Schopenhauer or Nietzsche, but he might have read Büchner.

To those who spoke about destroying the idea of God, because matter alone is eternal; to those who affirmed the necessity of destroying society in order to reconstruct it thereafter—on what bases?—because the initial will had gone astray; to those who praised rational and pitiless murder, because only the goal was important and obstacles had to be removed; to all of them, the individuals of the elite spoke about God and his infinite bounty. They evoked the harmony of things for those who had gone astray; they showed them the fortunate life, the eternity of joy as the undeniable, logical, necessary goal of everything that exists, everything that thinks and believes.

Among those specters of hope was Anna Erloff.

Victims, for long years, of an erroneous conception of Roman Catholicism, the Erloffs had been expiating in the prison colony an excessive attachment to traditional religion. Anna had been born there, had grown up there and had drawn from scenes of the everyday life of the convicts and immense pity, and immense desire to soothe such great miseries. She had found the means in the very foundations of her faith.

Anna Erloff had a noble forehead, frank eyes, and an air of charming modesty; everything about her inspired confidence and commanded respect. She was about twenty years old.

She had soon achieved an ascendancy over the mind of the rebel. Her abnegation, her tireless activity, when it was a matter of helping and consoling, showed the disciple of the philosophers that resignation to the will of God might have grandeur. In the meantime, he had crises of terrible despair.

“If I was wrong to affiliate myself to a society whose objective is criminal,” he said one day, “my inexperience is an excuse. To think that my life is over, that I shall never get out of this Gehenna, that my years will pass in this miserable village, while my intelligence, annihilated by coarse labor, will disappear like something useless! It’s frightful! And yet, I was only wrong in the means; my goal was noble. Poland ought to be free.”

“It will be, when God wishes it,” the young woman replied, “but liberty should not be conquered by crime; injustice cannot be avenged by injustice. If you thought that, your sin is immense, but God’s mercy is infinite. Be humble, repent, and merit human mercy by your conduct.”

A year went by. One day, the young woman told the convict that she was obliged to return to Russia by family obligations. She would return in two years. She made him promise that he would behave well and would not try to escape.

He promised. Anna Erloff went away.

The Hell of the mine closed in again on the convict, more terrible than ever. There was a star missing from the ink-black sky. In vain, the condemned man exchanged a sustained correspondence with his protectress; in vain, he stiffened himself against chagrin, wanting to remain worthy of the woman who had transformed him morally, to struggle against the obsession with escape; all the time, a mysterious voice murmured to him: “Never! Never! You’re a convict! You’ll be here until you die! All your life, you’ll be alone...”

He escaped.