

This novel was originally written in French and then translated into English with the help of the automatic translation software DeepL.

Therefore it is possible that, in spite of my careful corrections, some words or phrases are not quite correct. I apologise for that.

Nevertheless, I hope the story will remain understandable and will entertain you as well as it has entertained my French readers.



THE ILLUSIONIST

Novel

By Gérard Denamps

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This is my confession.

I know, we don't start writing our memoir when we are forty-three, I'm still young for that, but I've been through so strange events that I want to record every detail of them forever.

I want you to know exactly what happened to me in the last few months, no matter how unbelievable it may seem to you.

It doesn't matter whether you believe me or not, this is my story. I'm not embellishing anything, I'm not hiding anything, I'm just reporting the facts as they really happened.

I

It is undoubtedly thanks to my distressing clumsiness that my life has been able to flourish.

Without it, I would not have stupidly dropped my camera in the wrong place and I would probably have remained forever the obscure Justin Planchar. I would have remained a mediocre bureaucrat with no ambition and condemned to celibacy and mockery. I would have remained shy, clumsy, insignificant and short-legged and shaggy-haired. And, at last, I would have remained afflicted with a precarious health that did not augur well for the future.

So it was at the very moment when I was taking it out of my backpack that my little camera wanted to show off. It escaped from my clumsy fingers and it hurtled like a rocket towards the ravine I had intended to immortalise.

And what was I doing near a ravine ? To tell you the truth, every summer for more than ten years I spend my solitary holidays in the mountains. There, my great pleasure was to escape on the steep paths of the region. Calm, solitude, silence... I am not an experienced mountaineer or even a good hiker. I am only a peaceful walker, unable in his wildest leisure to imagine anything else than walking.

So I saw my poor camera plunging a few meters below into an abundance of vegetation that seemed

to want to swallow it forever. Needless to say, I was very upset : the camera contained in its entrails my most recent pictures : splendid sunsets, sublime landscapes and magnificent summits that I intended to show – again this year – to Mademoiselle Jeanne. And, as every year, she would pretend to be ecstatic about them, and I would pretend to believe her (but this is another story I will tell you about later)

I looked at the emptiness in front of me, dumbfounded : not a single path in sight but a nearly vertical wall studded with bushes, roots and tangles. Further down, where the culprit was laying, was an ocean of Amazonian greenery. I didn't know how deep the ground was for it was far too compact and bushy to see anything.

I am not a model of physical courage, as you can guess it, but I was determined to get my memory box back. So I observed the wall, trying to find some stable support points in this omnipresent vegetation.

I then adjusted the straps of my bag, took a deep breath and launched myself into the void. In a manner of speaking because, in reality, I clung to the wall, grabbing everything I could get my hands on : crevices, projections, branches, roots... All of this in total unconsciousness and in total disregard of the elementary rules of safety. But I wanted to retrieve my property at any cost.

I was sweating. My non-existent muscles were aching and my small size was a huge handicap. But I was going down, I was going down, that was the main thing...

Suddenly, I started to descend much faster than expected ! A piece of rock had just broken off under my weight, making me rediscover with realism the laws of universal gravitation. I then saw the relief of the wall spinning upwards while I was spinning downwards, desperately trying to hold on to anything that was sticking out. But nothing stopped me and, a few seconds later, I was forced to make the acquaintance of a providential bed of moss. A rough landing, of course, but considerably cushioned !

I was stunned for a moment, short of breath and heart pounding and, while taking stock of my wreckage, I measured the luck that had allowed me to remain unscathed. For without that lovely mossy carpet, I don't know in what state of advanced deterioration I would have found myself at that moment.

But I was not free of it, and it was when I wanted to stand up that a searing pain shot through my knee. I softly lifted the fabric of my trousers and found to my horror that my right knee had already doubled in size. I tried to move it gently but it was impossible. I tried to stand up on my other leg but it was worse.

And, little by little, fear – I should say terror – began to take hold of me. I suddenly understood that I was pinned to the ground, in a totally inaccessible combe, hidden by luxuriant vegetation. And, as I was living alone, nobody knew where I was and would not report my absence to the emergency services. The path above was not very far, of course, but how could I alert any walkers, assum-

ing there were any. I couldn't call for help for hours on end !

But I tried to do so. I began to shout relentlessly, pausing only to listen for an answer that never came.

Exhausted, speechless, I took my head in my hands and I feverishly looked for a solution. I turned the situation upside down, a bit like when Mr Dugout, my chief accountant, asks me to explain why my sales journal is so wrong. Only this time it wasn't a bunch of abstract numbers, it was my real life at stake.

I could also try to crawl, but to go where ? It would have taken me hours and hours to make my way through those inaccessible thickets...

Of course, I thought of the mobile phone. It doesn't often work in the mountains, but experience has shown that you can get reception in the most unlikely places thanks to the bounce of the electromagnetic waves off the rock faces. The problem is that... I didn't have a mobile phone ! What use would it have been to me ? I owned one for a year but it didn't ring once and my address book remained resolutely empty. Even Mademoiselle Jeanne didn't give me her phone number...

So, in complete despair, I laid face down on the ground and started to whine... I didn't want to end up like that, starving and thirsty in that gloomy hole. I begged Heaven, I pleaded with Him and in a last desperate plea, I promised that if He gave me a few more years of life, I would use them well to spread good around me. It was childish, but I had reached such a state of desperation that I was able

to promise anything and everything.

How, even if I wanted to, could I be of any use to anyone ? How could I imagine the obscure Justin Planchard as anything but a dingy, lonely, suffering little accountant ? What benefits could I spread around me ?

Yet I promised everything in bulk and without the slightest reluctance. But the worst thing at the moment was that I was completely unaware of the extent to which my wish would be fulfilled....

In the silence of the forest, my attention was suddenly drawn to a detail. I don't know what it was, but I was sure that something was happening. I raised my head and looked around. I scanned every tree, every bush, every patch of shade and finally I saw him : an old man in rags was looking at me...

The relief I felt at that moment was indescribable. I laughed stupidly, alternating tears and bursts of joy. I was saved ! I didn't even ask myself how it was possible that an old man was in this hostile place, or even how he got there, I didn't care : I was no longer alone and that's what mattered. Yes, I was saved !

Slowly he approached, his eye wary. Perhaps he thought I was crazy ? I showed him my knee and mimicked my fall. I couldn't stop laughing.

He came closer, bent over my swollen joint and, after a few indistinct grunts, he simply whispered : "I'll heal you".

He helped me to my feet and, holding me firmly

by one shoulder, he led me without hesitation through a veritable maze of branches. It is true that I did not weigh much, but, all the same, my saviour seemed surprisingly robust for his age... He did not smell very good either, but that was really the least of my worries. I knew he wouldn't heal me either, but at least he was going to get me to safety and alert the emergency services. I was saved and that's all that mattered.

A few minutes later we arrived at something that looked like a green shelter. Was it his home? It was in fact a large hollow rock with a thick hedge of branches on the front. So there was a hard roof and a good front to keep out the wind. He took me inside and pointed to an old mattress thrown on the floor between two rough wooden boxes. The mattress was stained all over but I wasn't going to be picky.

– I'll take care of you," he repeated, searching his shelves.

I doubted it completely, but I didn't answer. I didn't want to upset him. I saw him take tiny leaves from I don't know what plant and throw them into a bowl full of water. He reminded me of the druids of my childhood tales.

– You have to wait a little, he said.

So, to fill the silence, I politely decided to make small talk :

– You live here, I asked, you are a shepherd, no doubt ?

He sighed, as if talking was a considerable effort, and he shook his head :

– No.

I was no further ahead. So I began to tell him about my holiday in the village below, my camera flying around and my fall down the wall. He nodded and, handing me the bowl, he said firmly :

– You have to drink now.

But I didn't feel like drinking at all. The bowl was dubious and the liquid unappetizing. To save time I asked :

– What exactly is this ?

– It's healing, that's all. You have to drink it now.

I didn't like the situation at all, but what could I do ? Normally I would not be able to fight anyone, even an old man, but with my injured knee I was already defeated. He must have sensed my dismay because he softened a little and, in the patient tone one takes to reason with a silly child, he gave me his longest speech of the day :

– Drink, it will do you no harm. Then you will rest here for the night and tomorrow morning everything will be better. Be confident.

In any case, I had nothing to lose. I thought he might be trying to poison me to steal my backpack, but something in his eyes told me otherwise. For some reason I felt I could trust him. Then, I swallowed the drink in one gulp without breathing. He looked at me, finally satisfied, and he said :

– You will sleep a little and tomorrow you will be cured.

I doubted whether I could sleep even for a minute because of the pain in my knee, but I let him say it. Besides, I was now starving, which didn't help matters. I asked him :

– You must be a healer ?

He hesitated for a long time before answering me :

– Yes, that's a bit of it.

– And so you heal with herbs ?

– Yes, that's a bit of it.

I was about to ask him another question but suddenly, exhausted by all these emotions and the growing darkness, I fell into a deep sleep without even noticing.

The next morning was a complete surprise. After the first few seconds of bewilderment, I discovered that I was as relaxed as I had ever been, as if washed from the inside out, and purified, and filtered. And I saw with disbelief that my knee was no longer hurting. Better still, it wasn't even swollen anymore ! Not a trace of bruising, nothing !

And to top it all off, my little camera was sitting on a small tree stump which probably served as a table, in the centre of the hut.

– Did you find it ?" I asked stupidly, blinking.

– Mmmm.

I looked around in a daze and, sitting up on my bed, I became aware that all sense of hunger was gone. I didn't know what kind of pick-me-up he had given me, but it was literally miraculous.

– I don't know how to thank you," I said with the utmost sincerity.

He shook his head for a moment and he finally replied :

– Don't thank me. All I need is an absolute si-

lence.

– An absolute silence ?

– Yes, don't tell anyone what happened between us. You never saw me, I never gave you anything to drink and you never fell in that combe. Is someone waiting for you in the village ?

– No, there isn't.

– Then it's good, you won't have to lie.

– But... But are you sure you don't want anything in compensation," I insisted, contemplating the destitution in which he lived. A blanket, a few clothes, some food ?

– I can't ask you for anything," he replied, "because that would mean you would have to come back here. And I don't want that because then I would have to show you the way.

I was surprised at his reaction but did not show it. After all, he was a hermit whom I had disturbed in his retreat. He was right, I was an intruder and I had to step aside. In fact, the situation summed up my entire past life quite well : I had always and everywhere been the intruder who was being pushed aside. The order of things was therefore respected and it no longer surprised me.

I bent down to pick up my backpack and was very surprised to find it so light. Instinctively I opened it to check if anything was missing, but everything seemed to be in place. Catching my surprised look, the old man said curtly :

– You are stronger. That's all !

Stronger ? Indeed, I felt strong, it was as if my muscles had grown during the night. I wanted to ask him how such a miracle was possible but he cut

me off.

– The village is over there," he said with a vague gesture.

So I effortlessly adjusted my backpack. Just as I was about to offer him my hand to thank him for his hospitality, his eyes literally looked into mine as if he wanted to search the depths of my thoughts. After probing me for an eternity, he smiled at me for the first time and he whispered :

– Bring me a new knife tomorrow morning. Mine has a broken handle. Come, I'll show you how to get back...

I returned to the village with a surprising ease and lightness. I was twenty again. No shortness of breath, no joint pain, no fatigue. And later that day, when I wanted to read an old newspaper that was lying around my guest room, it took me several minutes before I noticed... that I hadn't even needed my glasses.

I wondered for a long time why this transformation happened. And I also wondered how long the magic would work. Because, of course, I shouldn't dream : this illusory well-being wouldn't last forever, the drug would wear off and reality would return with its share of daily misery. But I was hoping to worm information out of my hermit who was not very talkative.

II

– Did you find your way back ?

I turned around abruptly, surprised to hear him at my back when I was sure he was waiting for me inside his hut.

– I followed you from the stream below," he said, looking cheerful. Didn't you see me ?

– No, not at all," I replied, a little surprised to have been spied on so easily. This old man definitely had unsuspected gifts, I would have to be careful.

He let me into his shelter and I could see that he had done some semblance of cleaning. His utensils were lined up and the floor seemed cleaner and the smell less unpleasant. In addition to the knife, which I gladly offered him, I had brought some of those vacuum-packed sandwiches from the supermarket. I don't particularly like this kind of food (I prefer to buy my own baguette and ham) but at least I was sure that I wouldn't have to eat from his shabby dishes. Moreover, the snack was just an introduction to the conviviality that would help loosen his tongue.

It was he who brought up the subject in no uncertain terms :

– I suppose you would like to know a little more about this mysterious plant I made you drink ?

– To tell you the truth...

– You haven't told anyone about it ?

– No, no, I swear... Nobody !

– Good... Then listen to me carefully.

He sat down heavily on the small tree trunk and, with his forehead bowed, he seemed to meditate for a long moment. His long white hair covered part of his face and I could not see his expression. But I think he was looking for the right words to make himself understood. Obviously, what he had to tell me was not simple. Finally, he straightened his head abruptly :

– I am not a scientist," he began, "so I cannot explain to you the whys and wherefores of all these things, but the plant you drank yesterday has absolute healing power. That is all I know.

I was hanging on his every word. He nodded, and when I looked at him quizzically, he added :

– You know that the human body is made up of cells, don't you ?

– Yes, I...

– Well, this plant, this miraculous plant, has the power to work directly on the cells. Do you understand ? That is to say, it does not try to repair your sprain from the outside, no, it works deep inside your joint by reconstituting its cells. In a word, it renovated your knee and made the sprain disappear. Do you understand ?

Despite my astonishment, I could more or less understand his explanations. Nevertheless, one question remained :

– Yes, I agree, but what does my knee have to do with my excellent sleep, my excellent physical condition or my restored visual acuity ? It has nothing to do with it !

He looked at me, vaguely surprised (for it was all obvious to him, of course) and he raised a sententious finger :

– Because the potion works indifferently on the whole body ! It cleanses all the cells without exception (he emphasised the word "all"). Unlike conventional remedies that only target this or that illness, the potion is universal.

I nodded, almost incredulous, but he continued :

– It is true that in your case I was a little heavy-handed and should have given you a lighter preparation. After all, a sprained knee is not a serious illness and a very small dose would have been more than enough. Then imagine the result for a disease that sets the whole body on fire and that requires high doses ! Just imagine ! It is a tidal wave of health that cleanses you from head to toe !

I was increasingly incredulous but, again, I couldn't deny that my sprain had completely healed overnight. It was really confusing. He must have sensed my doubts, because he exclaimed :

– Here, you have other health concerns, don't you ? Don't tell me that all your blood tests are good !

– No, I had to admit no, of course, I have a high level of...

– Well," he cut me off, " I dare you : as soon as you get home, get everything checked. You're in for quite a surprise, and so is your doctor !

This prospect seemed to put him in a good mood, but he immediately turned darker :

– But be careful, not a word, eh ? Not a word to

anyone ! Otherwise...

He left his sentence unfinished, like an open curse.

I suddenly understood that this guy had gold in his hands and that he was not aware of it. So I cautiously ventured to ask him the inconvenient question, the one he had probably been asked over and over again :

– I... I would like to know... This plant, it could have made you rich and famous, no ? You could have relieved the whole of humanity with it. You could have been a universal benefactor...

He shook his head energetically, but I didn't let him interrupt me and I continued :

– Do you know that scientists spend their whole lives searching for a small vaccine or a small medicine (that is sometimes useless), that many researchers don't even find anything at all, while you, with a simple snap of your finger, you can surpass them all and wipe all diseases off the face of the Earth... ?

– Young man," he finally replied, "think for a moment. I have of course been tempted by what you describe to me, the power, the money, the benefits, the honors, the universal health, but have you thought of the terrible chaos that would ensue ? Humanity is not ready for such an upheaval. The cure would be worse than the disease.

– But...

– First of all, absolute unemployment for the entire medical world. For you should know that doctors, laboratories, pharmacies, hospitals, and others, live only from your suffering, never from

your cure. Give health to humanity and you condemn millions of professionals to a catastrophic inactivity. A whole part of our economy would collapse, entire professions would become useless. Believe me, you wouldn't even have time to put a single drop of potion on the market before you would be strangled from all sides, literally and figuratively. My great-grandmother was burned alive for witchcraft, and that made me...

– What!" I cried out, "burned alive! But by whom?"

He put his hand to his mouth as if he had said too much. He replied :

– Yes, yes, I will explain. In the meantime, you must understand that the medical world would not let itself go and that they would have the means to silence you, even the most radical means! In your opinion, why am I living in seclusion? For pleasure?

I couldn't answer, absorbed by his confusing arguments.

– Secondly," he added, "you must know that this herb completely renovates the organism, so it slows down old age considerably. As a result, the world's population would increase catastrophically.

I confess that I had not thought about this aspect of the problem. He was right, the potion, if widely used, would certainly cause more damage than good. Unemployment and overpopulation! Economic crisis and famine!

We were both lost in thoughts of the imminent end of the world, but after a few moments a little idea came to me :

– And why, I asked, not introduce it very gradually, by selling the formula to only one laboratory for example ?

– Because," he replied, "by distributing it in a very limited way as you suggest, you will generate enormous conflicts. On one side you will create the privileged population who will benefit from the miracle product, and on the other side the unfortunates who will continue to suffer and die. Of course, you will reply that this is already the case in certain regions of the world, but with this plant you would create an enormous disparity even within the industrialised countries ! Do you want to start World War III ?

I could not respond to all his arguments. A benefit so enormous that it was self-defeating !

He had obviously turned the problem on its head and the only answer he could come up with was to hide in the mountains and distribute his benefits very sparingly. Wisdom or prudence ? As if he could have read my mind, he added :

– Either way, I wonder if humanity is worth saving.

– I beg your pardon ?

– Of course you want to eradicate diseases, but isn't man the main cause of his own misfortune ? Look at history over the last two or three thousand years : wars, murders, massacres, assassinations, genocides, exterminations, tortures, invasions and so on. So why men should be relieved of existing diseases, when they know how to inflict far more horrible abuses on themselves than those inflicted by Nature...

I was appalled by the pessimism of his judgment, although I knew he was not entirely wrong. But he immediately added with a smile :

– Come on, let's eat one of your wonderful plastic sandwiches. Then you can go for a walk and come back to see me in the morning.

That night I slept badly, replaying the elements of our conversation over and over again. I had to admit once again that, had I not witnessed the healing of my own knee, I would not have believed a single word that strange old man told me. I would have thought he was a storyteller and a madman. But now, this damned sprain forced me to acknowledge the authenticity of his words : the mysterious plant had an undeniable healing power ! All this excited me and worried me at the same time.

And then a host of other questions pressed on my overexcited mind : where did this man come from ? What was his background ? How old could he be ? Why had his grandmother been burned alive ? What did he live on ? And where did this plant come from ? How was it cultivated ? Was it known to botanists ? What... What... How... And it was only at dawn that I fell asleep on so many unanswered questions...

The days that followed were a confusing dive into an ocean that bordered on the supernatural. I will not transcribe here the whole of our conversations because it could become tedious for the read-

er, but I will summarise the main points.

I learned that he lived there in summer and winter, enduring the cold and the lack of food thanks to the benefits of his plant. Even hygiene was of no use to him as he was immune to all bacteria. He only drank water from the nearby stream, picked berries and wild fruit and occasionally caught a bird to get out of the habit. I suspected that one or two kind souls in the village would drop off some food for him from time to time, but he never told me. I also learned that his first name was Cyprian, a name from another age, that he had been married several times in the distant past and that he spoke several languages, including, very strangely, Latin. Thus, he had called his plant "Frutex Virtuusus", a term he translated for me as "Virtuous Shrub". I also learnt that he was good in the sciences of the past, while he knew nothing of the most recent technologies. So he knew nothing about computers, mobile phones or even cars, but he was a bottomless pit when it came to subjects like astronomy, astrology, ancient greek, the Bible, antiquity, herbal medicine... This guy was really from another era, and living outside civilization did not bother him. It was as if he had never known it.

But the biggest surprise was in store for me on the last day. First, he led me down to the stream with the air of a law-breaking conspirator, and finally showed me (something I didn't even expect) the secret place where he grew his magic shrubs. They didn't look like much, and were just small and sparse bushes. Unexpectedly, he explained at length how to care for them, how to gently detach

the leaves and how to preserve them without spoiling them. I didn't ask for much, but I listened politely to his applied botany lecture. Finally, he picked up a particularly leafy branch, broke it clean off and handed it to me without a word. It looked like little lime leaves. When I did not react, he said with a smile :

– Here, this is for you. You just have to replant it in good soil and it will grow back on its own. Take care of it !

– For me ? But what do you want me to...

– You see, I am very old and I feel that my strength is gradually failing me. As I told you, the plant slows down ageing but does not prevent it. I feel that, despite my excellent health, the inevitable wear and tear is working against me and that the end is perhaps much closer than I imagine. So I think it is high time to pass on this gift of nature, so that it is not lost forever.

– But I...

– There were three of us in the world who shared this secret. I recently learned that the other two had gone to the Beyond. So it became urgent for me to initiate a newcomer.

I felt completely stunned by such a responsibility. How could the wise Cyprian not have understood that I was only Justin Planchard, an insignificant little man, and that I was certainly the most unworthy of his trust ? Why me ? Why not someone more brilliant ? Perhaps I said these last words aloud, for he replied with a smile :

– I have chosen you because I have observed you during all our days together and I am certain

you are the best person to hold this present. It is precisely your shortcomings, or what you consider to be shortcomings, that make you the ideal holder. You are not greedy, you are too self-effacing to seek fame and glory, you will never boast, you will remain discreet as I have been for... for... for...

Obviously he was stumbling over a word, he was having trouble talking about the past, as if it was still a secret too heavy to share. Finally he sat down on a large stone and whispered :

– Well, I must tell you everything, it is better for you. What I am going to tell you is very hard to bear. And after listening to me, you can decide whether to keep the plant or not.

I sat down on the floor opposite him and hung on his every word.

– Behold," he continued, "I am much older than you can imagine. The plant has slowed down my ageing so much that I have a very... distant past behind me. Do you follow me ?

I nodded mechanically, but he, with his eyes lost in the vague, had already continued :

– I don't know exactly what year I was born, because in those days identity cards didn't exist, but I have a vague idea. All I can tell you is that, as a child, I often heard about Louis Dieudonné the Fourteenth... Well, the one whom you familiarly call Louis XIV in your shortcuts...

There was a great silence during which I tried to digest the incredible revelation. Louis XIV ? So this old man would be 300 years old ? Impossible !

– Then," he continued, "I went through many eras, I knew many events, the French Revolution,

the Napoleonic wars, the two world wars... You know, there are so many differences between what I saw, with my own eyes, and what is taught in your history books that it makes me smile. The French Revolution, for example, it wasn't that, no, everything was transformed, exaggerated, falsified. It had nothing to do with the people. It started out as a bunch of looters who decided to have a good drink. That's all. And then the situation got out of hand. A bit like your May '68, but much worse. It was so easy, at the time, to tell anything : no television, no photographs, no recordings, no verification. Do you want another example ? Do you know the man called Napoleone di Buonaparte ? Well, he wasn't the man we're talking about today for the simple reason that he never existed ! In short...

– Who ? Napoleon ? Never existed !

He waved his hand as if it were just another trifle.

– Of course not ! This Napoleon was only a decoy, an icon imagined by the politicians of the time to rally public opinion and justify their uncertain wars and mystify the enemy. Did you ever find it strange that a real superman suddenly appeared, a military genius, an astute politician, and a hyperactive dictator, present on all fronts, sleeping little and overflowing with energy ? In reality, there were a dozen of them pulling the strings from behind the scenes. Believe me, this fictitious character's role was only to take the blame on all occasions, and to allow his handlers to slip away discreetly during the final debacle.

I was flabbergasted. But the old man did not

seem to be offended by his revelations and he continued :

– That's not the point, no. In fact, the hardest thing for me was to go through all these eras without being detected, because a man who does not age is suspect. So I moved to other cities and regions and started my life over again. I was married eight times, I had more than twenty jobs, apothecary, doctor, coachman, soldier, monk, it was easy ! No official papers, no pictures, no documents... Ah, today it's not the same music, everything is controlled, notified, recorded, you are under constant surveillance ! So you'll have to be extremely careful if you want to hold this plant, because for you the game will be a thousand times more difficult than it was for me.

He paused, probably to give me time to absorb the shock. Thus everything became clearer and I understood better the personality of my host, his outdated culture, his erudition of another age, and especially the reasons for his forced retirement.

Indeed, I will have to be extremely vigilant if I wanted to carry the burden. But could I do it ? I thought of her grandmother being burned alive and this frightened me a little. Of course, she must have been considered a witch, with her miraculous plant, and was thrown at the stake. But now what would happen to me ? I wouldn't be burned alive, that's for sure, but I would probably be suspected of identity theft, falsification of documents, illegal practice of medicine, drug trafficking and what not ? Not to mention, of course, the ever-recurring loss of loved ones who pass away one by one, while

myself remain unchanged through the ages.

– So, young man, what do you decide ? Do you accept this wonderful... poisoned gift ?

I looked up, totally undecided and ready to refuse it. But at the same time I thought that I had nothing to lose : no wife, no children, no friends, no situation. This existence of solitude and perpetual wandering would not modify my current life at all. Keeping a low profile had always been my specialty...

Finally, I accepted the poisoned gift. He nodded, satisfied.

– One more word," he added. Since you are accepting my modest gift, there is another thing thing you should know. Never forget that it's all in the precision of the dosage. A single infusion, such as I have prepared for you, will provide a complete cure and a lasting recovery for months to come. Regular intake, say... once a year, provides iron health and longevity. Finally, using it in higher doses offers total indestructibility and above all an extraordinary longevity, of which I am a living example. But beware, I don't know the limits to respect. So I tell you, be extremely careful in your choices. Use but never abuse...

III

On the train back to my humble two-room apartment, I tried to use the long hours of railway idleness to try and grasp my new dilemma : either I could manage this strange plant deftly and my life would be an unexpected burst of brilliance, or I could master nothing at all and my life would become a nightmare. It was clear, simple and concise and there was no more alternative.

During my last hour of travel, after exhausting cogitation, I nevertheless managed to define a course of action that made some sense : I will follow the advice of the wise Cyprian and I will not try to save humanity. In this respect, I had to find a solution to use the plant discreetly and make ends meet. That was the end of it. I know, you think I had no greatness of soul and that I was very down to earth, but I would object that my life was so mediocre that offering to myself a bit of luxury was a very fair decision. And wise.

But the recurring question was : how to proceed ? Because it was obvious that if I openly offered bowls of healing potion the word would get out and, after my little moment of glory, the situation would quickly turn against me. So I had to find a way to get my future "patients" to drink the potion without them noticing. That's where I got stuck.

I imagined grinding the leaves into powder and slipping them discreetly into some drink (or food) I

would offer them, but that was stupid. On what grounds would they pay me since I would treat them without their knowledge ?

I could also pretend that I had a revolutionary new drug, but that was even more stupid because they would all want to know where and how to get it. I could also invent that it was a secret substance developed by NASA for its astronauts and that I only had a very limited sample of it, but again I would be in serious trouble. Besides, let's be serious, who was going to trust Justin Planchard ? I looked anything but serious ! My ducking gait and my lack of confidence would be enough to give me away at the first second.

So I came up with plans and hypotheses, each one more stupid than the last, and wild imaginings that I won't even dare to tell you about here. Finally, when I set foot on the station platform, I had not made one iota of progress in my quest for a reliable solution. I was discouraged.

When I entered the office the next day, something happened that I did not understand at the time. There was an unusual silence, eyes were raised towards me and I was not allowed the usual : "Well, here is the mountaineer", "How was the Himalaya ?", "Didn't you fall into a crevice ?", "I heard you scared the Yeti ?" and other similar witty remarks...

I put down my jacket and sat down in my place without a word. I saw that Mademoiselle Jeanne was watching me out of the corner of her eye. This

was not her habit, since she usually ignored me completely (except for the needs of the service). Looking at myself later in the big mirror in the toilet, I almost mistook my reflection for someone else's. Of course I still looked the same as before. Of course I still had the same unattractive face, but I was standing straighter, my shoulders were clear, my eyes were frank, and above all I was radiating an unusual energy. I then understood the reason for this sudden change of atmosphere in the office. I was no longer the same...

From that day on, all my colleagues let me work in royal peace. Even Mr. Dugout, the chief accountant, began to talk to me differently. Of course he was still demanding and fussy, but there was now a touch of respect in his instructions. He no longer barked : he spoke. As for Mademoiselle Jeanne...

Mademoiselle Jeanne was in fact a very special colleague who both terrified and attracted me. Austere, stern and distant are weak adjectives compared to what she actually inspired. Surly might be closer to the truth. Her pursed lips never let the slightest smile slip through and when her gaze pierced you, you wanted to melt into the background. She was ageless. Always dressed in black, she never adorned herself with anything fancy, from her horrible flat-heeled shoes to the horrible stunted bun that topped it all off. The only concession to her supposed femininity was a tiny silver cross that tried in vain to embellish a dry and gaunt neck. Her nasal appendage bravely supported a pair of completely old-fashioned glasses that all her colleagues liked to whisper that she had probably

picked up at the flea market. In short, my poor colleague did not inspire romance, far from it, and she even terrorised me. But curiously enough I felt safe with her. Although we were different, we were two separate beings, equally uncomfortable in the world around us. At least that's what I liked to imagine...

In short, the mood was good, but this did not solve the problem that was constantly haunting me. The more I thought about the plant, the less I found.

The only interesting thing that came to my mind was from an illusionist's manual that I had read years before. Indeed, at the time when I still hoped to be able to tame Mademoiselle Jeanne, I had decided to learn some sleight of hand in order to amaze her and shine in her eyes. Unfortunately, my usual clumsiness prevented any effective manipulation. In front of my distressed mirror, the playing cards fell to the floor and the scarves would not come out of my sleeves. Nothing worked as planned, so I abandoned the project, like everything else. Nevertheless, I had retained one of the essential principles : while one hand is retracting the object, the spectator's gaze must be drawn to the other hand. In a word, always divert the attention to a decoy, to a secondary detail.

That's exactly what it was : drinking the potion had to seem like a minor detail and make it look like the main thing was elsewhere. Yes, but where ?

After a week, as I was walking briskly up the

three dilapidated (but well-waxed) flights of stairs to my dreary two-room apartment, I came across Madame Imbert, my neighbor. According to a well-oiled ritual, she was about to call her cats who were hanging around on the floors. I greeted her politely and was about to close my door when she rushed to ask me for advice. In reality she had no advice to ask me, it was, I knew, a simple pretext to make small talk.

Mrs. Imbert was a rather round, blond and heavily made-up old lady who was horribly bored between her cats and her television. Her husband, a certain Roland if my memory serves me right, had left the marital home years before, fed up with the felines that ruled his house. Still, periodically, I was the one who served as the outlet for his never-ending stream of words. Normally such a role didn't bother me too much, as I had nothing else to do in the evenings, but today I wasn't in the mood, I was too preoccupied with my problem. I needed to think in peace and solitude.

So she started her interrogation with banalities :

– Well, Mr Justin, you look great ! You seem to have had a good holiday, don't you ?

To which I replied with a grunt that didn't engage me in anything, especially not in conversation. Then she went on to talk about the weather, which was of no interest to anyone, and finally she turned to her favourite subject :

– And you know, my back is still hurting, I've taken painkillers but it's not getting any better. I don't know what to do anymore.

I had already stopped listening to her, shaking

my head, lost in other thoughts, when I realised she was shaking my arm vigorously and was asking :

– But don't you know one ?

I almost jumped.

– What ? Don't know what ?

– But I told you : a bonesetter, a healer, someone who heals with his hands !

I blinked, surprised by her strange question.

– No, Mrs. Imbert," I said, suppressing a strong urge to laugh, "I'm sorry, I don't know any healer. I'm really sorry.

I said a couple more polite things and managed to slip away without offending her too much. As soon as I was inside, I pushed the lock and threw myself fully clothed on the bed, trying to clear my mind. The plant, which I had potted according to Cyprian's very precise instructions, was sitting in the middle of the room. It seemed to be taunting me. For an hour I let my thoughts wander and my eyes drown in the cracks in the ceiling, the shreds of paper peeling off and the grey dust bunnies running across the floorboards. For the first time, I saw that my home was indeed overwhelmingly sad and that a little cheerfulness would not go amiss. The windows were grey with pollution, the cupboard door didn't even close and the little camping table that served as my desk was distressingly old. An antique black and white television set, which I hardly ever turned on, was left on the floor, covered in dust. In short, a decorator would probably have fallen into a depression at the sight of such accumulated bad taste.

Normally this miserable décor didn't affect me too much, but now that I saw the possibility of getting out of it, I felt an unknown need arise in me. I really had to find a way to monetise the benefits of my plant without incurring the wrath of God. This pretty leafy stem was the only graceful element in this desolate environment. And it was always taunting me...

Suddenly an idea came to me : if the plant was my problem, perhaps it was also the solution ?

I leapt to my feet and, forgetting Cyprian's recommendations, I rushed to the kitchen to heat up some water. What was I risking after all ? Better health ? A little extra eternity ?

With infinite care I peeled off a leaf and, not without a certain amount of emotion, I prepared my very first tea... I felt like a magician !

After drinking it greedily, I lay down again on the infamous straw bed and waited. But nothing happened. Finally, tired of waiting in vain, I fell asleep peacefully.

An hour later I was awakened by some strange sensation. It was as if some unknown cog was vibrating. To my surprise, an association of ideas was slowly taking shape. I tried to grasp the thread, but it seemed to escape me as soon as I put a word to it. I was like the fisherman who tries to bring the fish back to the bank without breaking his line.

Illusionism... Diverting attention... Imbert... Backache... Healer... Diverting attention... Healer... I can feel the idea, it's there, and I mustn't let it escape me !

Suddenly I stood up. That's it, I had it ! Yes, I fi-

nally had the solution ! Completely overexcited, I started to turn around and talk to myself like a madman. Yes, I was enlightened, but in the right sense of the word this time. I had the light !

I went out like a madman and knocked on my neighbour's door.

– It's Justin, Mrs Imbert, it's Justin ! Open up quickly.

I heard the sound of footsteps, then the click of a lock being opened, and a half-asleep eye appearing in the doorway.

– Mrs Imbert, let me in for a minute, I think I have a solution for you.

She opened the door and let me in. It was the first time I entered her house. Apparently her home was more spacious and at least more richly furnished than mine (which was no mean feat). Heavy drapes, thick carpeting, well-waxed furniture and feline figurines everywhere... It was a cat's candy store. How could anyone be unwell in such a pink upholstered cocoon ? She readjusted her thick dressing gown (pink, of course) and motioned me to an armchair while she herself slumped onto a bench studded with little white hairs. Through a half-open door, a television set was faintly broadcasting snatches of an enamoured dialogue. I was probably disturbing her routine, but I didn't care. I put my hands together and, taking a deep breath, I leaned towards her as convincingly as possible :

– Mrs. Imbert, I'm sorry to disturb you at such a late hour, but I have to talk to you. When you asked me earlier if I knew a healer, I said no. But I've been thinking about it ever since, and, silly me, I

do know one. An excellent one who will cure you for sure, believe me. I saw her eyes light up with a new interest.

– But why didn't you tell me straight away ?

– Excuse me, I was so surprised by your question that I didn't have the presence of mind to...

– So who is it ?" she cut me off impatiently.

Now I was going to have to play it smart, which was far from my forte.

– Who is it ? Well... Madame Imbert, you see, it so happens that... that... that I myself have the gifts of a healer and...

– You ?

I saw her jump up as if she'd sat on one of her cats. Apart from surprise, her expression was one of utter disbelief and suspicion. In short, she didn't believe a word of it. I was not entirely surprised by her reaction, I had never been able to inspire confidence in anyone.

– Mrs Imbert, I understand that this may seem surprising to you, but I really do have gifts, believe me. In any case, you have nothing to lose by trying. If it works, so much the better, and if it doesn't, well, we'll just remain good neighbours.

She looked at me for a moment and asked warily :

– But what exactly do you do ? Manipulations ? Black magic ? Are you a bonesetter ? Are you going to twist my spine and summon the spirits ?

– No, no, nothing like that," I said, forcing myself to laugh out loud, "I'm just... a... a magnetiser... Yes, that's it, a magnetiser, that is to say I put my hands on the part to be healed and my beneficial

waves do the rest. There is nothing dangerous, don't worry.

Still seeing some reluctance, I hastened to add :

– I repeat, it is without danger, the only risk you run is that it does not work, that's all.

I was careful not to tell her about the potion because I felt that she wasn't quite ready for it. I shouldn't rush things. She leaned forward and asked me with a hint of distrust in her voice :

– And why didn't you mention this before ?

– Why haven't I mentioned it before ? Well, because... because... because... I just don't like talking about it very much, that's all. Mostly I get laughed at and...

And I ended with a decisive argument :

– And on top of that, it's a practice that makes me very tired. I give a lot of my energy, you know, and each time it takes me a good day to recover. Finally, I only reserve my gifts for people I like and if I offer it to you, Mrs Imbert, it's because I really want to relieve you. Now it's up to you, if you refuse, it doesn't take anything away from me, on the contrary.

I let her ponder my last tirade without adding anything. I knew that she was right on time when she asked me to finish :

– And how much do you charge ?

I laughed :

– But come on, Mrs Imbert, for you it will be free, we're not going to talk about money between friends !

And finally I got up and, heading for the door, I concluded :

– Today is Friday. Well, if you agree, we'll meet again tomorrow at the same time. Can you wait until then? In the meantime, I wish you a good night.

As soon as my door was closed, I dived into bed, gloating. I had almost succeeded! But the game wasn't over yet: I would have to prepare my session for the next day in order to be as credible as possible.

Not feeling the need to sleep, both because of the excitement of the undertaking and because of the new boost the plant had given me, I spent the night rehearsing the gestures which would make me an honourable magnetiser. I practiced by running my hands over my bolster, although a quilt would have been more faithful to the geometrical configuration of this good Madam Imbert.

Then I prepared the famous speech that would convince her to swallow her potion gently. It would indeed be disastrous if my future patient were suspicious and refused everything. On these few words depended the success of the operation and, I was painfully aware of it, of all future operations. But if I was fully successful, my lovely neighbour would become not only my first patient but also my best ambassador. I could already imagine her saying: "Dear friend, you can trust me, my magnetiser got rid of my pain in no time. He's not a charlatan, you can believe me.

In the meantime, I was not there yet and I had to succeed in my fateful session if I did not want to

be the laughing stock of the whole building and be forced to move out under the booing and jeering.

I was a good fifteen minutes late – as I wished – when I knocked gently on my guinea pig's door with a steaming pot of tea in my hand. She opened the door immediately.

– I thought you had forgotten me," she simpered.

– Forgive me,' I replied, 'but I had to do some extra spiritual exercises to get in the best shape of my life. You see, dear lady, magnetism is a bit like an electric current, the battery has to be recharged to be effective.

She drank in my words, looking amazed, and I no longer recognised myself in this fanciful speech. I was quite satisfied with it.

– Oh, you've brought tea," she exclaimed. It wasn't necessary, I could have...

I cut her off :

– It's not tea, Mrs. Imbert. Let me explain. Here, let's sit here and listen to me.

I took a deep breath which she must have taken as a sign of wisdom and serenity. In reality I was trying to hide the tremor in my voice at this crucial moment. I leaned forward, gently placed the precious container on her coffee table and, with my elbows on my knees, I began to recite the short recitation I had invented without daring to look up :

– You see, Madame Imbert, my ancestors made a crucial discovery. They discovered that if the pa-

tient is in a state of calm, relaxation and inner peace, the magnetic waves have no difficulty in finding their way into the depths of his body and releasing their full effectiveness. On the other hand, if the patient is tense, nervous or anxious, he will block, his pores will close and my waves will hardly act, or very little.

Phew, I had served up my first tirade without error. I continued :

– My ancestors passed on to me a proven recipe, based on relaxing plants such as Valerian, Passionflower and other very rare herbs such as Eschscholzia Californica and others whose names I am not allowed to reveal. Rest assured, there is nothing nasty in all this, nothing illegal or dangerous, and these are only ingredients that can be found freely in pharmacies. My formula is simply as secret as it is ancient and my grandfather made me swear on his deathbed never to reveal it to anyone, except my successor of course.

Now I felt she was impressed. My plan seemed to be working perfectly. By making her believe that the magnetisation was the engine of her healing and that the potion was only a small additive, I had succeeded in reversing the order of things. I applied the great principle of illusionism : diverting the spectator's attention from what is important to what is not.

I did not give her time to sniff out the deception and, pointing to the teapot on his shelf, I concluded :

– So, if you don't mind, I'd like to invite you to have a cup of my little brew before it gets cold and

then we can get down to business. What do you say ?

She looked at me with a strange gleam in her eyes and whispered in a barely audible voice :

– I don't think I want to drink tea. You see, if I take too much liquid in the evening, I have to get up all night to pee, and I don't want to do that. Can't we start without drinking anything ?

What ? I was crushed ! All my plans had just collapsed because of a simple pee ! Stunned, I clung to my arguments and continued my recitation, but in a much less firm tone than I would have liked :

– Al... Allow me, dear lady, to insist on a point... The... The infusion and the magnetism session are inseparable, they support each other to... to reach the absolute cure. "The potion is the scout that generously opens the way for the fluid to reach the smallest particle of your body".

This formula had cost me a good hour of cogitation and I would have blamed myself for not having placed it. I was sure it would have a small effect. Mrs Imbert did indeed seem shaken, she smiled shyly at me and replied :

– No, no infusion. Just a little magnetism, I'm sure that will be enough to...

– But," I exploded, "don't you understand that it's useless ? Don't you want to be cured ? Drink this tea, it can only help you ! She didn't answer anything but kept her eyes glued to the ground and shook her head negatively. That old fool was more stubborn than a donkey. All my plans were falling apart. How could the old man in the forest con-

vince me in so few words, when my own carefully prepared speech was going nowhere? I was revolted by my own powerlessness to make myself heard. Even with gold in his hands, Justin Plancharde would remain this notorious incompetent, unable to convince anyone! I clenched my fists and felt an unknown anger rising inside me.

– Drink, I shouted at her! Drink!

But instead she stood up with difficulty and jerked her chin towards the door. What? She dared to dismiss me? I jumped like a spring and cried out:

– But why did you send for me? Why did you bother me for nothing? It's like calling the doctor and refusing to listen to him! Do you realise that?

– Except," she muttered, "except that you're not a doctor! You're a long way from it, my poor Justin. Besides, one wonders what you are!

This was too much. I was once again belittled, humiliated and insulted! In a fraction of a second I felt anger overtake me and, before I even understood the extent of my gesture, I threw a formidable slap at her which clattered strangely in the muffled silence of her candy box. She lost her balance and went to slump heavily on her carpet, almost in slow motion. I stood still, watching her wallow on the floor and holding her cheek with both hands. Was it me who had slapped her like that? I didn't recognise myself anymore. The potion had obviously increased my strength tenfold, giving me a boldness I had never imagined. But this was not the time to analyse myself, there was an emergency. I rushed forward and, grabbing my teapot in one

swift movement, I sat squarely on her bouncing belly and pinned her arms and abdomen with my own weak weight. With my other hand I lifted her neck and brought the potion to her lips. It was then that I saw with amazement her swollen eye and her bluish cheek. But I was not going to stop for so little !

I pressed the clay spout against her lips, but she struggled more and more, shaking her head in all directions. I desperately tried several manoeuvres and a little liquid dripped down her chin, but it was no use. Besides, she might break my container, which would have been disastrous. So I had an idea : I pinched her nostrils hard, forcing her to open her mouth to take a gulp of air. I took the opportunity to pour a good glassful of liquid down her throat. She swallowed wrongly, she choked, but I repeated the operation three times. A little potion was poured on her dressing gown, but I was sure she had swallowed a good dose. That should do the trick.

With a sudden relief I got up and, excusing myself awkwardly, stepped over her and headed for the exit. But, with my hand on the door handle, I suddenly remembered that I had forgotten the main thing : I had not performed the magnetism simulation ! What a fool ! So I retraced my steps and I saw her cowering and painfully shielding her face. Without a word, I turned her over like a sack, and applied my hands anywhere on her back, anxious to get it over with. She moaned dully but she did not react. After a minute of this grotesque comedy, I got up and left for good. As I closed the door

I thought I heard the words "complaint" and "police" between two sobs, but I wasn't sure. I crossed the landing in two strides and collapsed fully clothed on my bed, drenched in sweat and shaking from head to toe.

I just had the worst night of my life ! But what had I done ? How had I come to this ? My madness surprised me all the more because it was so unlike me.

What I didn't know then was that I had had the typical reaction of the weak. For their apparent kindness is not due to any kindness of soul, no, their kindness is only due to their natural cowardice. They are afraid to stand up and fight back. And when the walls of their cowardice crumble under the impact of too much emotion, excessive aggression becomes their only mode of communication.

In the meantime, unanswered questions kept swirling around in my head and all I could see was that my chances of success were now reduced to nothing. Even if the plant gave her some relief from her rheumatism, Madam Imbert would never forgive me for having assaulted her in this way and she would ruin my reputation. I didn't think she'd press charges, of course, but she'd tell the whole neighbourhood about her misadventure and I'd just have to get as far away as possible. I would never be able to cure anyone, I was too bad. I decided to get rid of that cursed plant the next morning. Cyprien was right, it was a poisoned gift...

The hours passed with exasperating slowness as I tossed and turned on my bed without even opening the sheets.

I must have fallen asleep from exhaustion in the early hours of the morning because I began to dream that I was walking in the mountains. In the distance, lumberjacks were working and I could hear their hammers felling trees. Their blows were echoing. Suddenly I became aware that I was not hearing their hammers but the actual knocking on my door.

I leapt to my feet and, without even asking who was there, I opened the door in a state of total stupor. Two young guys in trainers and leather jackets greeted me curtly and one of them, who was a good head taller than me, handed me a card with a tricolour line through it. At my bewildered expression, he said :

– We are the police, sir, and we would like to ask you some questions.

I was expecting anything but that. I felt my knees buckle under me and I had to hold on to the doorframe to keep from flinching. So that crazy old woman had filed a complaint !

– Your neighbour Mrs Imbert phoned the police station this morning to lodge a complaint. Do you know what we're talking about ?

I had no trouble looking stupid, I already did. Then, blinking as if I didn't understand anything, I shook my head negatively, unable to utter a sound.

– Don't you see what we're talking about ? Well, we'll refresh your memory, dear sir, and then you will follow us to the station. Francis," he added to

his colleague, "call the victim, it's the door opposite.

I thought I was going to faint. I watched the other young man press the doorbell energetically, and then her door opened. The cop's shoulders were hiding my neighbour's face, but I imagined the damage must be impressive.

– Mrs. Imbert," asked Francis, "can you confirm that it was this man who attacked you last night ?

I heard her murmur a weak yes, but the young cop then asked her :

– Mrs. Imbert, will you be able to show us traces of the blows, in order to support your complaint ?

– Traces," she cried, pointing to her face. But can't you see the damage ? What else do you need ?

The cop sighed and said nothing but, when he turned slightly to address his colleague, I could finally see my neighbour's features : not only her face was completely intact, but her skin had a youthful glow that didn't exist before. I was astonished.

– Look at my eye, Inspector, and my blue cheek, look !

The policeman lost all patience and began to lecture her sharply :

– Madam, you've just made us move on a Sunday morning for absolutely nothing ! If you insist, you'll be the one being interviewed. I recommend that you get treatment. With all due respect, a psychiatrist will be much more useful to you than the police !

Then he turned to me and sighed :

– I'm sorry to have bothered you, sir.

And off they went down the stairs without further ado. I looked up at my neighbour and her eyes met mine. I could see a mixture of disbelief and despair. She couldn't understand how these two detectives could have dismissed her when, according to her, she still carried evidence of the violence I had inflicted on her. She gave me a frightened look and slammed her door.

As for me, I was suddenly on cloud nine. I suddenly felt so relaxed that I fell back to sleep like a log until noon.

And at about noon, it was again light knocks on my door that woke me from my dreams. As I got out of bed, I wondered why everyone else in the building had doorbells except me. It was another "Justin Planchard's mystery " to be solved. Anyway, I walked cautiously to the door, fearing that I might come face to face with the Marshalsea again. Would the old lady have found more evidence against me ? Was the testimony of her cat admissible ? Of course I was joking, but in reality I was really worried.

Opening the door at the very least and ready to close it again at the slightest threat, I saw my neighbour's beaming face.

– Mr Justin, I would like to thank you. Of course you were not very... gallant towards me, but I must say that I was not very cooperative either. Ah Mr Justin, it's wonderful, I don't feel any pain anymore, I feel alive again ! You are a magician, Mr

Justin. How right you were to insist ! A good spanking is what I deserved and you did well to give it to me !

I noticed, not without satisfaction, that I was no longer Justin but "Mr" Justin. And an hour later, it was in her candy box that we continued this conversation with a cup of coffee and pastries in hand. Of course she wanted to understand, she wanted to know all about the potion and my healing abilities, but I remained enigmatic.

– I am not a scientist, Madame Imbert, I am only the humble recipient of an ancestral gift and I cannot explain why. As I told you, my concoction opened the way to my magnetic waves and it worked. If you had not drunk my concoction, my magnetism would have been only ten per cent effective, and even then !

– But," she questioned again, "my facial wounds, my black eye, how is that possible ? You didn't magnetise my face, as far as I know, I would have seen it !

I had a ready-made answer to this easy question :

– In fact, dear Madam, when I magnetise, I do not limit myself to a precise area but I solicit the whole vital envelope of my patient. If you prefer, I addressed your entire body.

At this point I was really talking nonsense but I saw that she was looking at me with her mouth open. The mayonnaise was taking.

– Do you mean that you also cured everything else at once ? My headaches ? My loose tooth ? My failing eyesight ?

With a theatrical gesture I handed her a magazine that was lying around and asked her to read it – without glasses of course. She deciphered a few words without even squinting and was amazed.

– I can read without glasses," she giggled, "I can read without glasses. What a magician you are !

The praise went on for another quarter of an hour, during which I tried to act modest and blasé. But it was hard, because it was the first time in my life that someone paid me a single compliment. Finally, after beating about the bush, she came to the subject that was closest to my heart :

– If you don't mind, Mr. Justin, I'll tell my friends about you. Poor things, they're in such a bad way ! How much would you charge them for a session like that ?

Bingo ! But I had no idea. On the one hand I was determined to make the most of it, but on the other hand I had qualms about charging for a gift that hadn't cost me the slightest effort. Can you sell a gift ?

– Let's see, Mrs Imbert, what do you think ? How much would you have given, yourself, for such a cure ?

– But my fortune, Mr. Justin, all my fortune ! Do you understand what you have done ? You have given me back my youth...

It was then that I saw what I could bring to others. It's true, I gave them their health, I gave them back their twenty years ! And that was priceless. So I could afford to hit them hard, I would never rob them and they would be eternally grateful.

– What do you think, I suggested, of a hundred

Euros ? Does that seem inappropriate to you ?

– What?" she exclaimed, "but that's not enough ! Are you aware this is not even the fee of certain specialists (whose results are sometimes more than doubtful) ? No, you must demand more, you must ! One thousand Euros, ten thousand Euros, that's at least what you're worth.

Finally, after negotiations, we agreed on five hundred Euros, which seemed to me a good compromise. I was jubilant.

– But, I added, don't tell too many people about me because my batteries run out quickly, you know. Tell your three best friends and that's it for now. We'll see about that later.

It was with these careful words that we parted, all traces of anger now forgotten.

IV

My accommodation being, as is well known, of indescribable bad taste, I made the most of my few available evenings to put everything in order. Madam Imbert gave me a serious helping hand, happy to show she no longer had a sore back or anything else. It was her way of paying for her recovery.

I took half a day off work to go to flea markets and buy furniture at a lower price to suit my new duties. I felt transfigured.

In a few hours, and thanks to our new-found indefatigability, we turned the entire décor upside down : a small, wood-paneled desk (of which I could not determine the period), a superb, massive bookcase, some impressive medical journals, a magnificent oriental carpet to hide my dilapidated parquet floor, an old engraving showing a life-size "écorché", a sky map, two pretty chairs fairly comfortable (but not too much), my imposing practitioner's chair and finally, the most important accessory, the table where the patient would lie down. We opted for a nice rustic bench, reasonably rigid so as not to encourage the subject to doze off...

My little vestibule was itself put to use and, by the addition of a small moulded chair, three engravings and a few periodicals, it was promptly transformed into a real waiting room.

Finally, as the icing on the cake, I had an elegant copper plate put up with the words "Justin

Planchard, magnetiser" and, just below, a black plastic rectangle inviting you to enter without knocking.

My meagre savings took a very big hit in the space of a few hours, but my accounting skills led me to believe that this was not an expense but an investment. I knew that, barring unforeseen circumstances, I would very quickly recover my investment.

And the big day arrived...

Or rather the big night, I should have said, since, being a full-time employee, I had planned to practice only after office hours.

So my first patient showed up on the dot, and I sat her down facing me in a daze. I don't know which of us was more intimidated, but all I remember is that I was literally scared to death. I was sweating profusely and shaking like a leaf as I poured my first paid potion. I nearly poured it all out, but fortunately the poor woman was so anxious to be treated herself that she paid little attention to my feverish state. Moreover, I did not have to convince her to drink her infusion, as the good Madame Imbert had duly chaperoned her on this subject. I only remember that she talked incessantly about a pain in her shoulder which bothered her in all circumstances, so that the "magnetisation" phase went smoothly in a sort of comatose fog where I mechanically fulfilled my role, like a well-oiled mime.

When she was out, I threw off my jacket, untied

my tie and collapsed on the bench, totally drained but happy to finally contemplate my first five tickets...

For the second patient, whom I received the following evening, my state of panic had dissipated somewhat. I was already shaking less and the words came more easily, less recited.

As for the third patient, my world collapsed again when she told me she was coming for a very advanced cancer. I suddenly felt crushed by an enormous responsibility. And she looked at me with such pleading eyes that I was shocked to understand that I was her last hope on this earth. The fear of disappointing this poor woman cut me off. As she described her ordeal to me, I shook my head stupidly, unable to find a word of comfort. But as I watched her greedily drink her life-saving potion, my courage gradually returned, I regained some hope and I whispered, trying to believe it :

– Madam, I am not a magician, but I will do my best to get you out of this mess. Believe me truly...

For, if I was quite confident in the virtues of my herb – since I had already seen some benefits – I still had a residue of doubt in my heart : Will my potion work in all cases ? Had Cyprian not hidden anything from me ? What about serious illnesses ?

When the magnetism was over, I had an enormous scruple about taking the handful of notes she held out to me. But I understood that if I pushed it away, it would mean I doubted my own ability to heal her. So I took the money, looking as confident as I could, promising myself inwardly that if I failed I would return it to her. Finally, I

urged her to inform me of her next test results. Not only because I sincerely wished her condition to improve, but also because it was through her healing that I would know the true extent of my power.

As I waited for this crucial result, everything grew very quickly and I began to exercise my talents with greater fluidity, my shyness fading encouragingly as I went along. Every evening and every weekend, Madame Imbert found me new cases, which allowed me to progress and refine my staging. She received the phone calls, noted the appointments and sorted my mail. I offered to give her a share of my earnings, but she refused, swearing that she owed me. I didn't insist, for fear of offending her.

I soon discovered that what I called the "potion break" was not a waste of time, on the contrary, it was an opportunity for the subject to pour out his heart and tell me about all his troubles. This was perfectly useless to me, of course, but this decisive moment, the scope of which he did not measure, gave him the comforting illusion that I was simply listening to him in order to better care for him. I took notes on cardboard cards I had picked up at the office, which I then filed carefully in order to follow the evolution of my results.

Strangely enough, the patients were taking me for a sort of confessor to whom one had to tell everything for a better remission. And I must confess that I heard all kinds of confessions while I walked my palms over a sore back or a swollen belly ! It is

as if they associate their present ills with their past mistakes and seek absolution to better purify their flesh. I am sure that if I had said to them : "When you leave here you will recite two Hail Marys and three Pater", many would have complied without question.

Then, depending on the case, I asked them to lie down on the bench or to stand. If they were elderly or unattractive-looking people, I asked them to keep their clothes on, claiming that my magnetism passed perfectly through the fabric. On the other hand, if it was a pretty woman, I must confess that I sometimes succumbed to the temptation of seeing her in her underwear. Oh, nothing too indecent, I assure you, but I thought it was a pity not to take advantage of it within reasonable limits...

In fact, I was doing a dream job, I had no effort to make... Recruitment was mainly based on word of mouth, so the patient landed on my bench, confident and hopeful.

Finally, and very importantly, I quickly learned to always make two recommendations to my patients. Firstly, I urged them never to abandon their current medical treatments, as I had no right to make them (and me for that matter) take that risk. Secondly, I asked them to always keep me informed of developments, either by a phone call to my "secretariat" or by a little note in my mailbox. Not only because I needed to check the real effectiveness of my potion, but also because I was happy to know that people were cured. Really happy !

As for my plant, it was doing wonderfully. At first I was worried about its longevity, fearing that I

would deplete it too quickly and squander its virtues. But I soon discovered that a very small quantity was enough to obtain excellent results. At this rate, I could go on for months, even years, before I exhausted its precious resources !

To reward myself for such success, I occasionally offered me a little dose of magic tea. I could not say whether such a frequency was reasonable (Cyprian having remained vague on the subject) but I felt that I had no right to fall ill and that the best way to take responsibility for my recoveries was to start by preserving myself.

It was at this time that, overwhelmed on all sides, I began to wonder whether I should not devote myself to my "art" full-time. I spoke to my neighbour about this and she, of course, agreed with me completely. Leaving my job didn't affect me because I must admit that I had lost my head for numbers and accounting columns and I was making mistake after mistake. The only thing that really bothered me was the prospect of not seeing Miss Jeanne anymore. I was going to have to think seriously about it.

So it was with great indecision that I went to my office the following Monday, unsure of what to do. Should I tender my resignation without delay or wait a little longer ? I must admit that I had never resigned in my life and I knew nothing about the rules. I wondered whether I should not first consult Miss Jeanne : she was a good adviser on everything, especially the regulations. Moreover it would

allow me to inform her discreetly of my decision. Perhaps she would be sorry for my choice and beg me not to leave? I dreamt of a heart-rending farewell and a passionate reunion...

But fate beat me to it and brutally imposed its own choice.

First of all, when I crossed the threshold of our workspace, a good fifteen minutes behind the morning schedule, I immediately noticed the absence of my favourite colleague. Her chair was deserted, her screen was turned off and her coat rack desperately empty. I looked around in dismay to see why, but I didn't have much time because as soon as he saw me, Mr Dugout opened his door wide and called out to me. With my mackintosh still on my back, I entered his small glass room which already smelt of sweat and mustiness. How could he mark his territory so early in the morning? No sooner had I entered than he slammed his door in disapproval and attacked me without preamble, completely out of his mind :

– Mr Planchard," he shouted, banging his fist on his desk, "I am extremely unhappy with your attitude. Not only are you late almost every morning, but your accounting work is full of... bullshit ! Yes, I said bullshit ! Here, take a look at this...

And he almost threw a pile of papers in my face I didn't care about. He listed figures, numbers and accounting terms which became so many insults in his foaming mouth. And he went on for many minutes barking and waving his drooling fangs in my face. I think that if he could have legally bitten me, he would have done so without any hesitation.

Clearly this man was a hypertensive and the only question that came to mind was whether my potion would be of any help to him. I decided that it would be worth a try, but not under such conditions. Maybe in another life...

– Planchard, are you listening to me or not ?

I didn't react, lost in my medicinal musings, and I saw his eyes widen in disbelief and his half-open jaw freeze. He watched me in dead silence and finally blurted out in a strangled voice :

– But it's not true ! Mr Justin Planchard is laughing... I'm yelling at him and he's laughing ! But he's completely stupid ! He's laughing ! He's laughing at me !

And, as I was indeed struggling to hide the laughter that was starting to get to me, he shouted :

– I'm going to cut off your laughter, asshole ! I'm going to fire you ! Do you hear me ? Fired ! Fired !

As he said this, he began to bang his fist on the wall, foaming at the mouth, completely out of mind. Through the window I could see the worried looks that were pointing at us and even a few curious employees from the neighbouring departments who were shyly crowding the corridor. His crisis must have been heard from the street. I let him flinch for a few moments and then, judging that a heart attack was imminent, I interrupted him in my calmest tone.

– Mr Dugout...

– What ?" he shouted. What now ?

– Is it true ? Are you firing me ?

And in front of his hysterical nods I felt such

happiness that I would have kissed his feet. Then, for the first time in my life, I threw down years of servitude and submission, I bent my chest, I broke the barriers that had kept me down for so long and it was with the greatest delicacy that I whispered to him :

– My good Mr. Dugout, since we're on the subject of trivialities and I'm no longer part of your honourable staff, let me tell you a secret : I'm covering you with my excrements...

And it was with a tremendous burst of laughter that I left his office, for this expression had always amused me greatly. I walked around the premises, greeting my appalled colleagues, my hand raised like the toreador greeting the bullring after having slaughtered the furious animal.

For the first time in my life, I had dared to break free in defiance of rules and propriety. I felt relieved. I was happy...

When I returned to the fold in the late morning, Mrs. Imbert burst out laughing at the story of my triumphant finale. To celebrate, I decided to offer her the restaurant that evening. She gladly accepted, feeling that she would not have too much of her afternoon to make herself presentable and worthy of accompanying me. We laughed a lot about it, but after a few minutes, a shadow of sadness must have betrayed me because she asked me :

– You're thinking of the absent colleague, aren't you ?

– Yes," I answered with a sigh, "in ten years I

haven't seen her miss a single time and today, as if by chance, I didn't even get to say goodbye to her. Mind you, it wouldn't have made any difference and even if I found a way to contact her again, she would never agree to see me again, that's for sure. She'd ignore me under normal circumstances !

– That, my friend, you don't know. Women hide their game well, you know. And then the fact that we won't see each other at work will perhaps soften things up...

– You're kind to cheer me up, Mrs Imbert, but I know what I'm saying. I'm awkward with women, shy, blundering and bad company. I don't interest them and I don't make them laugh, except to my detriment of course... And what's more, don't mention my shaggy side and my shaggy hair. True, maybe it will be different now that I have money, but it will still be hard...

She seemed to disapprove of my reference to female venality, but she didn't pick up on it, perhaps aware of some truth in what I said. She continued :

– Justin, you don't mind if I call you Justin, do you ? We will proceed in order. First of all we'll try to find out why she was absent this morning. Can you give me her name ?

– Her last name ? Wait, I don't remember very well, everyone always called her by her first name... So you understand...

No, Mrs Imbert didn't understand. How could you work with a colleague for ten years without even knowing her last name ? I don't think she was surprised by me anymore, but she rolled her eyes

and insisted :

– Come on, Justin, make an effort. Concentrate. Why do you think you called her by her first name ? Was his name difficult to pronounce ? Was he ridiculous ?

A vague stirring emerged from deep within my neurons.

– No, but I seem to remember that she didn't like it because it reminded her of a male name. She said it didn't suit her.

– What name, Justin ? Pierre, Paul, Jacques, François, Jules ? We're not going to check them all, are we ?

– No ! Yes, that's it ! Francois ! No, wait... Lefrançois ! Yes, that's it, I remember, Lefrançois !

Madame Imbert mentally mopped her forehead :

– Phew, we made it ! And the telephone number of the company where you've been working until now, she added, do you know it at least ?

I proudly recited my employer's number and was very surprised to see her grab her phone and dial it without hesitation. In a confident voice that I didn't know she had, she exchanged a few words with I don't know who and, after having been taken around to two or three different departments, she put the receiver back down and announced :

– That's it ! She is ill !

And to my astonished look, she said :

– You know, my good friend, before being a fat woman who spends her time watching TV and talking to her cats, I was young and I worked. You may not imagine it, but I was an executive secretary and

I was an expert on the telephone, believe me ! You see, Justin, retired people were not always retired and I would even say that some of them had brilliant careers. In life, you should never trust appearances.

And there I was, getting a lecture in my face. Aware of my dismay, she laughed to soften the severity of her remark and she continued :

– Well, I don't dare ask you if you know where she lives ?

I didn't have her exact address, of course, but having overheard her talking to other colleagues, I miraculously knew her street name. And my subconscious had even more miraculously memorised it. Madame Imbert immediately dipped into her phone book and, a few seconds later, she was writing Jeanne Lefrançois' full address and telephone number on her notepad.

– Now," she announced, "we're going to play Sherlock Holmes. I don't know who I'm going to get, but when in doubt it's better for me to call. On the telephone, one is suspicious of a man's voice, rarely of a woman's.

I didn't argue with her on this point, because it would have been out of the question for me to call. So she dialed the new number and, as she stared into the distance, I could tell from her silence that the ringing was in a vacuum. Perhaps my colleague was sleeping ? Or was she absent ? Mrs. Imbert hung up just before the answering machine went off and opted for a new tactic :

– Well, I'll call the neighbours. I'll say I'm a distant aunt or something and we'll see.

Increasingly flabbergasted, I watched her act, effectively discovering a leading lady I didn't know from this angle. She was right, professional reflexes don't quite die and retired people hadn't always been so. So I watched her dial, talk, apologies, hang up, start again, and it wasn't until the eighth call that I felt something was wrong. She put the receiver back down with a sigh and announced :

– She's in hospital. Not far from here. It was her next-door neighbour who called the ambulance...

– What ?

I was appalled. Faced with my defeated face, she decreed :

– The best thing is to go and see her. Now. I hope you're not afraid of hospitals ?

– But," I stammered in panic, "what are we going to do ? Who are we going to pretend to be ?

– Not 'us', 'you' ! Who are you going to impersonate ? But for yourself, Justin, for yourself ! You're just a work colleague who comes to check on another colleague. Nothing could be more natural. You can do that, can't you ?

I insisted that my ally at least accompany me to the hospital reception. I thought the presence of an old lady by my side would make the nurses less suspicious. She smiled, of course, but deigned to chaperone me to the visitors' lift. And from there, I had to go on my own like an adult ! Convinced that Mademoiselle Jeanne was going to get security and have me thrown out, I was scared to death and ashamed of the anticipation.

When I timidly pushed open the door to room 126, which the receptionist had indicated, I saw at first only an unknown woman in the only bed in the room. Thinking I had gone to the wrong room, I was about to turn back when she turned her head towards me. And there I recognised her without really recognizing her.

Of course, I had never seen her without her glasses and with her long hair spread over a pillow. At the office she was always strict, wearing austere buns and a very strict chignon, unsightly elements whose absence softened her considerably. But it was not only that, her somewhat frozen expression and strange look left a very unpleasant impression on me. True to my congenital savagery I waddled from one foot to the other, unable to utter the slightest sound, and it was she who finally broke the ice.

– Ah, my poor Planchard, you've come. It's nice of you to come, but I would have preferred it if you hadn't seen me in this state...

I was flabbergasted : her speech was slurred as if part of her mouth was blocked, and her left eye closed intermittently. The situation was beyond me and I had no idea what to say. In the face of my idiotic speechlessness, it was she who enlightened me :

– Stroke... I heard that a clot blocked a vessel, and this is the result.

And, turning her head towards the window so that I couldn't see her, she began to sob softly. I stood there for many minutes, pitying this woman I had known to be tough and unyielding, but who

was suddenly so fragile.

– Justin, I'm half paralysed," she said, sniffing. The left side. It's less difficult, of course, since I'm right-handed, but...

But I wasn't listening anymore : she had called me Justin ! It was the first time in ten years that she called me by my first name. I was overjoyed. Suddenly relaxed and free of all complexes, I found the first seat next to her bed and sat down without even asking her permission. With my elbows on my knees, I listened to her talk for over an hour, in a choppy, sometimes incomprehensible way interspersed with sobs. But I was happy, selfishly happy. I wanted to take her hand, her sick hand of course, but I didn't dare. And when she fell asleep, exhausted from so much effort and words, I stayed for another hour watching her without moving. Finally, it was the nurse who gently pushed me out...



It was a strange evening to spend with my friend Imbert. Faced with my distress, she cancelled the restaurant I had promised her, assuring me that talking about my future was much more important to her than a good meal. In fact, when I was embarrassed, she told me that it was only a postponement and that she was putting the "restaurant" on the list of things to do. Instead, she opened a good bottle of wine and prepared small sandwiches which she served in her living room.

– No going out tonight," she declared, "but a business meeting ! We have a lot of issues to work

out.

Putting words into action, she picked up her notebook and readjusted her glasses. I stared at the resurrected old executive secretary, regaining her old reflexes of organization and efficiency.

Now that I was available full-time, the management of my business had to be more rigorous. I was suddenly far from the time when I only saw one or two patients per evening, and a little more on Saturdays. From now on, magnetising was my new profession.

The only problem we had was that we did not see things in the same way at all. While I knew perfectly well that only the potion healed, and nothing else, she imagined on the contrary (and in accordance with what I made her to believe) that my magnetism was the only engine of my healings and that the drink was only a plus. To which I protested vehemently.

– It's incredible," she laughed, "it's like Asterix the Gaul's magic potion !

I responded with a huge burst of forced laughter, swearing inwardly not to press the issue too much.

Then we moved on to subjects that were completely beyond me, but which she assured me she would take care of. She spoke to me about "society", "statutes", "tax declarations", but when I looked embarrassed she mentioned an old lawyer friend who would do all the necessary steps for me. Phew !

With that problem out of the way, we turned to the subject that was closest to my heart and, for

once, it was I who initiated the debate.

– As you suggested, I'd love to treat Mademoiselle Jeanne but I have no idea how to go about it. It's impossible to...

– You mean in the middle of a hospital? Indeed, I don't see you doing a magnetism session in front of the nurses who come and go without warning.

And I could see myself even less making her drink the potion, I thought as an aside, but I preferred not to bring up the subject again. Instead, I replied :

– Of course, but the other difficulty will be convincing Mademoiselle Jeanne to let herself go. She will never believe me, she knows me too well. You know, at the office I was considered to be the official jerk. And if I tell her about my superpowers now, she'll laugh at me.

– Do you really think so ?

– Yes, it's a foregone conclusion, and besides, I know my colleague well enough to know that she's a woman of numbers, not letters. She is absolutely materialistic and does not believe in such things. She is a Cartesian to the point of disgusting Descartes himself !

Mrs. Imbert thought for a few moments and then suggested :

– What if you discreetly magnetised her while she was sleeping ? It's feasible, isn't it ? Look at my case, you only magnetised me for a few seconds and it worked. What do you think of that ?

The idea was not bad in itself, but once again Mrs. Imbert neglected the importance of the infu-

sion. She was even eradicating it.

– Yes, but what about the potion," I said timidly.

She looked at me with a frown and sighed :

– But in her case, is the potion really important ? Can't we do without it for once ?

– No," I said, "quite the opposite ! His case is so delicate that the infusion is essential ! I'm not saying that in certain very benign cases it's really indispensable, no, but you have to understand that the more serious the illness, the more necessary the plant is. And here there is nothing else to do : potion plus magnetism, that's the rule.

My friend stared at me even harder and shook her head, sighing.

– I wonder what could be in this magic potion ! It must be fabulous !

– Oh no, I lied, nothing fabulous, just ordinary plants. But it's all in the dosage. You know, it's like cooking, the proportions make everything !

And I knew at that moment that I had found the answer to all the embarrassing questions : I was going to research all the relaxing plants on the market and develop a complicated formula without giving the proportions. That would be my so-called "secret". Then I would concoct the tea as I would have prescribed it, but with a discreet addition of my beneficial "Frutex Virtuosus". This was called "muddying the water"... The whole thing would make me do extra work, of course, but I considered that, at the price I was paid, I could still do some work.

We remained silent for a while, each of us lost

in our own thoughts. She broke the silence first.

– In that case, we'll have to play it tight. The best thing will be to make her drink your herbal tea by trickery and...

– Mrs Imbert," I cut her off, "I think that...

– Listen Justin, stop calling me Mrs. Imbert, you sound like a little boy and it makes me feel so old. Call me Rose !

So my neighbour was called Rose. I wasn't surprised, given the sweetness of her world.

– Well, Rose, I think the wisest course of action would be to tell Mademoiselle Jeanne the truth. I don't want to lie to her. That's it !

– It's a stand that honours you, dear Justin, but you risk spoiling everything. After all, isn't it the result that counts ? Isn't her recovery more important than your scruples ? Think about it !

She was right, but I couldn't bring myself to lie to that woman again. Something inside me forbade me to trick her vulgarly. I felt a kind of respect that paralysed me beyond reason. But my decision was made, I would not treat her against her will. To cut short any discussion I muttered that I would think about it, but inwardly I was already wondering how I would present the matter to my former colleague.

The next morning my neighbour received the long-awaited phone call. My third patient, the one with the most advanced cancer, told her that the disease was clearly regressing. She had preferred to wait, so as not to spread false joy, but now there was no doubt. Her markers were at their lowest

and the MRI showed no trace of malignant cells. The doctors didn't understand what was going on, and they had been pulling out their hair while doing more tests. For me, this unexpected success opened the door to all hope and I knew that I and my little leaves were now ready to face the most difficult cases. I had the power to resurrect condemned patients ! It was exhilarating !

In any case, this superb victory over the disease confirmed that I had to do my utmost to help Mademoiselle Jeanne. So I decided to go back to see her that same day.

Contrary to my habit, I did not prepare any arguments, preferring for once the spontaneity of improvisation to the security of a recited speech. So it was in a state of total apprehension that I entered her little private room.

She looked at me sadly and tiredly. I noticed that she had really changed. Not only physically. It was her whole personality that had shifted in defeat and renunciation. She felt diminished and abandoned, it was obvious.

– My poor Justin," she sighed, "you're wasting a lot of time coming to see me. You are kind.

Then she seemed to think of something specific that made her frown and added :

– But... But... How can you be away so often ? Doesn't Monsieur Dugout say anything to you ? I hope you don't use up your days off to come and see me ?

I smiled and told her about my dismissal. And in the process I told her about my heated interview with our supervisor and my final insult. I thought

she would disapprove of my disrespectful attitude, but instead she gave a little hesitant laugh and said :

– How happy I am to know that someone has finally put that fat pig in his place. How happy I am ! Do you know, Justin, that at one time he even made a pass at me ? Poor guy," she laughed, "he must have been really needy to attack such an ugly girl !

And as I was about to protest in all chivalry, she suddenly looked worried and asked me :

– But what are you going to do now ? Have you registered for unemployment ? Have you started looking for work ? It's not easy, you know.

That's when I saw the opening : it was the moment to tell her about my new job and to tell her my full-size pitch. I didn't need to trick her as Rose suggested. I was going to convince her honestly.

I explained that I had nothing to worry about in the future and gave her a clever summary of my new activity : my so-called "ancestral gifts", the "magnetism" sessions, the "relaxing" potion, all carefully punctuated with : "I know you won't believe me, but...", "As unlikely as it may seem...", "You will laugh, but...". But she did not laugh and even listened to me with deep attention. At the end, I concluded my speech with a masterful :

– And if you want proof, I can introduce you to a friend, Madame Rose Imbert, who has more or less served as my assistant during this last month, and I can also have you read a good thirty letters of thanks.

For a moment she stared at the ceiling in perfect

stillness, and I thought she had even fallen asleep when she spoke these few words of implacable lucidity :

– Justin, I believe you, of course, but I also believe that you are not telling me the whole truth. Justin ? What if you tell me everything ?

I looked bewildered and tried to keep up appearances by playing the most perfect incomprehension.

– Justin," she continued, "there's something wrong with your story and you know it. If your gift is innate and if these secrets have been passed down from generation to generation, why did you wait so long to use them ? Why ? Why didn't you start years earlier ? Why did you force yourself into a job as an accountant, which obviously doesn't suit you, when you could have done something a thousand times more interesting ? And then I noticed this sudden change as soon as you came back from holiday. You weren't the same, Justin, and as luck would have it, it was in the month that followed that you threw it all away to finally live off your powers. Strange coincidence, isn't it ? What happened during your summer holidays Justin ? What did you discover ?

I was stunned ! Even Rose Imbert hadn't made the connection. My colleague was reading through me as if she were looking at her balance sheets and I hadn't even anticipated the slightest defence against her insight. And I was far too slow-witted to improvise any kind of reply on the spot. I was trapped, she had seen through my poor acting. I had to face the fact that, although the plant had

improved my physical form, it had had no impact on my intellectual alertness.

Mute and dejected, I took advantage of her turning my head towards the window to get up and rush out. I thought I heard her calling me, but I ignored her, preferring to run off down the corridor which was crowded with trolleys.

On the way home I almost wept with shame, but for once I was firm and made a manly and voluntary decision : I would never see Mademoiselle Jeanne again ! And that was it !

I told myself that hanging on to this snobbish and contemptuous colleague had been a mistake and that, since she refused my help, I could very well do without her too. She was wasting my time when I had a thousand projects that now required my full attention. She was right, I was a renowned healer, not a shabby little accountant. I was going to have tons of women if I wanted them, and more attractive than her !

In short, I now admit that I showed incredible bad faith in defeat, something I have always excelled at.

When I arrived on the landing, my friendly neighbour opened her door and told me that she had worked for me again. She had scheduled three appointments that evening : a heart failure, a hearing loss and a bowel problem.

I thanked her and quickly went home. As always, I rushed to my plant, anxious to check its progress and health. It was sitting at the back of

my kitchen, well away from prying eyes. I watered it carefully, more and more surprised at the speed with which it was growing. The torn off leaves were quickly reformed and new branches were timidly appearing. I didn't know that such vivacity could exist and, of course, it was impossible for me to ask anyone for advice. In any case, at this rate I was not about to run out of raw material. It was as if the plant, aware of its regenerative qualities, was first feeding itself before sharing it with others. Charity begins at home...

Despite my minor annoyance of the day, my three patients were treated with courtesy and efficiency, as always. I then ate a simple piece of cheese for dinner. I had discovered that I could now skip almost all my meals without feeling the slightest bit tired, probably due to the regular use of the potion. And this effect was not the least of all, for it would save me a considerable amount of time on my future schedule. Full and satisfied, I decided to go back to my neighbour to set the agenda for the next day.

Rose was telling me about the new patients expected the next day, when suddenly she asked me, with a suspicious look in her eye :

– What about your office mate ? How did it go ?

As I was expecting the question, I had no difficulty in appearing unburdened as I told her :

– Mademoiselle Jeanne ? Ah yes, well, as I thought, she's not too keen on all this. She's an impossible rock to convince.

– And ?

– And... what ?

– And what are you going to do ? Don't tell me, Justin, that you're giving up on treating her. You'll find a trick, won't you ?

Silencing the small hint of regret that was slyly knotting my stomach, I took a totally indifferent look and answered :

– No, I won't force her, it's useless. Besides, I have enough to do with the volunteers to waste my time begging the recalcitrant. Case closed, pfuitt !

Rose Imbert didn't answer anything, she just nodded her head. I knew what she was thinking deep down, but she didn't know Justin Planchard's ability to barricade himself. I was soft and indecisive in most situations, it's true, but I was also unusually stoic in accepting defeat. I could have written whole tomes on the philosophy of resignation, submission and low profile. After all, why rush the obstacle when you can turn your back on it ? And why get agitated when it's much more comfortable to sit back ?

My friend wished me good night without saying anything more. That night, for no reason at all, I slept very badly.

V

The next day was most painful. Indeed, not having yet enough clients to keep me busy for a whole day, I spent most of my time in a hopeless idleness. I walked around in circles, leafing through my medical journals and suffering above all from an extraordinary but totally useless physical condition.

I rang my neighbor Rose's doorbell to make some conversation, but she was away.

And then, I must confess, I thought a little (a lot) about Miss Jeanne, all alone in her little white bed and moping about her semi-paralysis. But what could I do? It was not my fault if she asked too many indiscreet questions and refused my help. Let her do it herself, after all!

Around four o'clock, I had the happy surprise to see Rose coming home. I called out to her at once, but I felt that she was so preoccupied that I did not insist and I wished her good night without asking her any indiscreet questions. What had happened? Was she in trouble?

The next morning, anxious to avoid another day of inactivity, I decided to do some shopping to try to spruce up my office. When I asked my friend if she would accompany me, she looked as worried as she had the day before and told me that she unfortunately had an appointment to keep. I did not insist again.

Among other things, I acquired two superb wooden boxes that would house my client files, because until now they had been thrown gracelessly into a vulgar cardboard folder. I also found a few volumes to seriously nourish the shelves of my library: "Healing with Plants", "Magnetism for Everyone", "The Secrets of the Druids", etc...

In the late afternoon, Rose returned from her mysterious visits with an increasingly strange air, and I wondered if her preoccupations had anything to do with our activity or if they were due to a personal concern. Nevertheless, she didn't breathe a word of it to me and even complimented me on my new purchases.

Then she told me about her legal advisor who had finalised my articles of association and filed them in some administrative body. Out of politeness, I looked interested, but the paperwork aspect of my business left me unmoved. She used a few more legal terms that exasperated me to no end and I thought she was about to leave when she asked me point-blank :

– I was wondering... could you... well... do you know if it is possible to magnetise remotely ?

Caught off guard, I had no idea about the question and just remained evasive :

– To tell you the truth, I don't know... I've never tried... I'll think about it and...

– I'll think about it and..." "Because," she continued, "you see, I have a friend who is in a delicate situation and who, because of his position, can't afford to go out in public. This person has serious health problems but doesn't want anyone to know.

– If that's all," I replied with a shrug, "you can count on my discretion. Besides, there's no need to work at a distance : he just has to come to your place and, without seeing or knowing, I'll join him afterwards.

– No, no, she panicked, he cannot come in the district, that would be known at once. Impossible !

– Ah well, then maybe I can go to his place, no ?

– No, no, even less !

I had never seen her in such a state of agitation and began to wonder if all this was not related to her mysterious visits from which she returned so worried. I smiled inwardly, thinking that perhaps she was the old mistress of some prominent person whose anonymity must be preserved. An old minister ? An old artist ?

– Listen," I answered again, "your story seems quite complicated, but I'll see what I can do.

She looked at me, squinted her eyes and asked me :

– Tell me Justin, did you say that your magnetism was not limited to the sick part, but that it renovated the whole body ? I wasn't dreaming ?

– Yes, you are right, my potion... er, sorry, my gifts are addressed to the whole body and...

– So, when I send you a patient, if I didn't tell you what he was suffering from, you could heal him just as well ?

Here I had to be careful and not let myself get caught up in any contradiction :

– Uh... Yes and no," I answered without going too far. In fact, I can heal the body as a whole, but the fact of knowing where the evil is located allows

me to insist on the incriminated zone. It's not necessary, but it's still better.

Phew, with my half-assed answer I think I had done well. But she asked for more :

– So, even if the disease is not really locatable, you heal just as well ? For example, leukemia, allergy or general fatigue, you can cure ?

I assured her that she was right, relieved to have convinced her of the extent of my powers without having revealed any link with the potion.

– So, she concluded, if I ask you to heal someone at a distance without specifying the nature of his illness, you know how to do it ?

That's it, I had guessed ! She was not the mistress of anyone, but she had in her relations a celebrity affected by an unavowable evil. I understood her growing concern and her desire to have him treated discreetly. For my part, knowing that I was not a magnetiser, I could promise anything, including sending my healing waves to the Moon. But there was still the unavoidable question of the potion !

– Dear friend," I lied shamelessly, "I remember now that my grandfather had managed to heal from a distance, especially a large contagious person who could not be approached and who had been relegated to a small island. So it is feasible. But there is still one imperative : the patient must drink the potion just before the magnetization and he must remain calm during the whole operation, it is imperative !

– Yes, yes, I know," she sighed, "but that's not a problem. If you prepare me your mixture in a small

bottle, I make strong to make him ingurgitate it in the rules.

Her proposal made sense, but at the same time, I didn't like leaving my potion in the hands of strangers. Who knows what they would do with it ? On the other hand, this story of remote healing was not to be neglected and it could be useful in certain cases, why not ? So I agreed to try the experiment.

– Yes, we can work together, but we have to synchronise our actions. Moreover (I invented in order to give even more credibility to my pseudo-scientific rules), I would need a personal element : an object that belonged to the subject, a photo, a piece of clothing, or simply some hair. In short, anything that would allow me to enter into communication with his body.

She nodded her head, admiring so much professionalism, and retorted, after much reflection :

– No problem, I will bring you something. I don't know what yet, no photo for sure, but I will bring you something.

The next few days went by with a disconcerting speed. I went from session to session with ease, and I, shy Justin, was no longer apprehensive about having all these strangers over. I even noticed that it was me who was intimidating people, not the other way around. They were so eager to be cured that they would not have allowed themselves to be rude to me. Most were reserved, docile and deferential in the extreme. I believe that in the eyes of some I had become a saint.

Some even thought I could perform miracles and asked me for help with problems that were not medical. Thus I remember this strange individual who came to visit me one evening with a very particular request.

– How can I help you, dear sir ?

He coughed, visibly uncomfortable, almost as uptight as I was before I became a healer. Finally he answered me :

– Well, I don't know if you can do anything for me, but I happen to be writing a remarkable novel, but I'm out of inspiration.

– Out of inspiration ? That's interesting, but what can I do for you ?

– Let's just say that my creative genius is at a standstill and I thought that maybe your magnetic waves could unlock it.

– Look," I replied in surprise, "I don't know if I can stimulate your neurons, but we can always try.

He was such a sucker that I couldn't let him leave without having subtracted his five hundred euros. I would have promised anything to keep him. And while he sipped his share of the potion, I asked him :

– And what exactly are you writing, if you don't mind my asking ?

– I'm working on a small, unpretentious literary work about a magnetizer who is not a magnetiser, and who serves his patients incredible nonsense in order to get some kind of payment out of them... I've already written the beginning (with an old lonely hermit who is quite excellent), I've already gone on for a little more than seventy pages, but at

the moment I'm stumbling over what to do next and I haven't even considered the end.

I was a little shaken by the coincidence with my own situation, but I didn't let on.

– I don't know anything about literature," I said, "but I thought authors always had a plan before they started writing. Am I wrong ?

– It's quite possible, but I write as I go along, without a plan or a framework. That way," he added, chuckling stupidly, "I discover the story as I write it. I'm both author and reader ! Isn't that wonderful ?

And he almost choked with laughter, satisfied with his joke. This guy was crazy, but I let him say it. So I did my usual magnetisation routine and hoped that the potion would give him some literary inspiration. After all, it had sometimes helped me in difficult times, so why not him ?

And although he had no chance of ever being published, I asked him, purely out of courtesy :

– Remind me of your name, dear sir, so that I can buy your book when it appears in bookstores.

– My name is Gérard Denamps, but don't bother. If thanks to you my little masterpiece takes shape and I am published, I will send you a copy. Dedicated, that goes without saying.

I took him home and thanked him.

– It will be called "The Illusionist" !" he shouted down the stairs, screaming with laughter, as I closed my door. Remember well : "The Illusionist" ! This title will make a lot of noise !

I was still thinking about the strange people I had to deal with when I heard footsteps in my hallway. Mechanically, I glanced at my appointment list and saw that it was not an ordinary patient. It was a wife who had insisted on seeing Rose "in between" about her husband whom I had recently treated. She had said that she would only be in for a few minutes.

So I let her in. She was an elegant woman of a certain age, about sixty, but who seemed particularly upset. Was her husband unwell ?

I offered her a seat and, as I sat down, she leaned towards me and, without warning, she slapped me in the face with a tremendous blow that must have been heard all the way to Rose's apartment.

I immediately raised my elbow to protect myself and I dove headfirst under my desk. I waited for a few seconds, shaking all over, and when I didn't see any more blows coming down, I abandoned my posture of a beaten child and shyly raised my head.

She was sitting upright and staring back at me.

– Are you happy with yourself ?" she snarled at me.

Assuming that something had gone wrong with her husband and that his health problems might have worsened, I replied while massaging my cheek :

– I don't know what you're talking about, dear lady. Is there a problem ?

– Yes, my dear sir, there is a problem ! And a big one !

And without giving me time to question her fur-

ther, she continued :

– The problem is that my husband is fine ! You've invigorated him, you revived him, you resuscitated him. He doesn't even take his antidepressants or sleeping pills anymore. Do you understand that ?

No, I didn't understand. What was she complaining about ? But I thought it safer to let her continue.

– It took me years to persuade him to take these medications. Years ! And you, with your charlatan's head and your tricks I don't even want to know about, you've ruined it all...

A little disoriented by so much incoherence, I still end up saying :

– But, Madam, since you yourself admit that I have made your husband feel better, where is the problem ?

– The problem is that now he's bothering me !

– He bothers you ? What do you mean ?

– But you don't understand anything, my little gentleman ! He bothers me every night, he's twenty again and he wants to do it again !

I thought I guessed what she was referring to and was horribly embarrassed, but I made no comment.

– You see," she continued, "I'd managed to get rid of the thing by giving him antidepressants and sleeping pills. These are wonderful things, and as you know, they are powerful sexual inhibitors and...

– Oh ? I didn't know that...

– Well, I'll tell you, my little gentleman ! Anti-

depressants especially ! It cuts everything off ! So you can imagine that when I knew that, I pestered him for years to start taking them. As soon as he had a problem, I told him it was his depression, so much so that he finally believed me. What a relief !

As she seemed to have calmed down a bit, I ventured to ask :

– I don't want to be indiscreet, dear Madam, but why were you so keen to reduce your husband's... ardour ? Was it going badly ?

– It's not a question of whether it was going well or badly ! It was going on, and that's the problem !

I understood less and less. She must have noticed my obvious lack of comprehension because she softened a little :

– Since you need to be told what's going on, I'll tell you everything ! Women are not made like men. Apart from a few hysterical females in heat, we have very little pleasure in sex. You men have a ball, but for us it's usually a chore. The term "marital duty" was not invented by chance and it's quite appropriate ! For us it's a chore, just like washing up or cleaning. So when we can do without it, we...

I was hardly in a position to give an opinion, since my knowledge of married life had only been acquired by hearsay, but I nevertheless felt entitled to raise an objection :

– But after all, Madam, there is such a thing as pleasure, isn't there ? Perhaps the years of marriage seriously dull it, but I imagine that with a little experience...

She shrugged her shoulders.

– That's not the point. A woman doesn't seek pleasure for the sake of pleasure, but because it gives her something else. The carnal act is only a passageway, a gateway, to something more intensely desired. For example, young women go on a binge not because they like it, but because they want to have children. Moreover, if you observe carefully, once they become mothers, these same women are much less demanding. Others simply want to balance their relationship to keep their home quiet, because they no longer see their husband as a potential lover but simply as the father of their offspring. So they accept it diplomatically. For you sex is an end in itself, for us it is a means !

– But," I asked, "in that case, how do you explain that some women have lovers ? It's because they like it anyway, isn't it ?

– But not at all, my dear sir ! Apart from the hysterical ones, whom I despise, they usually take lovers out of boredom, idleness and the need to get involved in a relationship. Not a sexual relationship, no, just a relationship. But since friendship between men and women doesn't seem to exist here on earth, they give in to the demands of the flesh in order to obtain those of the spirit.

She looked at me for a moment, satisfied with her formula, then added :

– And finally there are those, the most numerous, who do this for interest. Sometimes for money, but also for a social position, for material goods, for more comfort, or simply not to be alone.

I wanted to ask her which category she fell into, but I didn't dare, for fear of getting another blow.

She had a heavy hand, that lady, and my cheek was still burning.

– So you see, my little gentleman, when we find a solution to keep all the advantages of marriage without suffering its disadvantages, we're terribly angry at the first idiot who comes along and throws everything away.

And she stood up. The idiot in question immediately leaned against the back of his chair, ready to parry the attack. But nothing came. She closed her coat and concluded bitterly :

– I had put him to sleep, you woke him up...

Then she walked briskly to the door, which she opened with a sudden gesture. The next customer was already there and was quietly reading a magazine in the hallway. She looked at him and said :

– You've come for a little workout too ? Satire !

Then she opened the landing door and rushed down the stairs. I heard her shout one last time :

– Men are all the same !

It was definitely a day for nuts ! Fortunately, there were other more serious matters awaiting me.

Rose set the date for my remote magnetisation for the following Thursday. The day before, she carefully placed a brown envelope on my desk containing... some of the subject's hair. I did not open it, assuring her that it was not necessary and that I trusted her.

As for synchronising our actions, Rose cleverly suggested that we simply use the phone.

– As soon as I'm there and the person has had their drink, I'll call you from my mobile. Then, when you've finished sending out the vibes, you call me. What do you say to that ?

I didn't say anything at all for the simple reason that her plan was perfect and childishly simple. Almost too easy to be feasible. Besides, I thought that this idea was really worth exploring in order to multiply my earnings without increasing my visits. The idea appealed to me...

As soon as Rose left my office, I grabbed the brown envelope with my fingertips and... I disrespectfully placed it deep in my wastepaper basket. Medicine can be disgusting !

The next day I prepared a small dose of the potion and poured it into a beautiful new thermos bottle I had bought for the occasion. And when the time came for my first remote consultation, I wisely answered her call and assured her that I was ready. I then spent ten minutes daydreaming in front of my open window with my hands in my pockets. Then I called her back to tell her in a falsely exhausted tone that the magnetisation was finally over.

– I struggled a lot to get my vibrations through," I lied, "I felt the resistance of the air and all the radio waves that overwhelm us, but I think I managed. Thank you, Rose.

She seemed satisfied, her friend seemed satisfied, and I hung up with the feeling that I had taken a step forward in this industry that was now mine.

I was not even curious about the outcome of my

session. I knew in advance that, if the patient had swallowed the contents of my thermos well, success was assured. In any case, I suspected that in the days to come, another letter of thanks would be added to the already substantial collection of praises.

Every day brought me its share of disoriented, anxious patients who often felt neglected by the medical world. I, who rarely went to the doctors, was surprised to see how limited their means and results were. Before that, I naively imagined that a doctor was a well of science, capable of curing almost any ailment. Of course, I knew from hearsay that science had its limits and that not everything could be cured, but I was far from imagining the extent of these limits ! Not to mention, of course, the frequent errors that plagued many diagnoses.

I was appalled by so many failures and misdirections. But it would have been wrong of me to criticise all these professionals who had toiled for so many years to achieve such meagre results, while I, who had learned nothing, was able to achieve limitless wonders. How could they not be discouraged ? Life is sometimes profoundly unfair, but for once I wasn't going to complain about it...

I still had strange visitors, some of them much less funny than my little writer. For example, I remember a sickly-looking fellow, tall, very thin, extremely pale, who sat down opposite me and said

clearly :

– Don't worry, I'm not here for myself !

I assured him that I would have been delighted to help him, but he had such a negative aura that the atmosphere became oppressive. I just wanted him to leave.

But he didn't move a millimetre and stared at me. Suddenly I was very afraid : this guy smelled like an inspector. Inspector of what, I didn't know, but he was coming to check me out, I was sure. In a dull voice I asked him :

– And may I know the purpose of your visit ?

He leaned casually on the edge of my desk as if he were at the bar, and, lowering his tone, he announced :

– My wife will be coming to see you soon.

I was relieved. After all, it was only a modest husband who had come to talk to me about his beloved half. But my relief was short-lived when he told me :

– She will come to see you, but I wish you wouldn't cure her !

– Is that so ?

– Yes, you understand, there is an inheritance, so the sooner she disappears, the sooner I get my money. Do you understand ?

I didn't know what to say. How was I going to get out of this embarrassing situation ? But I was not done with my fright, for he lowered his tone further and whispered to me :

– In fact, I wish you would kill her !

– What ?

– Shh, not so loud ! You do have a way of re-

versing your waves, don't you ? Well manipulated, all waves can kill, it is well known, so go for it ! Black magic ! Laser ! Bewitchment ! Ultra-sounds ! Microwaves ! Spells ! Do what you want, you have carte blanche !

– But... I...

– Hush," he insisted, looking me straight in the eyes, "there will be a lot of money for you, a lot of money !

I didn't know where I stood. This guy was scaring me. Nevertheless, recovering my senses, I tried to end the conversation :

– Look, I'll see what I can do, but I can't promise anything. You know, it's not easy, I've never done this before. You'll have to be patient.

Finally, the guy stood up, unrolling his six-foot-long body of bones and bad vibes, and announced to me :

– I don't owe you anything, since I didn't use your services, but I'm going to give you a small deposit on our project.

I protested vigorously, for I had no wish to be bound by anything to this horrible character, but, cutting short my protests, he put his hand in his pocket and drew it out at once.

– Here, this is for you ! But shush !

And he triumphantly placed a dime on my desk.

I looked at him, dumbfounded. I thought for a moment that this was all a hoax and that a bunch of merrymakers would burst in with a hidden camera. But his cold, determined gaze disabused me of any doubt.

– And there will be many more like this one !"

he shouted from the doorway. Dozens more ! My wife has a jar full of them ! So... Abracadabra, eh ?

I let him go without even seeing him off. Slumped in my armchair, I offered myself a good swig of the decoction he had left behind...

VI

I had hardly recovered from my emotions when I heard someone enter the hall through my half-open door. I took a quick look at my appointment sheet, but all I saw was a completely illegible name, hastily scribbled by Rose. I was a little surprised at this as she always took care to write each name correctly. It was only when I stood up to greet the newcomer that I understood the reason for this deliberate illegibility.

Of course, I panicked completely, unable as always in her presence to make the slightest sound. Mademoiselle Jeanne came towards me, holding out a friendly hand which I took mechanically. I wondered to myself if she had passed the other lunatic on the stairs, but I noticed that she had only a slight limp and no cane. So her condition was not so critical but she obviously needed me. I immediately pointed to the chair opposite my desk and invited her to sit down. As I took my place on my side, I noticed again that she was no longer wearing her ugly old-fashioned bun and that she had put away her ugly glasses. I could even make out a hint of make-up on her lips and eyelids. Aware that I had to make an effort to speak, I finally articulated with difficulty :

– I... I'm really sorry about the other day... I don't know what came over me... I'm really sorry... I really am...

– Don't be sorry," she replied, shrugging off my

apology, "you've made up for it.

– Made up ?

– Yes," she smiled, "I'm much better. Look, I'm talking almost normally and I'm starting to use my left hand again. Of course I'm limping a bit, but that's nothing compared to what I endured in the early days. At least until you intervened, my dear Justin.

– Me ? Intervene ?

Suddenly everything became clear ! The mysterious patient that Rose had made me magnetise remotely was her ! Ah, the perfidious ! I looked at her with eyes as round as saucers, unable once again to utter a single word.

– Yes," she continued, "it was your friend Rose who came to see me at the hospital, after you left a little... a little hurriedly. She spoke to me at length about your gifts and she easily convinced me to try them. It's true, she was right, it didn't cost anything to try. But there were two problems : on the one hand she was not sure that you would agree to see me again (which I deserved, given my rather inquisitive attitude) and on the other hand, even if you had agreed, such a session was impossible in the middle of a hospital. She therefore had the idea of having you act at a distance, which avoided both revealing my identity and making you come to the hospital. Now, you know everything !

I understood Rose's plan perfectly, a diabolical but ingenious plan. However, as Mademoiselle Jeanne spoke to me, one question nagged at me : she had not been one hundred percent cured. Why not ? Did the plant have its limits ? Had she drunk

the potion correctly ?

– By the way," I added casually, as if it were only a minor detail, "did you drink the relaxing drink I had prepared in a thermos ? Rose hasn't forgotten ?

– Don't worry, everything has been done according to your instructions. I think your friend would cut off an arm rather than omit anything from your protocol. She has total respect for your abilities. In fact, she told me how, thanks to you, all her pain disappeared within a few hours. And she also told me about many other serious cases that you have handled with mastery.

Her compliments went straight to my heart, but I was inwardly desperate to see that things had not worked out completely for her. I had failed the one and only person I really wanted to rescue. How could this be ? Should I start the operation again without wasting a moment ? I was about to suggest another try when she cut me off :

– I see you are worried, Justin, is something bothering you ?

– Listen, Mademoiselle Jeanne, I...

– Oh no," she cut me off, "no more Mademoiselle Jeanne between us ! Call me "Jeanne", please.

– So, Mademois... er... Jeanne, I don't understand why I haven't cured you completely. I usually get much better results. Really, I'm dissatisfied with my potio... well, dissatisfied with me.

– But don't you understand that I am much better ? When I think back to the way I was before your intervention, it's like night and day ! Frankly, I'm happy. And the doctors, if you had seen their

faces !

– What," I panicked, "the doctors ! Did they notice ? But I'm going to get into trouble !

– No, I don't think so, because we acted with caution. In fact, I felt able to get up normally the next morning but, still on your friend's advice, I continued to play sick and only revealed my progress little by little. Everyone was amazed, of course, but they thought I had exceptional recovery abilities. And in the end, all the credit went to the physios at the hospital...

– Wait, I don't understand. You talk about physios and recovery. I don't see the connection. Can a physio pull you out of a hemiplegia ?

She looked surprised but didn't make any comment, probably fearing to offend me and trigger the stupid reactions I'm used to.

– I can see that you don't know much about the subject," she said cautiously, "but that's normal. I didn't know anything about strokes and their consequences until I was a victim myself. So I'll explain things as I understand them. During a stroke, a vessel stops supplying a small part of the brain, either because it has burst or because a clot has blocked it. Neurons that are not supplied with oxygen quickly become necrotic. This explains the paralysis of a whole side because a small part of the brain is dead and no longer commands anything.

– But why, I asked, is only one side of the body paralysed ?

– Because the right hemisphere controls the whole left side and the left hemisphere controls the whole right side. So if the accident takes place in

the right lobe, as it did for me, the left side is paralyzed.

– Okay, I understand the mechanism, but I still don't understand how a physio can intervene. I would have rather imagined a neurologist or even a cardiologist, no ?

– Because nature is very well organised and the neighbouring neurons of the dead zone take over. Only, as these replacement neurons have never worked, they have to be educated. Hence the work of the physiotherapist.

At this point I understood better the intricacies of this strange disease, and at the same time I began to see the reasons for my failure : since my Frutex Virtuosus had the effect of regenerating the cells of the human body, it was obvious that it could only act on living cells. I couldn't ask it to resurrect dead cells ! The failure was therefore logical. Consequently, if Jeanne had made very rapid progress, it was simply because the plant had stimulated the neighbouring neurons and accelerated their learning. The plant had done the work of the physiotherapist to the power of a thousand !

I was relieved to see that it was not my treatment that had failed, but that it had simply limited the natural death of things. On the other hand I was deeply disappointed that I could do nothing more for Jeanne. In the end, I found myself in the position of the practitioner who powerlessly notes the limits of his practice. The only difference was that for me it was the first time, whereas for him it was his daily bread.

Regaining all my self-confidence, I put my two

hands on my desk and leaned slightly towards Jeanne in order to better serve her with my "arranged" conclusions :

– I understand now why my magnetism was not one hundred percent effective. I can't do anything for the area of your brain that is definitely dead. On the other hand, my waves reached the periphery of this dead zone, which had the effect of boosting the neighbouring neurons. Hence your record recovery !

My ability to attribute the effects of my plant to hypothetical magnetic waves was becoming second nature to me. I was now falsifying reality with ease and without any scruples.

– My dear Justin, you are fantastic and I owe you a lot.

– You know," I replied with unabashed modesty, "I had nothing to do with it personally. I received this gift from... from Heaven and I'm giving it to others, that's all !

For once I had told the truth. Nevertheless, Jeanne, who was definitely a psychic, gave me her incredibly piercing look and whispered to me :

– And this potion ? What exactly is it ? Is it really that important ?

Very uncomfortable, I was about to give her my usual routine about the role of the potion in preparing the ground for my healing waves, when I was saved by the gong. In my haste to seat my visitor I had forgotten to close my door, an oversight which allowed me to hear the next patient move into the hall. I looked genuinely sorry to tell my friend that the interview was unfortunately over.

She rose from her chair, leaning discreetly on my desk, and I thought I saw a very slight distortion of her mouth on the left side as she asked me :

– How much do I owe you for all this ?

I was taken aback by the question and could only stammer :

– But, come on, Madem... Jeanne, nothing at all, it's... nothing at all !

I think she had anticipated my reaction because she immediately said :

– In that case, dear Justin, let me repay my debt by inviting you to dinner. I'm a pretty good cook, you know ? How about coming to my place tomorrow evening around eight o'clock ? With all due respect, of course.

– With all due respect, of course," I repeated mechanically, completely stunned.

I even forgot to walk her to the door.

I was on cloud nine as I dealt with the next customer. I didn't even listen to the story of his ailments and dispatched my pretence of healing in no time. He must have thought I was pretty dim-witted for a professional healer, but it must be remembered that I had become so well known among my patients that I could do anything. If I had wanted to, I could even have taken great advantage of the misfortune of some ! Moreover, I must admit that some female customers even made me understand, while undressing, that they were ready to go much further than the *de rigueur* five hundred euros.

The first time I didn't understand the allusion and naively replied to the beautiful woman that the price was the price and that I had no reason to increase it. But when she insisted, simpering and undressing more than necessary, I became so scarlet that she looked at me, mouth agape, as if I were an alien. And the session ended in an embarrassed silence. When she finally handed me the five tickets, I suddenly understood that this money was perhaps a considerable effort for her and that she had certainly hoped to save it by indulging in some form of privacy. I looked at her for a moment and saw that she was no more financially healthy than physically healthy. I remembered the beginning of our conversation (while she was sipping her herbal tea) and recalled that she had more or less talked about unemployment, divorce, dependent children and other worries that were not very pleasant.

I sincerely hoped that my plant would give her enough energy to help her overcome all her problems. And with a generous gesture, I pushed back my due. Fearing to offend her, I gave the excuse that the session had cost me no effort and that her case had been childishly simple to me. And as she packed up her precious tickets, I asked her, in exchange, not to tell anyone, and especially not her friends, about the little gift I had just given her. Free tickets should remain exceptional.

That evening, I told Rose about my little misadventure, and I worried about her reaction.

— You were right to refuse his advances, because you never know where it might lead you. I know that for a man the temptation is very strong, but

you have to hold on. You never know who you're dealing with, you may come across a crazy woman who will then make your life difficult and blackmail you. Be careful, I'm not saying that you can't start a love relationship with a patient one day, why not, but it must be done in good manners, not in a hurry. In any case, don't delude yourself, Justin, this kind of attempt is bound to happen again. It's the first, but certainly not the last !

Rose was right, for I subsequently had a few such proposals, but not all of them came from young women in need. Strangely enough, some of the advances even came from very financially well-off clients. Again, Rose enlightened me :

– I think some of them hope that if they give you more, they'll get more and that you'll cure them better. It's a form of insurance for them that they will be treated better.

And as I looked surprised she added :

– And I also think that there are some who are excited by the situation. I mean, they think that, thanks to your magnetic waves, you will give them a thousand times more pleasure than a normal man. They are looking for new sensations, that's all.

I laughed, amused at the supposed effects I could have on women. The unfortunate ones, if they had known what a zero score Justin Planchard was in love, they would have quickly sheathed their fantasies. For, I must confess, if I had never given in to any of these women, it was not only out of honesty or uprightness. It was also because I was afraid of ridicule, afraid of failure, because I was

clumsy and inexperienced, because I didn't have the instructions for use. That's all there is to it.

And then, I must admit, I often thought of the wife who had slapped me and her strange theory about female sexuality. Did all women act, as she claimed, out of self-interest ? Yet, listening to Rose, some of them did not seem so closed to pleasure after all. With so many opposing views, I didn't know where I stood.

In short, to return to the present situation, I put an end to all my doubts and went to bed that night thinking feverishly about Jeanne and her invitation for the next day. Did she too believe that I was a different man because of my waves ?

I can't say how good the dinner was because I can't even remember what she put on my plate. I only had eyes and ears for my hostess. The moment was magical.

She had definitely abandoned her austere bun and her ugly spectacles. Instead, she had beautiful chestnut hair that fell in waves to her shoulders and light make-up that softened her features. She was certainly not the perfect woman, but she was nothing like the surly teacher I had known for years.

Under her spell, I myself felt for the first time in my life that I had the soul of a seducer. While she spoke and smiled, I mentally replayed excerpts from old films where the hero is seen kissing the heroine passionately. I tried to remember what gallant strategy he used to achieve his goal. Little

by little, I felt a growing confidence and, perhaps helped by the good wine, I began to imagine that the evening would end with a real kiss at the end of the film. Yes, I was sure of it, Jeanne had invited me into the intimacy of her home only to embrace me. We'll see what we'll see !

Moreover, her transformation was not limited to her physical appearance but to her character. She had become pleasantly chatty and her conversation was far from boring. For me, who had only ever heard her speak in a dry tone of voice and talk only about figures, debits and credits, what a change ! She was transfigured.

She even had the thoughtfulness not to ask the "annoying questions", questions about the usefulness of the potion or about the reasons for my late vocation. So it was I who, at dessert, took the lead in order to dispel any suspicion. I was ready to recite the big lie I had memorised in the previous hour, which I hoped had all the possible repartees. I began by explaining to her, as I had done with Rose Imbert, that if I had concealed my gifts until then, it was only for fear of ridicule.

– When I was younger I sometimes tried but no one would believe me and I was in for a series of mockery. So, you understand, I quickly lost the habit of talking about it.

– Of course, I understand," she replied, "but what gave you the idea to start again ?

Fortunately, I had anticipated the question and its answer :

– In fact, it's simply my neighbour Mrs Imbert.

– Your neighbour ?

– Yes," I half lied. As she frequently complained of back pain, I ended up offering her my services. She immediately accepted and I magnetised her straight away, with the success you know.

This time she seemed convinced by my false sincerity. But she couldn't help throwing a final probe :

– But, tell me Justin, I don't want to make you angry again, but how do you explain this metamorphosis when you came back from your holidays. Because you were no longer the same, it was obvious. Did you "self-magnetise" yourself or... what ?

Unbelievable ! She was asking me an embarrassing question and at the same time suggesting the answer. I jumped at the chance :

– Well, yes, I have magnetised myself. People always say it's impossible, that you can't act on yourself, a bit like psychics who can't see their own future. But I read a book on the contrary and I tried it. And I succeeded quite well.

– But that's fantastic ! You've done some good work on yourself. Do you see that ? When you walked into the office, nobody recognised you at the time. That's incredible !

I took advantage of his last remark to steer the conversation into less dangerous territory :

– I know, that's usually the rule. My patients feel so 'renewed' from the inside that it influences their whole behaviour. Rose Imbert, for example, felt like she was twenty again. But you, dear Jeanne, are also unrecognisable. Did you feel better after drinking... sorry, I mean, after having my

session ?

– Yes, of course. Apart from my rehabilitation, which was done in record time, I have seen a lot of little worries magically disappear : I am no longer out of breath when I climb my stairs and I no longer have headaches...

– And," I added, "I see that your eyesight has improved since you no longer wear glasses.

She laughed.

– Glasses ? Oh no, that's different. Actually they were fake glasses, flat without any correction, as actors sometimes use them. I wore them to give myself a more severe look. That's all.

– That's all ! But why did you purposely make yourself ugly ? Women are looking for the opposite, aren't they ? To make themselves more beautiful and more attractive. Female coquetry is innate.

She looked down and thought for a moment before answering softly :

– Yes, you're right, but there are circumstances where it's more advantageous to be a pushover. At work, for example, at least in my case, I found that behind my austere facade I was left in peace and I could line up my columns of figures without being disturbed at any time. No saucy jokes, no ambiguous allusions, no inappropriate advances. In short : peace and quiet.

– But...

She held up both palms so that I wouldn't cut her off and continued :

– Have you ever put yourself in the shoes of a pretty woman, Justin ? No, of course not, but I can guarantee you it's exhausting. I was quite pretty

myself when I was young, you know. At first I found it flattering to be looked at, complimented and courted. But very quickly it became stressful. We are no longer looked at, we are undressed, we are no longer complimented, we are harassed, we are no longer courted, we are bothered. We are no longer a human being, we are a commodity that is constantly judged, weighed and hunted. Not to mention the jealousy of other women ! When I was eighteen, my first job was an ordeal, I was the focus of all the staff, I couldn't concentrate and I made mistake after mistake. And to top it all off, I was the one who got fired ! But I learned my lesson and it was while I was looking for my second job that I got the idea to make myself a little bit ugly. It's hard for a woman to give up her coquetry, but at least I was safe, the male colleagues turned away and all the women became my friends. You men don't have these problems ! Yes, I know that in your most frequent fantasies you dream of being overwhelmed by female demand, but I assure you that if this really happened to you, you would be disappointed !

I remained pensive in the face of all these unexpected revelations. I didn't think that being a pretty woman could sometimes be so restrictive.

– But, I finally asked, what about now ? Do you no longer feel the need to make yourself ugly ? Are you becoming pretty again ?

She laughed.

– But I'm not at work, I'm at home ! Don't you like it ?

– Yes, yes," I said, blushing like a tomato, "I like

it very much, but it's just that I'm not used to seeing you so... different.

She just smiled and got up to take something to the kitchen. As the evening was drawing to a close and I could see some signs of fatigue in her, I thought it was time to take my leave. I stood up and thanked her warmly for this wonderful evening. I didn't mean it as a simple courtesy, I really meant it.

She was modest and assured me that it was nothing at all and that she would do better next time. As she poured out the usual platitudes and preceded me towards the exit, my heart began to race. I knew that the climax of the evening was imminent. If all went according to plan, in a few seconds I would be hugging her tenderly and kissing her. I knew exactly how I was going to do it, I had in mind the final scene of a movie I loved. All I had to do was reproduce the actions of the main actor.

She stopped at her front door, opened it and whispered to me :

– Well, hello Justin, and thanks again for coming.

I didn't answer, aware that I was playing the role of my life. I looked her squarely in the face, ready to conclude in an elegant and manly manner, and I moved a few inches closer. I fixed my conquering gaze on her pretty lips and wondered what flavour they would offer me. And so I remained motionless, gazing at them, long, long, long...

– Is something wrong, Justin ? You look pale.

I could hardly hear her. Couldn't she see that I

couldn't go through with it, that I was paralysed, distraught at the thought of missing this unique opportunity? Why wasn't she coming closer? It was now or never! Inside I was torn by something painful that pushed me and held me back at the same time. Now or never! I felt my knees buckle and ready to give way, and I began to shake like a leaf. Now or never!

– Justin? she worried again.

Her voice came to me at last, distant and distorted. Then, being aware of the ridiculousness of the situation, I managed to regain some sense of reality and stammered, with a superhuman effort:

– I... I think it's the wine... I hardly ever drink it... I shouldn't have... Sorry...

– It's okay, Justin," she replied, opening her door wide. Do you want me to call a taxi?

– No... No... I... I could do with some fresh air... I'll... walk, it's not far.

And, pitifully, I crossed his mat with a ton of regrets on my shoulders. I heard behind me the soft clatter of her door closing and locking. I went down a few steps and dropped heavily on one of them. I held my head in my hands and spent an endless amount of time brooding over my bitterness and calling myself unpleasant names.

After an hour of silent whining, I came to the obvious conclusion that if the plant improved the character of my patients, it had in any case not changed mine. I may have looked better on the surface, but deep down I hadn't improved from one iota. I was and always will be Justin the clumsy one, it was inborn...

VII

The following days were painful and heavy with sadness and self-deprecation. I received my clients with total indifference, incredibly absent, bordering on rudeness. But curiously enough, I later learned that my apparent lack of interest was not detrimental to me, on the contrary: according to Rose, it had enhanced my reputation. My visitors attributed it to my 'supernatural', even 'enlightened' aspect, which characterises any good healer. They imagined that I was 'elsewhere', in permanent dialogue with the Beyond.

When I learned this, I decided to cultivate the lunar aspect of my character a little better. Until then, I had been wandering between doctor, masseur and psychologist, without managing to find the ideal profile. At least, by remaining more or less taciturn I was not taking any risks and felt more in harmony with myself.

However, the memory of my sentimental failure faded as the days went by, to be replaced by a renewed pride that I would not have believed myself capable of.

The potion, which I had abused severely over the last few days, had helped me a lot to overcome my depression. I even felt invigorated.

So I admitted that this young lady Jeanne did not deserve all the attention I was giving her. After

all, one had to be logical : she hadn't shown the slightest regard for me in ten years of working together, she had ignored, snubbed and despised me, and suddenly, under the effect of my alleged powers, she now found me approachable. Who was she kidding ? Was it not out of interest that she now sought my company ?

But open your eyes, my poor Justin, open your eyes ! Don't you see that you're in the situation of the guy who just won the lottery and suddenly finds a lot of friends out of nowhere ? If she hadn't had that unfortunate stroke, you'd never have heard from her again ! You're not attractive, you're not funny, and you're not cultured, so ask yourself why she's suddenly so interested in you. You came to her aid, that's good, but now enough is enough, you're not going to be vamped by this first-class hypocrite ! She is, after all, just another customer ! Stop !

And it was on this wise resolution that I sank into the sleep of the wise that night.

The next day, I received all my clients with exemplary serenity, my mind finally free and my gesture sure.

Of course, I got into the habit of pouring myself a few more concoctions, just like that, for no specific reason. Just for the pleasure of feeling great. Moreover, I had the exceptional feeling that each sip gave me a few more decades. How far will I go ? Will I see the twenty-fourth century ?

Since we're talking about concoctions, I should

mention that, as the pace of my consultations had increased considerably, I had decided to abandon my traditional teapot and replace it with a thermos flask, which was less aesthetic but much more functional. This would allow me to brew tea only once or twice a day, and the container would keep it at the ideal temperature.

So I decided to talk to Rose about it and, with my last client of the day barely out of my office, I rushed to her door. We talked for a few moments about the choice of a suitable bottle, but suddenly she asked me in the middle of a sentence :

– And your friend Jeanne, how is she ?

I was taken aback and could only stammer :

– Who ? Jeanne ?... Oh yes ! Well, she's fine.

She looked at me suspiciously.

– Is that all ?

– Yes... Err... Well, I don't see her much these days.

She crossed her arms over her chest and looked at me over her glasses.

– Well, well ! And can we know why ?

I looked stupidly at her doormat while waddling from one foot to the other and finally I admitted that this lady didn't deserve my attention...

Rose listened to my vengeful theory for a good ten minutes without interrupting me.

– My poor Justin," she sighed at last, "I'm beginning to wonder if you're not a moron.

And when I looked offended, she continued, waving her index finger under my nose :

– I know your Jeanne much better than you do. Don't forget that I went to visit her every afternoon

for ten days, and that I had plenty of time to get to know her. Well, let me tell you that your friend is not at all the woman you imagine. She likes you very much and she was ignoring you because she was intimidated by you.

I was amazed.

– Who ? Me ? Intimidating Jeanne ? But that's impossible, you must be joking !

– No, I'm not ! Let me tell you that you are both very shy and you intimidate each other. You're both as uptight as you are timid, and things aren't going to work themselves out.

– But...

– You have to admit, Justin, that if I hadn't pushed you up the backside you would never have gone to see her in hospital. And she, in turn, would never have dared to call you. Oh, don't worry, you're not the only ones who stare at each other, millions of people are dying to talk to each other but never do, convinced that it's the other person who doesn't want them. The problem is that too often we confuse shyness with indifference, and that's a pity.

I lowered my head, stunned by Rose's revelation. So Jeanne liked me and would have liked to get to know me long ago ? Why not, after all. But I couldn't really be convinced.

– However," I replied, "even if she hadn't been shy, I don't see why she would have been interested in me ! I know that I have nothing to please, and her shyness has nothing to do with it. No, Rose, I admit that there was a certain mutual misunderstanding at the beginning, but I still think that my

plant... well, I mean, that my magnetism has a lot to do with the interest she has in me.

– And I, Justin, I tell you that your gifts have nothing to do with it ! They were just the pretext, the spark that melted the ice. And you want me to tell you what he really touched her, do you want me to tell you ?

And without giving me time to answer she continued :

– What really touched her was that you went to see her in hospital, that's all. The magnetisation was a plus, that's for sure, but it was your visit that moved her much more than anything else. So that's it. So if I were you, I'd stop being so stubborn and run to that nice woman without question.

I lowered my head a little more, like a child who has just been lectured. Then, without a word, I headed for my bedroom, moved to tears...



I often thought of Jeanne, but like a distant and inaccessible dream. I would never dare to contact her again, and even if I did, I was too afraid of being taunted. The situation was hopeless.

However, the next day, I was surprised by a little unexpected visit.

– Hello Justin. Can I come in ?

I almost dropped my new thermos. As I had already driven my last customer home, I politely invited her to sit down, a little reluctantly and wondering what kind of mockery I was going to be subjected to. But there was no hint of it, and after exchanging a few innocuous words about how well

my business was doing, she finally got to the point of her visit.

– Justin, I spoke with your friend Rose, and she agrees with me that you are completely overwhelmed.

I was expecting all sorts of remarks, but not that one.

– Me ? But I...

– I don't think you really see it because you're a bit... dreamy, shall we say, but things are piling up dangerously.

– Are they ? But no, not at all... Everything is fine...

– Of course, everything is fine, everything is fine ! But, tell me, who does your accounting ? Who monitors the payments ? How do you manage your customers file ? Who answers your letters ? Who does your tax-declarations ?

– But... Rose... Rose, of course, she's the one...

– Nothing at all," she cut me off, "your friend Rose only answers the phone and opens your letters, and that's already a lot, believe me. So who does the rest ?

– Er, her legal adviser, I think...

– No, her legal advisor has just created your statutes, that's all. So, what's the deal ?

– But," I stammered, "I don't know... I didn't know that there was all this to do as well !

Seeing that she was terrorising me with her old schoolteacher airs which were resurfacing from the past, she agreed to soften a little and it was in an almost childish voice that she continued :

– Well, I've been thinking about it and I think

you need help. Your business is growing and you need to approach it from a more professional angle. So, if you're willing, and only if you're willing, I'd like to do some of your secretarial work. What do you say ?

What did I say ? I couldn't believe my ears. Not only was Jeanne going to give me a serious helping hand, but I was going to see her every day ! She was going to be my second assistant, so to speak. No, the first ! Total happiness ! Nevertheless, I asked, worried :

– But... What about Rose, what will she say ?

– Rose agrees, don't worry about it. We'll share the work. She will continue to answer the phone, she likes that, and I will do the rest. To start with, I suggest that you buy a small laptop, which will allow me to do your accounts and keep your clients file up to date. Then I will take care of the administrative part, the declarations and the mailings.

Usually, when you're happy, you say you're on cloud nine. In my case, I was on a big psychedelic cloud !

– On one condition ! I added with a smile.

– "Yes ?

– No more buns or bezels. It's forbidden by my business rules.

– No problem ! Now, if you don't mind, we'll go over all the details together. Do you have an hour to spare ?

For sure, I thought as an aside ! I'll give you an hour, two hours, ten years, eternity...

From that day, things began to improve dramatically. Jeanne and Rose organised my days for maximum efficiency, allowing me to receive more and more people and make big profits. When Jeanne showed me the first provisional balance sheet, I almost fell over. I was rich !

Because of my unshakeable health, I was able to put in huge days of work. As I said, I hardly needed to eat any more, the only real meals I allowed myself were for simple greed. I also hardly needed any sleep either. An hour or two of sleep was more than enough for me.

Although I tried to hide my incredible resistance from them, Jeanne and Rose were well aware that I was leading a hellish rhythm but never told me anything about it. For them, I was an unusual character and they accepted it without question. I was a saint !

In spite of their protests, I was very generous to them, showering them with money from my pockets like a prolific magician. And God knows how much I was spouting ! My clients, by an old custom no doubt linked to this kind of profession, thought they were obliged to pay me in cash. As a result, my drawers were full of notes that I didn't know what to do with. It was Jeanne who, with her rigour and good sense, came to put order in my dissolute treasury :

– Justin, you can't keep all that money under wraps, you have to declare a lot of it.

– What do you mean ? Declare it ? But the tax-man will take it all away !

– Look, you don't look like you've been working

in an accounting department for years. You know how it goes : if you don't declare that money, you won't be able to spend it freely without triggering the curiosity of the taxmen. And that will be worse than paying a little tax.

I was being a bit of a ninny, but deep down I knew she had a point. Money is not meant to sleep forever. So it was done as she ordered.

A new and very worrying fact had also attracted my attention : among the multitude of my patients, I noticed that some of them came back from time to time. My extra sessions were of no use to them, for the plant had renewed their cells to perfection, but I think they needed reassurance. They probably thought that a few more waves would consolidate the gains of the first magnetisation.

I had a problem with these duplicates because they were foolishly taking the place of new cases that urgently needed my help. And they were not even discouraged by my fees.

Moreover, by making them ingest my potion repeatedly, I risked giving them an unreasonable longevity, which was precisely the risk against which Cyprian had warned me. So I decided not to serve these regulars any more potions and to offer them only a simple tea free of Frutex Virtuosus. I therefore got into the habit of keeping two identical thermos bottles on my shelf, one with and one without the plant. A small discreet mark on the base allowed me to differentiate them. It was simple and effective.

Moreover, I didn't want to waste my source of goodness unnecessarily. The shrub always sat in my kitchen where no one was allowed to enter. I pampered it, I talked to it and I watered it lovingly, for although it regenerated itself with strength, I was always afraid that one day it would die. As a precaution, I cloned it by distributing new shoots in different containers. It was no longer a kitchen, it was a greenhouse, and I only had a narrow corner of the table to prepare the potion each day. And for me, who had never been interested in botany or horticulture, I made a point of studying a few textbooks on the subject. This was a considerable effort because, I must confess, I never opened a single book or even a single periodical. In a word, I was hardly interested in anything, not even my old black and white television set, which I had put in the cellar. The intellectual effort was therefore painful but I consoled myself by feeling that my astronomical income was well worth such meagre suffering.

Every evening we met to review the day's work. Rose would give me the list of new appointments (I was already busy for the next three months) while Jeanne would collect my new client sheets and count the day's takings. Then Rose would make a brief summary of the mails she had received that morning. Of course, it was all thanks, blessings and praise. In short, it was a wonderful time.

VIII

It had been three months since we had put our new arrangements in place, when I received a visit from a nice little couple.

Apparently the two lovebirds were both in need of my services, but I understood that if they were acting as a duo it was also in the hope of getting two magnetisations for the price of one. I didn't like the process very much, but they were so young and friendly that for once I turned a blind eye, considering that I was rich enough anyway.

They complained of various pains, he in the knee (if I remember correctly), and she in the back after a lumbago. In short, nothing but the usual.

While serving them their potion, I gave myself the luxury of a little anatomy lesson in front of their astonished eyes, apparently surprised by so much seriousness from a simple magnetiser. They asked me a lot of questions and showed great interest in the originality of my method.

Nevertheless, I sensed a slight reluctance on the part of the young woman when, pointing to her still-steaming cup, she asked me :

– And what is this ?

Accustomed to this kind of question from a new patient, I recited my usual lesson on the mixture of herbs designed to relax the muscles and facilitate the flow of my magnetic waves.

Then the young man lifted his cup and I thought he was about to raise it to his lips when he poured

the contents into a bottle handed to him by his companion.

– What are you doing ?" I cried, jumping to my feet.

And without interrupting his gesture he answered me calmly :

– We are taking a sample for analysis.

– What ! But you don't have the right !

– Oh yes we can," they answered in unison, "We are mandated by the Ministry of Health. Here are our cards and our mission orders, and you can phone to check.

I was devastated.

– But why are you doing this ? I'm just a lowly magnetiser and I'm not doing anything illegal.

– That's exactly what we want to check," the young woman replied as she finished recapping her bottle. Because you don't just magnetise, you also make people consume an indeterminate substance and we just want to check what it contains.

– But why ? Herbalism is not forbidden, as far as I know !

– Of course it is not. But if you only use the usual herbs that you can find in pharmacies, you are safe. On the other hand, if you find traces of anything else, you can be prosecuted, either for drug trafficking or for illegal practice of medicine. You choose.

– But that's impossible ! I don't sell anything !

– I'm sorry, but at five hundred euros a session, you can't expect me to believe that you're just doing magnetic tricks. There's more to it than that and the lab will find out what.

The two charming lovebirds had become downright aggressive and, despite being a born pacifist, I really wanted to strangle them. I also imagined for a moment that I could bribe them with a few bundles of money that were lying around, but I knew that this was impossible. Anyway, I didn't have time to offer them anything because they had already got up and greeted me very hypocritically.

– Have a nice day," they said with a false smile.

I sat down again, unable to call the next customer. I didn't feel like anything else. I just wanted to lie down and sleep. For a moment I thought of calling Rose and Jeanne to the rescue, but what good would that have done? Not knowing about the plant, they would have smiled and advised me not to worry about a few grams of Valerian or Passionflower. I was really alone in this sinister matter.

The analysis would detect an unknown plant, that was certain, and the people from the Ministry would want to know more. And they would question me. And they would search the place. And they would find the shrubs in my kitchen...

I broke out in a cold sweat. I then conclude that I had to find another cache for my bins, it was crucial. Tonight I would start thinking about it.

Reluctantly, I pulled myself together and stood up to greet the next customer, dragging my feet. Fortunately for me, it was a slightly depressed and very talkative old woman who paid no attention to my despondency, so preoccupied was she with her own. I listened to her with an absent ear and it was at the precise moment when I reached for my

thermos bottle to serve her her drink that I stopped in disbelief. My eyes became as round as marbles, my patient stopped her chirping and, her gaze following mine, she too began to stare at my bottle without understanding why.

– I gave them the wrong mixture !

And as she looked at me even more worried, I managed to regain my seriousness and explained to her :

– It's nothing, it's just a little mistake that's not serious. But don't worry, I will give you the right tea. The one that will suit you.

And I swiveled smoothly towards my shelf to take the other thermos bottle, the one containing the plant. As I filled her cup, I realised that I had been incredibly lucky, which put me in a euphoric mood for the rest of the day. In the evening Rose and Jeanne were surprised to find me so cheerful. I simply told them about the visit of the two inspectors, without, of course, mentioning the saving confusion between my two containers. My assistants laughed heartily, rightly believing that the sample would not yield much. And for good reason !

Nevertheless, I learned my lesson from this mishap and decided, in my heart of hearts, to look for another cache for my shrubs anyway. And for my cash too, for that matter.

The only problem was when Jeanne, pointing out the day's receipts, told me that five hundred euros were missing. I scratched my head for a few seconds but I soon remembered : those bastard inspectors hadn't even paid me for their consulta-

tion. It was clear that no one could be trusted...

A few days later, Rose felt that the visit of the Ministry of Health inspectors was only a warning shot and that others, more difficult, would follow. Jeanne was in complete agreement with her.

– You know, Justin, when you succeed you get a lot of jealousy. Also, don't forget that we live in a country where making a lot of money is very much frowned upon. So you have to expect attacks from all sides.

– And we have to be prepared for that," says Jeanne. We should seek advice now.

– It's already been done," retorted Madame Imbert. As you know, I have a legal adviser among my friends who knows our business well since he drew up the statutes. I spoke to him.

– And what does he think ?

– He says that we should never go outside the legal framework of our activity and respect the law to the letter. Moreover, he thinks that it is not only the Government that we should be wary of. There is the whole medical profession. Doctors are for the most part extremely proud people who do not accept the slightest questioning of their supremacy. So, the day they discover that a little magnetiser without any diploma can treat a hundred times better than them in just a few minutes, they will have a nervous breakdown, if you allow me to use the expression. I would even be tempted to say that it's them we should be most wary of, not the taxmen.

– Yet," I intervened, "they should be happy to see their patients miraculously cured, that should make them happy, shouldn't it ?

– But you don't know them," Rose exclaimed, raising her arms to the sky, "they don't care if their patients are cured by others. All they care about is their ego, their personal success and their bank account. Healed, yes, but healed by them only, not by the neighbour...

– In any case," cut in Jeanne, "we have to tuck ourselves in on all sides to prevent any attack. When is your advisor coming ?

As I listened to the two women work out a defence plan, I was angry that I couldn't tell them about the plant itself. How could my allies help me if they didn't hold all the cards ? How could we work effectively in the perpetual lie ? I tried to imagine the consequences of such a confession on my two friends. How would they react ? Would they approve of the process ? Would they be able to keep it a secret ? No, such a confession was unthinkable, at least for the time being...

At that moment, Rose stood up and apologised :

– I'm sorry, but I've got a terrible headache and I can't think of two things. I think I'll go to bed.

– What ?" I cried. Do you have a headache ? How can it be ? Would you like to drink... well, I mean, would you like a session of magnetism ?

– You're sweet, Justin, but there's no need, you've gone to enough trouble for one day. An aspirin and a good night's rest, and tomorrow we'll forget all about it. Good night, everyone.

I was worried about her headache because,

theoretically, she should have been free of any health problems for years to come. I say "theoretically" because in practice I didn't have enough experience to judge the effects of the plant in the long term. Of course I had followed Cyprien's recommendations, but they were very brief and did not include the contraindications or side effects that can be found in any instructions. But I didn't have any instructions, that was the problem. So I promised myself to close up shop for a few days next summer and go and visit my hermit to ask him the few questions that were bothering me. In three hundred years of existence, he must have accumulated a lot of knowledge on his *Frutex Virtuosus* !

Once we were alone, Jeanne leaned towards me :

– Where were we ?

I had no idea where we were in the conversation, but an idea came to me :

– I don't know what we were talking about," I said, "but I'd like to ask you a little question. I need to find a small room because I'd like to grow by myself the plants that make up my special herbal tea. You know, linden, passionflower, vervain, and others... I need a discreet place, not too far from here. Do you have an idea ?

Jeanne thought for a few seconds and then she asked me :

– But why are you looking for a "discreet" place ? Why this discretion ? There's nothing illegal about your plants, is there ?

And damn, I had just given myself the stick to beat me with. Nevertheless I stood my ground :

– No, but, you know, my potion is an ancient secret and I wouldn't want my formula to be leaked.

She looked at me suspiciously and replied :

– Yes, of course, I understand. Well, I think I have the ideal location for you : close, discreet and well guarded !

– Really ! But you are wonderful ! And where is it ?

– At my place !" she answered as calmly as possible.

I was horribly stunned.

– I've got a small room facing south, but it's not much use to me. You could put your entire plant collection there without any problem. Besides," she added with a knowing smile, "it'll be an excellent excuse for you to come to my house as often as you like. Isn't that a good idea ?

I nodded my head a couple of times, while my brain was racing to find a counter-offensive to her ingenious proposal. But nothing came. Finally, it was she who got me off the hook by offering :

– Well, why don't you come home for dinner tomorrow night and we'll discuss it over a beef bourguignon. It's my specialty. Do you like it ?

I continued to sway stupidly as she laughed and took her leave.



The next day was a source of worry for me : firstly because Rose wasn't feeling any better and preferred to stay in bed, and secondly because I still didn't know what I was going to invent to de-

cline Jeanne's offer. What a fool ! Why did I have to go to her for advice instead of doing it myself !

On the other hand, I don't see how I could have managed on my own. Renting a room in my name would not have been of any use because, in the event of a serious search, all my accommodation would have been searched. So I would have had to use a nominee. Yes, but who ? Who could I trust ?

In the end I had to admit that the solution proposed by Jeanne was by far the best, except that... except that I was obliged to confess everything to her, which I wasn't really happy about. How would she take it ? I couldn't see myself saying to her in the middle of a conversation : "By the way, don't you know the latest one ? Well, I don't magnetise anybody, it's my potion that does all the work ! Yes, I just fill the cups and pocket the change. Isn't life great ?"

Was she going to burst out laughing or was she going to shout at the impostor ? It was impossible to know as she seemed so unpredictable, but one thing was certain : by revealing everything to her, I would lose my halo as a healer, while the plant would henceforth hold her full attention. Whether Jeanne approved or disapproved of the process, I would become a zero in her eyes...

However, as the hours passed, a small idea came to me : why confess everything ? Perhaps a fraction of the truth would be enough to make her accept the plant. I began to refine this new option and by the time I changed my tie for dinner, the half-lie I had found was perfectly fine.

I stopped by to see if Rose needed anything, but

she was fast asleep and I decided to leave her in peace until the next day.

Jeanne welcomed me as a distinguished guest. But as soon as I stuck my fork into her succulent beef bourguignon, she attacked :

– Well ?

I calmly took the time to chew my first bite, I carefully wiped my lips and I said :

– Of course I agree to entrust you with my plantations, it's even an excellent idea. That's a great idea !

– But last night you didn't seem very enthusiastic. I would even say "upset". Am I wrong ?

– In fact, my only problem is that I'm going to have to put you in the secret of the gods !

– Oh ? And you don't trust me, is that it ?

– No, no, that's not what I mean, but I'm going to have to make a rather special revelation, that's all.

– A particular revelation ? What kind of revelation ? You got your powers from a pact with the Devil, right ?

– No," I replied, "otherwise I wouldn't have offered you to be in the secret of the gods, but in the secret of the demons, nuance !

– So ?

– So listen to me carefully : here it is...

And I began to recite the fable that I had carefully prepared :

– As you know, I work with relaxing herbs that facilitate the passage of my waves through the human organism.

– And you do it very well," she cut me off.

– I thank you for that, but it wasn't always the case. When I was very young, I used the potion my grandfather had given me but I had little success. Perhaps I was not as good as he was ? After that I searched for years for the right mixture that would allow me to heal brilliantly, but I never succeeded. All my attempts were doomed to failure and I remained a very mediocre magnetiser. So much so that I ended up getting discouraged and giving up all practice.

– That's why you went into accountancy," she asked.

– Right, I lied, and that explains why I never told anyone. I couldn't bear to disappoint my patients.

– And you found the solution during your last holiday !

– Yes, I did ! Last summer, while hiking in the mountains, I met an old hermit to whom I spoke about my problems. And this hermit gave me a gift of a particularly relaxing plant that I didn't know about and which he thought would meet my needs.

– And you believed him right away ?

– At first I only half believed him. Then I did a test on myself for a knee problem and I was amazed at the result. As soon as I returned to Paris, it was Rose Imbert's turn to test the method, and again with dazzling results. And since then, as you know, I have had nothing but success.

– And do you know the name of this plant ?

– I have no idea," I lied again, "but according to the old hermit, it doesn't exist anywhere except in his vegetable garden. It has been passed down

from generation to generation. In any case, it seems to me to be quite harmless because I have not noticed any side effects since I started using it. On the other hand, it plunges my patients into a state of relaxation never reached before. So you will understand that I want to protect my little plant like the apple of my eye. I don't want it to be stolen or destroyed...

– However," she cut me off, "I don't want to upset you again, but I think I remember that, during our first conversation at the hospital, you told me that this plant had been passed down from generation to generation. Am I wrong ?

And that's it ! I felt the blow but, fortunately, I was beginning to be used to this kind of disappointment and did not let it show. I even managed to let out a little forced laugh and pretend :

– You were very tired at that interview and I don't remember saying anything like that to you. All I could tell you was that my gift, and the technique that goes with it, was passed on to me by my ancestors. But certainly not this plant !

She looked at me, half-convinced.

– And where is it, this famous plant ?

– In my kitchen, well out of sight.

Jeanne looked down at her plate as if searching for some clue, weighing up the pros and cons. Personally, I was proud of my performance and my huge lie, but it was with a slight anxiety that I awaited her verdict. I was the candidate in front of his jury. Passed or failed ?

Finally, after playing with her breadcrumbs for a long time, she looked up at me :

– Normally, I wouldn't have believed a word of your story, it seems so unbelievable. But now I have been treated by you and your plant, and I have seen the result. Today I hardly limp any more, I have no speech problems and my left hand has recovered a good part of its motor skills. I don't know if you're telling me the whole truth, but I have to admit that your stuff works. And I would be crazy and especially ungrateful not to help you. So, yes, I will house your magic herb and keep it a secret. That's a big yes, Justin, three times yes !

Phew, I had won hands down ! I was relieved. I had managed to get her to accept my plant and I had saved my healer's hat. Too good, Justin !

To my relief, Rose was perfectly well the next morning. I congratulated her but I did not tell her about the plant removal. It was my secret with Jeanne and I was happy to finally have something to share with her on the sly. It brought us closer together and I prayed that this secret would be the first of many to come. And I enjoyed fantasizing about what our future secrets would be !

Rose went back to work, going through two days' worth of neglected mail and answering the phone in quick succession.

The morning passed peacefully, but in the early afternoon I had a strange visitor.

Three men, impeccably dressed in dark suits, entered my hallway. The older one looked worried while the other two, younger, looked strangely aggressive. The trio reminded me of a mafia godfa-

ther and his two bodyguards. But perhaps it was just a modest family man with his two sons after all? However, there was so much arrogance in their attitude that I immediately thought of a new control from some fussy administration. I was desperate, as the move had been scheduled for the evening of the following day and my plants were still invading my small kitchen. I was finished!

I nevertheless invited them into my office, but curiously enough the two young people did not move a millimeter. Only the older one came towards me, closing the door on them.

He gave me a forced smile, apologizing awkwardly:

– They are nice people, but they can be a nuisance. And I don't like to show my little troubles in front of witnesses. You understand that, don't you?

Of course I understood, but what I didn't understand was the presence of his two chaperones who were obviously bothering him. It was not clear to me and I stood cautiously on the defensive, ready to give him the second thermos, the one without the plant in it.

– I hope, young man, that you can keep a secret! I wouldn't want my visit to you to be in the papers first thing in the morning.

I nodded, increasingly mystified by his behaviour. Who did he think he was? A celebrity? A movie star? Eager to see him and his two weird sidekicks disappear, I invited him to tell me about his health problems without wasting time.

When I said the word "health", he smiled and

said :

– Ah, I see you have recognised me ! That's good, you know how to be discreet...

I didn't recognise anything at all but I nodded so as not to offend him.

He spoke to me at length about mysterious responsibilities, worries and annoyances that made him ill. After a few minutes, convinced that he was not a detective but simply a stressed-out businessman (who never went anywhere without his driver and assistant), I finally decided to serve him the real potion. And while I filled his little cup and he talked about his liver and headaches, I watched him on the sly.

– You understand that with so much responsibility I can't afford the slightest 'health lapse'. Ah, ha ! That would be the last straw ! I have to perform at two hundred percent and I'm counting on you, young man, to get me back on track.

I still didn't understand the meaning of his undertones and I didn't know where he stood at all. If, as Rose had often suggested, I had been more interested in the 'celebrity press', I would probably have recognised my mysterious visitor. But for the moment, no name came to mind. I finally dropped the "businessman" category and put him in the "show business" box, it suited him much better.

– You know," he said, lying flat on the bench as I ran my hands over his back, "you know, I only came here because I've heard great things about you. And you'll never guess who gave me your address ? The president himself ! Can you imagine that ?

No, I didn't imagine anything. I didn't even know which president he was referring to – the President of the French Republic or the president of his country club? Always anxious not to offend him, I just nodded silently.

Suddenly I understood everything and felt a cold sweat run down my shoulder blades. How had I not understood his hints earlier? This guy was a gangster and had been in the prison de la Santé¹! Maybe he was an escapee?

He turned round and, looking at me with a shrewd glance, he smiled and said:

– Are you dumb, young man? But of course, what was I thinking? You're the epitome of discretion! Well, I can only congratulate you. In your profession, discretion is the best way to keep your customers.

And as he readjusted his jacket and tie, he pompously placed a small rectangle of white cardboard on my desk and said:

– This is where you can reach me discreetly. If you have any problems, don't hesitate to call, I'll help you as much as I can.

He paid me what he owed me, he joined his cronies who had still not moved an inch, and he disappeared as he had come, in complete anonymity.

Sweating like a maniac, I turned over his business card in all directions. The name vaguely re-

¹ Prison de la Santé is the name of a prison in Paris and it can be translated by "Health prison". But it has nothing to do with health, it's just the name of the street.

mind me of something, but I couldn't tell what. Perhaps I had seen it in a newspaper on the front of a kiosk ? In any case, it didn't smell very good and I thought it prudent to get rid of the card as soon as possible.

Suddenly Rose burst into my office without knocking, which was not her habit. Feeling a little silly with the little card I was awkwardly shuffling, I thought I should justify myself :

– Well, Rose, I've just come across a disreputable fellow who has...

But she didn't seem to care at all. She collapsed in the patient chair and handed me a half-crumpled letter.

– Simone is dead !" she cried.

– Simone ? But who is Simone ? Who are you talking about ?

– My friend, the one who had cancer. Your third patient, do you remember ?

Yes, I remembered her perfectly, especially as her remission was my first big success. I even thought she was completely cured.

– Did she have a recurrence ? I asked incredulously.

– No, but we don't know exactly. She was perfectly fine and then suddenly she felt ill. She was taken to hospital and died immediately afterwards.

– So we don't know exactly what she died of ?

– No, we don't know anything !

– But it's a pity, why didn't she come to me ? Maybe I could have done something for her.

– I'm sure you could, Justin, but it all happened so fast. According to what her sister wrote me, it all

happened in a few hours. What a pity !

It was indeed a pity, but what could I do ? I had to start understanding that my patients were not immortal and I had to stop feeling guilty at the slightest incident. The potion renovated the cells, of course, but it did not make them invulnerable forever. It erased all traces of malfunction, it reset the counters to zero, but then they were subject to the vagaries of life again. Just because you put new tyres on a car doesn't mean that it won't get punctured again.

So any guilt-tripping was unnecessary and I decided to take a step back. Do doctors feel guilty when one of their patients dies ? Of course not !

With this resolution, I consoled Rose as best I could and went on with my day's care in peace. The only significant change in my attitude was that I now insisted that my visitors continue their usual treatments without ever thinking they were safe. I liked my comparison with the tyres of a car and used it often.

IX

That evening I invited Jeanne for the first time to cross the threshold of my kitchen to show her my three shrubs. Aware of the importance of these little golden leaves, she stroked them with a delicate and respectful index finger. I was certain that the plant would be in good hands with her.

I even saw her so enthralled that I wondered if she had not finally understood everything. Nevertheless, whatever she might have been thinking at the time, she did not let it show and continued to regard me as the sole architect of my healings.

As she left my kitchen and passed my desk again, she saw the little business card from the morning, the one the strange visitor had left with me. She turned it over in all directions, her eyes wide as ever.

– Well then," she finally said, "you're getting a lot of good people now !

– Me ? Good people ? Are you joking ?

She looked at me, squinting :

– You're the one who's joking. Do you know who it is ?

– Oh yes, I think so. A mobster who's been in the papers or someone like that ?

She looked at me, speechless :

– Justin, Justin, you're an alien ! Are you putting me on ?

– No, Jeanne, I swear I'm not !

– Well," she said, "the gentleman you just

treated today was none other than... the Minister of Health !

It was my turn to be stunned and to widen my eyes. The Minister of Health ! How could this be ? How could I have confused the Ministry with the prison of the same name ? But how could I recognise him when I never opened a newspaper and didn't even own a television set ? I was definitely monumentally uneducated.

– And, I ended up laughing and I admitted that at first I took him for a mafia godfather and at the end for a crook ! What a mistake !

Jeanne put the card back on my desk blotter and murmured, looking thoughtful :

– Perhaps you weren't wrong after all... There's a bit of that...



And so, the very next evening I was able to transfer (not without a little apprehension) my most precious possession to the one I now considered my true partner. From that day on, she had custody of my shrubs, my accounts, my cash, my client file and my many letters of thanks. We were linked, and to let go of each other would have meant the instant collapse of our business. Such a bond frightened and delighted me at the same time...

Speaking of those letters of thanks, I had now accumulated nearly four thousand, carefully filed and indexed by Jeanne. We thus had an impressive collection of testimonies in my favour, something that Rose's advisor had welcomed while cautiously

warning us :

– Be careful, this abundance of mail should only be used wisely. No one should know how many clients you have, least of all the tax authorities. Be careful !

We were cautious, and I was somewhat comforted by the fact that I had put everything in a safe place with my partner. Of course I was aware of the danger of leaving everything in her hands, but as long as she remained convinced that my magnetism was the active principle of our success and that the potion was only an additive, she would not let me down. Besides, she needed me, as the after-effects of her hemiplegia could play tricks on her at any time. She was my insurance policy as I was hers.

A few days later I woke up with a slight headache and unusual fatigue. I was extremely surprised because this had not happened to me for almost a year, but I was not overly concerned. Perhaps the plant did not have a constant effect on the body and it allowed a few isolated ailments ?

Yet I was now taking it regularly. When sometimes in the evening I saw that there was still a bit of the drink left at the bottom of my thermos, I didn't hesitate to finish it rather than throw it away. And I must admit that the opportunity presented itself almost daily. So I was now soaked in potion but I was not invulnerable. Last week it was Rose who had felt bad, today it was me... There were relapses. But which ones and why ?

I therefore felt that it was high time for me to find my hermit and have a long talk with him. I had no intention of confessing to him the intensive trade in which I was indulging, but merely of describing to him the little good I was doing here and there in my surroundings, without more. As summer was imminent, I set myself a date of leave and warned Rose not to make any more appointments during that period.

The next day my condition did not improve at all and I even felt a little nauseous. I decided to give myself a real night's sleep. I took a light sleeping pill and, as a precaution, I gave a copy of my keys to my neighbour, asking her to come and shake me if I had any difficulty emerging. Fortunately this precaution proved unnecessary for, for no apparent reason I awoke the next morning in dazzling form. All danger seemed to be over...

It was at this time that I received a compliment that went straight to my heart. Indeed, the countless praises I usually received gave me great pleasure, but they did not affect me directly, since in reality all the credit went to the potion. However, this conversation will remain engraved in my memory :

As he was paying for my session, a client leaned over to me and said in a tone of confidence :

– You know, I don't know if I'll be cured by you, I don't know if you're as effective as they say, but I can tell you one thing : being here has done me a world of good.

As I thought he was referring to my potion, the

effects of which he was beginning to feel, I undertook to explain to him, as usual, that my waves were probably having their effect. But he cut me off and told me that no, it was something else.

– You understand," he continued, "here it's not like at a doctor's, you feel welcomed, respected, listened to, and it relieves. What doctors don't understand is that the psychological aspect is fifty percent of the cure. Instead, they are always in a hurry, cold, unpleasant, and you always have the impression that you are disturbing them. With them, you're not a human being, you're just a commodity and they only smile when you take out your bank card.

I didn't answer anything, anxious not to incur the wrath of the medical world. Of course I felt somewhat protected by my illustrious patient, the famous Minister, for it was perhaps no coincidence that I was now being left in peace. But I didn't want to use my luck too much and I intended to do everything to preserve it.

– Whereas with you," he continued, "we can talk quietly and you don't show any impatience. You make us feel like we're in a cocoon. Even before you started the session I had the feeling I was getting better. One has the impression that only good things can happen here.

– But," I replied, "it's not the role of a doctor to listen to the confidences of his patients. Don't you think that would be more the job of a psychologist ?

– Ah, don't talk to me about shrinks ! They're first-rate comedians. With them, you talk to an

empty chair, they don't listen to you and just nod in time. They drag out their so-called 'therapy' to get as much money out of you as possible and have only one credo : the worse you are, the better their bank account will be. So don't expect any help from these people.

– But, I tried to object...

– No sir, believe me, between the doctors who send you away in no time and the shrinks who try to slow down your recovery, we are much better off here. With you, we have the impression of being listened to and understood, and that is rare...

That was the most beautiful compliment, because it was not about the plant! It was about the warm atmosphere of my practice, its ambiance and my way of being. For once, the Frutex Virtuusus had nothing to do with it, it was Justin Planchard himself who was appreciated. Justin Planchard was beginning to exist...

One night, when I was lying on my bed with my clothes on, a sudden revelation came to me. Since I was regularly imbibing potions, thereby ensuring a promising longevity, would it not be wise to share my fate with my friend Jeanne ? Indeed, I did not imagine myself eternally young next to an ageing and finally dying woman. I didn't want to end up like Cyprien, alone in the world and who, by his own admission, had seen his relatives disappear one by one. What an ordeal it must have been for him ! Moreover, I wondered what selfishness or carelessness had prevented him from thinking of

sharing his blessings with his loved ones. I made a mental note to ask him this additional question during our future interview...

Nevertheless, the idea tormented me for a good part of the night. How to solve this thorny problem? How to ask Jeanne to accompany me on the long road to longevity?

I slept for an hour, which was more than enough for me, and at dawn I had a vague idea of how I would present things to her. Cunning, always cunning!

Since the potion was supposed to be a very effective relaxing tea, I was simply going to get into the habit of offering it to her regularly. Not as part of any magnetisation, but simply to relax her. Every time she came to see me, every time I went to her house, every time we worked together, I would systematically offer her a small dose of it as one offers a cup of tea to one's guests. I will flavour the drink, I will sweeten it, I will serve it with biscuits, I will drink it myself as an example. And I am sure that, little by little, she will end up accompanying me without even taking notice.

I was at this point in my cogitations, anxious to put my little plan into action, but Rose, for her part, was going from bad news to bad news. Still in charge of the phone, she was receiving urgent calls from former clients who insisted on an emergency meeting. She tried to explain to them that we were fully booked for the next few months, but nothing helped. As ex-clients they didn't understand why

they weren't given priority and felt that I was abandoning them. One of them even made the cruel remark that, now that I had filled my pockets, I "didn't care anymore".

So I had wrongly imagined that the clients were trying to see me again simply as a safety measure, to consolidate their recovery, but it was not so : they were trying to see me again because they had relapsed !

I was shocked by this. For me, my patients were recovered and would not show up for many years. But something wasn't working as planned. I had to find a quick and effective solution. Seeing Cyprian again was becoming an absolute emergency and I was even beginning to wonder if I could wait until the summer to see him.

To top it all off, Rose started vomiting the following week. I offered to "magnetise" her urgently, which she accepted without being asked because she was so unwell. I made her drink her potion and performed my usual mockery, hoping that she would recover as soon as possible. Indeed, the magic worked again and it was a dazzling Rose who resurfaced the next morning. I was again very happy but her health was yo-yoing and that didn't inspire me.

– We have to find a solution for all these old patients who need you," she exclaimed with new energy. We can't leave them like this, it's cruel. I know what it's like !

Yes, it was cruel, but what could I do ? For a while I thought of working even on Sundays and all night (a pace I was physically capable of) but I

could see that it wouldn't be enough. I had to find a way to help all these people who had trusted me and who no longer understood why I was abandoning them.

In fact, my problem came down to a simple equation : find a way to get my former patients to drink a little potion without making them parade here ! The trick I had done to Jeanne, the so-called remote magnetisation, was too complicated to be implemented in series. I had to find something just as effective but less restrictive. So every evening I plunged into my esoteric books, hoping to find some inspiration. But nothing came.

While waiting for the solution, I told Rose that I would be working an extra hour each night, which meant three or four extra clients, and that she could therefore take on the most urgent cases.

– But they are all urgent ! Between their nagging headaches, their nausea and their constant exhaustion, I don't know who to pity more.

– In that case, I decided, go with your gut. Listen to your heart and you'll know who to pass on. She shrugged her shoulders and left the room, grumbling. I was aware that my answer was meaningless but I had nothing better to offer her at the moment.

Clearly Cyprian had been right in calling his gift "poisoned" ! Perhaps I had gone too far ? Had I let myself get carried away by greed ? Had success gone to my head ? But it was too late to turn back and I had to face my responsibilities. In fact, I was surprised myself by my positive reaction, because in the not so distant past Justin Planchard would

have stuck his head in the sand and waited for things to settle down.

Not only did I not wait, but from that head emerged, in the middle of the night, a wonderful idea whose very simplicity surprised me. A new big lie ! All that remained was to submit it to the sagacity of my favourite examiner.

– Jeanne," I said to her the next day at lunchtime, which had become unnecessary for me, "I may have a possibility that will allow me to relieve more people. Of course, it's not ideal and the procedure offends my ethics, but I can't leave my former patients without any help.

– Only the old ones ?" she asked, intrigued.

– Yes, because the method is quite particular and I can only address it to people I have already had in my hands, literally and figuratively.

She sat down on the patient's bench and crossed her legs in a very elegant way. I would never have seen her do that in the past. So the plant was making us all flourish.

– Tell me about it !

– As you know, magnetism can be conveyed by any object.

– No, I didn't know...

– Well," I lied with aplomb, "I'm teaching you. And cloth is precisely, with wood, one of the best materials for this purpose. The constitution of the fibres traps the waves and keeps them much longer than a cold, smooth material would. This is why voodoo dolls, for example, are made of cloth and wood. The ideal material.

– And you're going to make voodoo dolls ?

– No, no, of course, but you're not far off the mark. I only intend to magnetise pieces of cloth and send them to my patients, asking them to apply them to the diseased part.

– Is that all ?

– Yes, you see, it is not difficult. But the magnetism thus conveyed is necessarily less strong than the one I give off in real life, so it can only be applied to patients I have already treated.

– And why is that ?

Here I reached the height of the imaginary :

– Because the body retains the memory of the magnetism to which it has already been subjected !

I felt she was won over. She was obviously taking the bait. Nevertheless, I launched the last part of my multi-faceted lie :

– Of course, don't forget that it is imperative that the patient drinks some of my relaxing potion. So I plan to send him a tiny vial of my precious composition at the same time. What do you think ?

– It's an interesting idea ! In short, it would be a kind of "healing kit". But aren't you afraid that some patients won't use it properly and fail because of clumsiness ?

– Yes, I've already thought about this, and all that will be needed is to provide them with instructions for use. I will tell them how to proceed, the conditions and the duration of the operation.

– And if they want to share the kit with their friends and family ?

– Well, I'll take the lead in explaining that it's impossible and that it won't work. It will be clearly stated that each kit is personal and cannot be

passed on to a third party.

– Excellent initiative ! And how will you go about magnetising all these pieces of fabric individually ? It must be a huge amount of work !

– So let me be discreet about the method used. All magicians have their little secrets, well consider this one of them.

Of course, I couldn't admit to her that I wasn't going to magnetise anything at all but content to fill my little vials. So I instructed her to buy a full roll of cloth and asked Rose to provide us with a list of the clients involved.

In making these decisions and distributing the roles I felt, for the first time in my life, like a leader. I was finally able to decide, to command and to take responsibility. I felt great.

Nevertheless, only one dark cloud remained in my starry sky : I could not forget the bitter failure I had inflicted on myself by remaining petrified before Jeanne's lips one evening. This episode was like an indelible (not to say stupid) stain that left me with a bitter taste. I dreamed of overcoming this residual shyness that paralysed me and of daring to do to Jeanne what millions of men did to the woman of their heart. Simply kiss her...

No matter how much I imagined the scene, how many times I replayed it in my mind, I couldn't see how I could overcome the difficulty and walk the few centimetres that separated us as we said good-night. That distance was the end of the world.

However, Jeanne had apparently forgotten the

incident and invited me back to her house from time to time. So I had many opportunities, but when I left her I always kept a careful distance and slipped away without daring to meet her eyes. I almost ran away like a murderer.

The only good thing that came out of our little dinners was that, as I had planned, I managed to get her to drink some potion regularly. Of course, she wasn't on my high dose, but I enjoyed watching the sweet liquid pass her lips. Each sip placed her in my wake on the long path of programmed eternity that lay ahead. It was wonderful !

The problem was that I couldn't see myself spending a few hundred years at my beloved's side without ever daring to touch her. Platonic love is very noble, of course, but I still longed for something more down-to-earth ! I had to find a way to overcome my horrible shyness.

I was at this point in my doubts and questions when the solution suddenly became obvious to me. I had definitely become a real idea machine ! The potion was having an increasingly stimulating effect on my brain cells, that was undeniable, and I was beginning to wonder to what extent I could not also exploit this source. Justin Planchard, merchant of intelligence... Anyway, coming back to my idea about Jeanne, I simply said to myself that, since I couldn't touch her physically, I would touch her with words. Indeed, why take unnecessary risks when all I had to do was ask permission : I was simply going to propose to her...

The idea seemed so good to me that, at the time, I was breathless. Why hadn't I thought of it be-

fore ? In my euphoria I even thought that marriage was just a trick invented by the timids. All you had to do was ask and you'd be served, and that was that !

And since we had planned to have dinner together the day after tomorrow, I was going to take advantage of the opportunity to come with a huge bouquet of flowers and make my declaration. All I had to do was to learn my little blabla by heart and recite it at the inconvenient moment, an exercise I was now used to. And this time, old Justin, no fuss, you're not backing out ! You're not leaving her house without having served your tirade !

The prospect of finally seeking Jeanne's favour in an official way was disturbed by a new incident. Completely devastated, Rose burst in between two clients to inform me that she had just learned of the death of one of my very first patients. However, I was much more reserved than she was :

– Rose, don't get it into your head, I'm not responsible. What is happening is perfectly normal : since I opened my practice ten months ago, I have seen about six thousand people, okay ? But these are people who all have health problems (otherwise they wouldn't have come to see me), sometimes very serious and, what's more, most of them are elderly. So it is mathematically logical that there are regular deaths. It's a question of statistics, that's all !

But my cartesian reasoning did not console Rose, who snorted in response :

– Yes, but this time it wasn't an old person, it was a young one !

I must admit that I was a bit shaken by this precision.

– And do we know what he died of ?

– No, that's just it," she moaned, "we don't know. He didn't feel well when he woke up, he didn't go to work and his wife found him lifeless when she came home in the evening.

– Ah... But perhaps he had a serious illness ? I'm going to check his file to see why he came.

– No need, his wife told me. At the time, he had only broken his arm and he wanted to recover as soon as possible because of his work.

– Did he ? And what was he working on ? Something dangerous ?

– No, not at all. He was a self-employed taxi driver and he couldn't stay out of work for too long.

In fact, there was nothing very dangerous about it. No serious illnesses or risky jobs. But I couldn't accept that Rose could attribute any responsibility for people's deaths to me.

– Listen," I said, raising my voice, "you don't die from going to a healer, otherwise people would know about it and the profession would have been banned long ago. This poor man is neither the first nor, unfortunately, the last. So stop complaining and get back to work.

Just as she was about to leave the room I called her back :

– By the way, Rose, have you drawn up the list of patients to whom we should send the kits ?

– Yes sir," she replied almost at attention, "I'll

finish it and give it to you this evening.

And that evening, when she brought me the list in question, I nearly fell over. Between the desperate letters and the urgent calls, she had collected several hundred names. How could this be ?

Was there something wrong with my method ? Had I made a mistake in the dosage or the preparation ? Perhaps it should not have been prepared in a thermos bottle ? Had I denatured the plant by keeping it at the bottom of my poorly ventilated kitchen ? Nevertheless, I brushed all these questions aside, considering that all this was only perfectly human : since they had felt the benefits of my therapy, the patients simply wanted to try it again. I myself was a fervent follower of my tea, so I understood that others would ask for it again at the slightest hitch !

Besides, I didn't want to let my mind be polluted by pessimistic and erroneous considerations, my thoughts going to my beloved and the little speech I was mentally preparing for her. Tomorrow would be another day because tomorrow would be a great day... !

X

The next day was certainly another day, but certainly not a great day. I woke up so sick and nauseous that, to my great regret, I had to cancel the evening I had so intensely desired. If Jeanne was disappointed, she had the delicacy not to show it. But I, for my part, was crushed by this new blow of fate. It was as if a destiny written in advance prevented me from reaching the goal I had set myself. Why was there an invisible barrier between me and her ?

Although full of potion, I had great difficulty in treating my thirty or so clients of the day but, as we have seen before, I took refuge in a semi-somnolence which passed for a state of high spiritual concentration. I served my daily batch of herbal teas as quickly as possible and, with the last customer just ejected onto the landing, I threw myself fully clothed onto my bed, shaking with fatigue and fever. I slept until dawn and woke up sweating and in a terrible state.

I felt soggy and muddy but, above all, I was imbued with the bad dream I had just had. I had dreamt that, on arriving at my landing, I discovered that my beautiful copper plate had been torn off and replaced by a piece of grey cardboard. On this badly pinned cardboard, they had written with a clumsy hand : "Justin Planchard – Magnetiser". Then, crossing my threshold, I discovered an indescribable dilapidation. The wallpaper was again

peeled off, the floor was littered with crumpled medical journals and leaflets, and my beautiful desk had disappeared to be replaced by my old camping table and its two unsteady folding chairs. As I approached my cardboard cards, I saw that the first one was Jeanne Lefrançois's, with the simple mention "AVC". I wanted to grab it but it was at that moment that I woke up.

I had a hard time letting go of this nightmare because it stuck in my mind, not as a night vision but as something I had experienced. I had the feeling that I had really seen what I had just seen in my dream. It was oppressive and I had to shake it off.

I didn't approve of what I was going to do but I had no choice. Too many patients still needed me, so I had a whole bottle of potion for breakfast without even heating it. I swallowed a good twenty doses in one go, took my shower shakily, shaved roughly and found a way to decorate my cheek with a nice unsightly gash. Today was definitely not my day either.

It was not until the tenth customer that I began to feel refreshed. The feeling of well-being gradually returned and, an hour later, I was completely recovered. I thought my troubles were behind me, but I was in for another nasty surprise : at lunchtime Rose burst into my kitchen, her eyes red and watery. Imagining that she must have spent the night crying for the missing young man, I looked at her sternly and ordered her :

– Come on, Rose, stop this whining, it's getting ridiculous now. Do you hear me ?

– But, Sir, I am not crying. It's my eyes, I don't

know what's wrong with them. They've been burning me since last night. I've been in pain.

– Your eyes ? But what is it now ?

– I don't know, sir, but I'm in a lot of pain and I'm cold.

For the first time I noticed that she was calling me 'Sir', a sign of respect, of course, but also of distance. She was obviously slowly disassociating herself from our company, and it hurt.

– Come on, Rose, I'll fix you up. Here, lie down on the bench and have some potion.

But she stood there with her eyes fixed on the floor.

– No, sir, don't take this the wrong way, but this time I'd rather go to the doctor.

She would have thrown a beam at my head and the effect would have been the same. The hardest thing was to hide from her how stunned I was. I played the indifferent.

– Of course, Rose, you are absolutely right. You must not continually rely on magnetism, which, as you have seen, has its own limits. I myself do not hesitate to return to the usual medicines when I do not feel very well and I recommend to all my patients never to abandon their current medical treatments. It's the obvious thing to do !

She seemed relieved by my understanding. She thanked me and headed for the door.

– And when are you going to the doctor ?

She turned around, still a little wary.

– I'll be right back. Today he's seeing people without an appointment, so I'm going to take advantage of it.

– You're right, but can you give me back the mobile phone while you're away ? I'll ask Jeanne to take care of it for today.

– Yes, of course," she replied, placing it on my table, "What was I thinking ?

I noticed that she had not handed me the device but had put it down in front of me, as if she wanted to avoid physical contact. Had I become so "untouchable" ?

When she had finally left, I shook my head sadly, thinking of the term I had just used : "untouchable". And why not "pestiferous" while we were at it ? But suddenly an idea came to me. What if we were victims of a contagion ? Since we had been receiving sick people of all kinds, we had inevitably come into contact with unwanted viruses ! Of course, the explanation was there : we had contaminated ourselves !

– And to think that I sleep in my own practice," I exclaimed loudly. What a nest of germs !

I had to admit that we were not taking adequate hygienic measures and that it was perhaps this lack of basic precautions that had played tricks on us. I immediately called Jeanne :

– Listen, I need your services for the day. Rose is indisposed and I need you to take the calls for her. Is that possible ? Well, thank you... Yes, I'm a bit better... And we'll also need to find a cleaner... Yes, that's right... Every evening after the last client she'll have to disinfect everything, the chairs, the door handles, my desk... Yes... And also the air in the room with a disinfectant spray. Yes, like in hospitals, that's it, we'll do everything like in hos-

pitals... Yes, keep me informed.

I was about to hang up but suddenly I changed my mind :

– And you, Jeanne, I forgot to ask you, you're not ill, are you ? Are you all right ?

And as she answered that she was doing fine, I hung up with a big "wow" of relief.

Twenty minutes later she was standing in front of me and I handed her the little device.

– Since Rose has been holding it to her mouth a lot lately, it might be prudent to disinfect it. Do you have what you need ?

– Yes, of course," she said, slipping it into her bag. But why all this sudden caution ?

– Simply because, as you know, Rose and I have been slightly indisposed recently, and in addition we have many former patients who are also seriously ill.

I hid the two deaths from her, which I didn't think had anything to do with the story, and besides, I didn't want to worry her unnecessarily.

– So," I continued, "I have good reason to think that perhaps we are the victims of a small epidemic which may have spread here. Nothing is less certain, it's only a guess, but I prefer to apply the maximum precautionary principle.

– That's an excellent initiative," she replied. But I see you're feeling better. Why don't you come for dinner on Saturday night and we'll talk about it ?

When Rose's doctor failed to find the cause of her illness, he sent her to the hospital for further

tests. In a way this was not good news but, on the other hand, it would at least tell us what we were both suffering from. We would know in a few days.

In the meantime, I carried on with my sessions without interruption. The day was going on, like many others before it, when something strange happened.

Late in the evening a patient came to my office with a problem of back pain. I looked at him and after a few moments I was suddenly certain that I had treated him before. I asked him if he had ever seen me before, but he said no, that he was coming for the first time.

In fact, the impression I had was more than just "déjà vu", it was "already experienced". I knew exactly what he was going to say or do, just like watching a movie for the second time.

So I asked him how long his back had been hurting, but in the back of my mind I heard a little voice whispering, "for about a year, but it got worse last month carrying a heavy suitcase".

I waited, full of apprehension, and I heard it answer me, as if in echo :

– For about a year but it got worse last month when I was carrying a heavy case.

So I knew what he was going to say, except for one thing – case instead of suitcase. I was extremely disturbed and even more so when I knew that he was going to drop his jacket when he tried to put it on the back of his chair. So I warned him :

– Not on the chair ! Hang your jacket on the coat rack before it falls on the floor !

But he remained deaf to my recommendation

and his jacket slipped off the chair as I had foreseen. This incident proved that I knew what was going to happen but could not prevent it, as if it were written. I asked him, as he picked up his clothes, if he wanted to go further with the experiment :

– Excuse me for asking, but didn't you hear what I told you about the coat rack ?

And to my amazement, he didn't even answer me, as if this dialogue was just an aside that wasn't part of the initial experience... And, looking in all directions, he saw the coat rack and announced :

– Ah, there's a coat rack ! Sorry, I hadn't seen it !

I was stunned. He hung up his jacket and then sat down on the treatment table without me even inviting him. I proceeded with my magnetisation ritual, deeply uncomfortable with a clairvoyance I was not used to.

As soon as the client left, I collapsed into my chair, sweating profusely and shaking all over. My heart was pounding as if I had just run a marathon. What strange manifestation had I just been the victim of ? Where did these premonitory visions come from ? Was it the effects of the potion I was taking in high doses ? Should I be worried or pleased ?

In any case, the experiment was out of control and therefore not reproducible at will. I just thought that it would probably never happen again and that I'd better forget it. It was a science fiction accident, but nothing more...

Saturday came and went, with no new disasters or impromptu clairvoyance. The recent events had not made me forget my plans to propose, and it was in a state of impatience that I went to her home. Confident and happy about the evening that was shaping up so well, I brought a small bouquet of flowers and filed my little matrimonial speech in a drawer of my brain, ready to bring it out again at the appropriate moment.

Towards the end of the dinner I discreetly brought up the subject of marriage in general, the disadvantages of solitude and other such clichés. But I could see that she was listening to me with a distracted ear, as if she had some other concern. I even thought for a moment that she saw me coming "with my big hooves" and that my proposal would be rejected in advance. Nevertheless, I continued my discreet approach without letting myself be discouraged.

At the moment I judged to be the most appropriate, I started to make my statement. But without even listening, she interrupted me :

– Look Justin, I took an initiative.

I swallowed my little speech and listened to her as attentively as I was frustrated.

– Did you ? But it's very good to take initiatives ! And what did you do ?

– Well, I don't know if you'll like it, but given the scale of the problem you're concerned about, I conducted my own investigation.

– Your investigation ? But what problem ?

– Yes... Well, I took the liberty of conducting a

sort of survey. All day long. I went through your files in chronological order and phoned your clients, starting with the oldest.

– Phoned ? But... But what did you tell them ?

– Don't worry, I didn't say anything incriminating ! I pretended that I was your secretary and that I was carrying out a sort of satisfaction check. I asked if the symptoms you had intervened on had completely disappeared and if everything was fine.

I didn't answer anything, anxious about what was to come.

– In two days I was able to make about one hundred and fifty phone calls. It's not much compared to the total amount of your care, but the numbers are quite disturbing.

– What do you mean disturbing ? What does that mean ?

– Look Justin, it's a small sample, it's not statistically significant, but... oh my God, I shouldn't have...

And she buried her head in her hands, like someone trying to hold back tears. I rushed to her feet and walked around the table.

– No, no, don't cry, Jeanne, it's not serious, don't cry.

She calmed down a little, put her forehead on her closed fist and, without daring to look at me, she listed :

– Out of a hundred and fifty people contacted, about twenty are in good health and about thirty are slightly ill...

– But come on," I exclaimed, "there's nothing alarming about all this !

– And," she continued in an almost inaudible voice, "the others... the others... almost a hundred... the others are all dead !

And she burst into tears, a veritable tornado of tears. She got up, knocking over her chair, and she fled to her bedroom, slamming the door.

Left alone with myself, I was unable to make the slightest movement or coherent thought. I was stunned. I had planned a thousand and one pleasant ways to end the evening, but this was not what I expected. A hundred deaths ! Sixty percent ! All my theories about the chances of death collapsed at once. This was too much for mere chance. Something was wrong.

I had to lie prostrate for a good quarter of an hour, perhaps secretly waiting for Jeanne to come crying back into my arms. But she did not come back. Aware that I was bothering her now, I got up heavily and, with a heavy heart, I left her little flat. Would I ever return ?

As usual, I walked the distance. The fresh air cleared my head and the beginnings of sensible thinking began to surface. I hesitated for a long time, weighing up the pros and cons, but when I arrived at the foot of my building my decision was made : since tomorrow was a Sunday and I had no clients to receive, I would jump on the first train and go and ask Cyprien. It was now urgent !

Of course, I hardly slept a wink all night. At about two o'clock in the morning I decided to pour myself a big bowl of potion, for no particular rea-

son, just to keep my mind and hands busy. I had to admit that it had become a kind of drug.

So I got up, but when I saw a ray of light under the door of my room, I conclude that my practice had been left on. Yet I remembered perfectly well having turned it off on my way home from Jeanne's.

Suspicious, I slowly opened my door and I felt my blood run cold : I was sitting at my desk and looking at myself with a smile.

– Come in," I heard myself say, "and sit down. What can I do for you ?

I didn't move a millimetre, frozen in fear and disbelief. My double held out his hand, inviting me in once more. I could not believe what I was seeing, it was nightmarish.

A sudden thought crossed my mind : either bodily splitting exists – and I am having such an experience – or I have simply gone mad ! But I was not dreaming, I was awake.

I kept my eyes on myself and whispered in a strangled voice :

– Who are you ? What do you want from me ?

– Justin Planchard," the other me answered, "a magnetiser. And you, Mister... You are Mister... ?

– Justin Planchard," I replied stupidly.

– Well, that's perfect ! And what exactly are you suffering from, my friend ?

I didn't know what to answer, dazed to the core. I saw my double get up from behind the desk and hand me the thermos with a smile :

– Relax, I'm here to heal you... a little potion ?

I grabbed the chair reserved for customers and,

in terror, I threw it with all my strength at my second self. He looked at me in surprise and, hit on the forehead, he slowly sank to the desk...

When I woke up, I was drenched in sweat and I had a headache. I blinked and looked around, not quite understanding what I was doing there. I was slumped over my own desk and a chair lay before me on the carpet. What had happened ? Had I had a bad dream ? But I hadn't been dreaming : a huge bump on my forehead proved that I had indeed been hit.

I tried to remember but everything was blurred. The only thing that came to mind was that I was sitting at my desk waiting for the next client. Then my double had burst into the room and thrown a chair at my head.

Then, when I tried to think back harder, it was the other way round : I was the one who entered the room and my double who was sitting at the desk. And the next moment it was the other way round again. I jumped from one character to the other with disconcerting ease, as if I had been both at the same time... As if I had split into two...

It was incomprehensible...

Knowing that I would not be able to sleep or rest, I prepared myself painfully for my train journey. I had a terrible headache. But what had happened ? Had I overdone the potion ? Had I experienced something out of time and space under the influence of the plant ? I didn't understand anything anymore ! But I knew that in a few hours everything would be cleared up and I desperately clung to the idea that my friend Cyprian would

finally give me the key to all these enigmas.

I swallowed a good swig of potion for breakfast and packed my little travel bag. The bump on my forehead was still hurting but I knew that, thanks to the potion, it would be gone in a few hours. I was confident.

I opened the heavy porte cochere of my old building and crossed the street, happy about this trip which would finally put an end to my doubts and questions. And I will not come back without a satisfactory answer !

I had planned to return that evening so as not to disrupt the smooth running of my practice. In a few hours everything would be perfectly settled.

So I crossed the road, but as I stepped onto the pavement opposite, I saw, out of the corner of my eye, a police car almost at my level, and three plainclothes cops rushing out. Obviously they were on a big case. Dawn was breaking and I wondered what kind of poor guy they would get out of bed so early on a Sunday morning. I was even more surprised to see that they were heading straight for my building. Which one of my roommates could they possibly be going to ? We were all just quiet, uneventful people. But it was none of my business. I shrugged and quickened my pace, anxious to get to the station and jump on the first available train.

XI

A few hours later, I arrived in the village and rushed to the first guesthouse that came along. I received a warm welcome : the tourist season had not yet started and customers were rare. They even wanted to give me an "off-season" price but I refused, since money was now the least of my worries. I changed quickly, put on my "Sunday mountain man" outfit and I slipped away without a word, under the surprised look of my host. He had never seen such a rush to go for a walk. But what people thought of me was the least of my worries.

I went back to my old hiking path and was pleasantly surprised that I didn't feel any fatigue or shortness of breath during the climb. Moreover, the bump had already disappeared completely. Thanks to the plant ! So the potion had lost none of its effectiveness and that removed any doubts I had about it. Or perhaps it was the impatience to see Cyprian again that gave me wings ?

In any case, I continued my ascent with gusto, suddenly far from my worries, far from Jeanne, far from Rose, far from my practice and from all the patients who were calling on me. I told myself that I should take this kind of leave more often, now that my means allowed it. There's nothing like a good sweat and a breath of fresh air to get your head in the game !

After two small hours, which seemed very short to me since I was not at all weary, I finally arrived

at the labyrinth of greenery which led to Cyprian's hut. It was not to be missed, for of course there was no sign of it, and the innocent walker who approached it would pass by unsuspectingly. My visual memory was excellent, I did not hesitate once among the multitude of paths that deceptively crossed. And, ten minutes later, I was within ear-shot of my friend's refuge.

I did not signal, certain that he had heard me coming and that, true to his good habits, he was lurking in the shadows. I approached his piece of rock but no one came. So I approached the threshold and called softly :

– Cyprian ! Cyprian ! Are you there ?

But only an overwhelming silence answered me. I suddenly felt a little frightened. What if he was just lying there, dead ? But I banished this horrible thought and entered the dark dwelling, not without apprehension.

Nothing. No one. Had he gone to set his traps or pick some plants for his lunch ? In any case, he couldn't be far away and I decided to wait.

An hour passed and still no Cyprian in sight. Suddenly a detail caught my attention. The hut was not only empty, it seemed frozen, as if stopped in time. No trace of food, not even a remnant of fruit, and above all a thick layer of dust covering everything. I looked at the bowl from which I had once drunk : the little water it contained was rotten and a couple of flies had drowned in it.

It had been a long time since anyone had lived here...

Completely distraught, I jumped out of the hut

and scanned the surroundings. Suddenly I had the idea of going to see his shrubs, the very ones that had given me the stem he had offered me. I had a hard time finding them, buried as they were in the weeds and brambles. It was obvious that their owner had not looked after them for a long time. I was devastated. Where would I find the old hermit now? Was he still alive? Had he gone on to other horizons as he had so often done during his long wandering life? Had he been forced to flee or had he left of his own free will? So many unanswered questions...

And my problems? Who was going to enlighten me now about the illnesses and deaths that tarnished my practice? Completely distraught, I readjusted my backpack and began my long descent towards the village.

There is no need to describe the state of total depression that accompanied me on the way back. The nagging questions went round and round in an endless loop and no light, however faint, came to illuminate my inner turmoil. I had relied so much on Cyprien that I was now unable to see any alternative. I had nothing left to hold on to. And it was in a state of extreme weariness that I finally arrived at my landlord's house. He was in his garden when I saw him waving at me.

– So," he exclaimed in his thick accent, "have you been out and about?"

I approached, trying to put on a friendly face.

– Yes, thank you, it feels good...

Suddenly a little idea came to me. I had promised Cyprien not to betray him and to keep the lo-

cation of his hideout secret, but now that he was gone, I no longer felt bound by anything. The mention of his presence could no longer harm him. So I approached a little closer and asked, lowering my voice :

– Tell me, you know the region well, don't you ?

– Of course I know it ! I've been roaming the countryside for over seventy years !

– And, tell me, last summer I met a sort of... shepherd up there who lives alone in a hut. Do you know him ?

– Do I know him ? Of course I know him ! Ah, he was hiding well, the rascal, everyone looked for him but they never found his lair. It was only when he died that we knew where he was hiding.

– What !" I cried, "is he dead ?

– Oh yes, he's dead ! It was the smell that alerted some walkers, so they warned us that there was a strange smell in the valley and we sent the police. They have to be good for something, those too ! That's how we found him.

It was too much, I thought I was going to faint. I leaned discreetly against the wall of the house, trying to regain my composure.

– Are you all right, sir, would you like to sit down ? You look pale.

– No, thank you, I'm fine," I murmured weakly, "I must have pushed myself too hard for a first outing. I should have taken it easy.

Then, returning to the subject that was worrying me, I asked :

– But why did you say he was a scoundrel ? He seemed very nice, though.

– Ah, for God's sake ! He was a scoundrel because he poisoned people ! He had a business in the village, he sold herbs, plants, seeds and all the rest, and then he wanted to be a scientist so much that he distributed anything in any way.

I was speechless.

– And then," he continued, "the mayor's wife died, and then the baker after that, and then two or three more parishioners, not to mention all those who were seriously ill. And when the gendarmes came to look for him, well, the scoundrel had disappeared. Into the mountains ! Gone ! What a creep !

My legs were shaking. I must have been livid, because the old man looked at me with a look of half concern and half amusement.

– I hope he didn't make you eat his plants," he joked, "because you'll end up between four boards in no time !

The old man was pushing the nail in, and I felt worse and worse. Nevertheless, pushed by an obscure survival instinct, my brain refused to admit the validity of this avalanche of accusations. I had seen, with my own eyes, the Cyprian in question. A solid old man, in perfect health, sound in body and mind. It was impossible, we weren't talking about the same person.

– I don't understand," I insisted painfully, "when I met him, Cyprian was a noble old man, very resistant for his age and in good health. If his plants had been harmful, they would have started by destroying him, whereas I saw someone very robust...

– Robust ? Him ?" he cut me off. Do you know how old Cyprian was ?

I was about to answer yes, three hundred years old, but the figure suddenly seemed so absurd that I preferred to wait for the answer.

– Well, I'll tell you ! Your Cyprian was forty, and not one year older !

– What's that ? Forty years old ? But...

– Yes, sir, forty years. I know because I knew him when he was a kid and he was already a big liar. And if he had white hair and a wrinkled face, it's because his bloody plants killed him slowly. It aged him before his time, that's for sure.

Worse and worse ! I made one last desperate attempt :

– But Cyprien is a name from another age, it's not from our generation.

– Ah, but that's not his real name ! Alain was his name ! He called himself Cyprien to make himself interesting, his nobleman, his gentleman and all that. He told a lot of lies about his origins. You should see what nonsense he made up ! In short, his name was Alain Dupont, and he was well into his forties. May he rest in peace !

I opened my eyes to the ceiling of my little guest room. My landlord and his wife were beside me, looking worried. They explained that I had simply collapsed in the garden and that they had to call the neighbour to drag me upstairs.

I begged them not to call a doctor, it was useless. I had only overestimated my strength for my

first hike of the year and I was going to rest wisely. They left the room, closing the door quietly, leaving me alone with my nightmare.

The more I tried to make sense of it, the less I was able to put my thoughts in order. All I could understand was that I had been led astray by a madman, taking with me the crowd of unfortunate people who had trusted me. How could I have been so naive ?

I had forced Rose to drink the potion, I had tricked Jeanne into drinking it. What was to become of them ? I was crushed under the weight of my responsibility. What about me ? Would I soon find myself in the coffin predicted by my host ?

I consoled myself by thinking that my life had not been a success, far from it, but that at least this damned plant would have given me ten exhilarating months, ten intense months full of hope. I was rich, I was able to be with Jeanne with all the hopes possible and I had the illusion of spreading good around me. For the first time in my life I had been an important figure, I was solicited, listened to, worshipped and success had made me pleasantly intoxicated.

I did not regret anything for myself, I only regretted the fate of my victims.

The only detail that was incomprehensible to me – and for which I would have really liked an explanation – was the double-edged sword of this versatile plant that mercilessly destroyed the very people it had treated so well a few months earlier. It really was Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde ! How could it be ?

I tried to gather my poor memories of botany and herbalism, but I could not find anything similar in the plant world, at least not to this extent.

Finally I thought that the plant was probably regenerating the human cell to such an extent that it was gradually being thrown out of kilter. A bit like mechanics who "inflate" an engine : the mechanism runs at overpowering speed but, not having been designed for such a regime, it ends up breaking.

Yes, that's it, I had seen the beginning of a logical explanation. We had all doped and now we were paying...

I slept for a long part of the day and when I woke up I felt a little more vigorous. My thoughts were slowly coming together. What attitude to adopt ? To run away ? To hide as Cyprien... sorry, Alain Dupont... had done before me ?

To take my mind off things, I turned on the little television set in my room. It had been ages since I had watched the small screen and I didn't recognise the presenter who was on. At first I didn't really understand what he was talking about because I had caught it on the fly. I was not interested in what he was saying, only the pictures distracted me a little. We were shown excerpts about the Minister of Health and, indeed, I recognised perfectly the little man who had come to visit me a month earlier. I wondered how he was feeling now and whether my plant had helped him in his duties. Suddenly, the presenter's words came together in a coherent way and I understood everything : the Minister had died !

The news came as a shock. Not that I was attached to him, but I was proud to have been able to work with a minister, and his death left me with a void. I hoped at least that the potion had not been useless and it had softened his last two months of earthly life. I turned up the sound to find out more :

– The doctors who had been at his bedside for several days now believed that the Minister had died as a result of unexplained poisoning. An investigation is underway and suspicions are now directed at a mysterious herbalist whom the Minister had been seeing shortly before his disappearance. This had been done in great secrecy, but it was his bodyguards who reported the facts. For the time being, the individual seems to have disappeared, but the investigators do not despair of finding him to hear him. There is no evidence that he is responsible, but his interrogation will help the investigation to progress.

Wanted by the police ! I was devastated ! It was the coup de grâce ! I, Justin Planchard, the notorious incompetent, had, through my incurable stupidity, caused the death of hundreds of people and ended up in style with a statesman...

I turned in circles in my little room, like the assassin already in his cell. Then I collapsed on my bed and stared for more than an hour, completely stunned.

It was then that I made a decision, the only one I had left to make. I went down to my hosts and asked them for something to write with. Looking a little surprised, they handed me a brand new jar of

squared paper but did not ask any questions. I wanted to pay but they refused.

I sat down on the uncomfortable little wooden chair and, with both elbows on the table, I closed my eyes to get my thoughts in order. At first I had thought of writing a long letter to Jeanne to explain everything. But, aware that a simple letter was very little compared to the immense truth, I decided to make a full confession.

Yes, I was going to tell her everything, down to the smallest detail, even if it meant hurting or disappointing her. But I wanted at least one person to know.

After a few moments, I grabbed my pen and began with these words :

"This is my confession.

I know, we don't start writing our memoir when we are forty-three, I'm still young for that, but I've been through so strange events that I want to record every detail of them forever.

I want you to know exactly what happened to me in the last few months, no matter how unbelievable it may seem to you.

It doesn't matter whether you believe me or not, this is my story. I'm not embellishing anything, I'm not hiding anything, I'm just reporting the facts as they really happened..."

I wrote all night. Fortunately for me, the plant was still present in my veins to help and support me during those long hours of vigilance. I wrote and wrote and wrote, and I am still writing the text that you now have in front of you. I hope I have not left anything out and have stayed as close to reality

as possible.

I have not yet put the finishing touches to it. I still want to say that, later on, I will put all my pages in a large envelope and will deposit it at the village post office, at the personal address of Jeanne Lefrançois.

I have just left my little chair, all aching from so much discomfort. As I pass in front of a mirror, I see the early signs of my programmed decline. My skin has become slightly parched and my hair has already turned a little white. I am becoming Cyprian...

I can now seal Jeanne's envelope.

EPILOGUE

Jeanne Lefrançois carefully put the strange manuscript back on her coffee table. She did not understand.

The story seemed quite fanciful, of course, but at times it was punctuated with such realism that she was a little confused. Why had he sent her this ?

Of course, Justin Planchard was an unsociable, introverted person with a sickly shyness, but she would never have assumed that he had such a creative imagination. She had to admit that his self-portrait was incredibly lucid.

Moreover, the way in which he portrayed her left her doubtful. Not only did she have no idea that she was so repulsive, but she had even less idea of his fondness for her. And to have worked for so many years with this obscure colleague without having guessed his feelings left her with an aftertaste of guilt.

She looked at her watch and saw that it was not very late. Deciding that the poor man might need help, she reread the address on the back of the envelope and picked up her little spring jacket which she had thrown on a chair in her haste. It wasn't very far, she could walk there. Just like in the story...

After a quarter of an hour's walk, she finally arrived at the building she was looking for. Fortunately, there was no code to prevent her from en-

tering. She climbed the three dilapidated floors and immediately recognised Justin's door. A nasty grey card was pinned to it, bearing the clumsily drawn inscription : "Justin Planchard – Magnetiser".

She was captivated by it. So there was some truth in it ? Wasn't everything made up ? Nevertheless, it was far from the "elegant copper plate" mentioned in the story !

She took a deep breath and, with her heart pounding, knocked gently on the door. She waited for a few seconds but, receiving no answer, she called out :

– Mr Planchard ? Are you there, Mr Planchard ? It's Jeanne Lefrançois, your former colleague. Are you there ?

She listened carefully, but there was only silence. Not even a creak. Perhaps he was sleeping ? So she knocked a little harder, hoping to finally get a sign of life.

Suddenly she heard the creak of a door opening softly behind her back. She turned around and, although she didn't know her, she immediately understood who the small, blonde, pudgy woman was.

– Madame Imbert, I suppose ? I'm Jeanne Lefrançois, a colleague of your neighbour, Justin Planchard.

Caught off guard, the other dropped her cat on the landing.

– You... You know me ?

– No... Well, yes... I mean, Justin told me a lot about you. He wrote me a... a long letter and I understand he's been having a lot of trouble since he

got fired. Have you seen him recently ?

– Polka, come here, Polka ! Oh, those cats ! If I let her escape now I'll spend all evening trying to get her back. Do you have cats ?

Jeanne repressed a slight movement of impatience.

– No, sorry, I don't have cats. But getting back to your neighbour, have you seen him recently ?

The little woman thought for a few seconds and then announced :

– Well, no, I haven't. Now that you mention it, I haven't seen or heard from him for several days.

– And... Was he all right last time ?

The little woman tightened the flaps of her pink dressing gown and came closer, lowering her tone as if in confidence.

– Actually... he's weird. Yes, that's it : he's weird...

– Weird ? Weird how ?

– Well, he talks to himself, he comes and goes, and he behaves as if he had visitors. One day I even opened my door a little, just to see, but there was no one there with him. There he was, waving on the landing, talking to himself. I was afraid.

– Yes, I understand, but tell me, when he wasn't talking to ghosts, was he talking to you ?

– Oh yes, of course. He was very kind, even. He always wanted to offer me herbal tea, but I refused.

– You refused ?

This precision reminded Jeanne of an unpleasant episode.

– And," she insisted, "and that day he got angry, he got violent with you ? Did he force you to drink

it ?

– Oh no, not at all ! He would never have hurt a fly. He was a bit disturbed but he knew how to behave.

Jeanne was reassured to see that the part about the slap was pure fabrication. But this detail proved that there was a mixture of reality and imagination, as if the author had slipped from one to the other without realizing it. She asked :

– And when he was talking to you, what was he talking about ?

– Ah, first of all he was always talking about his herbal tea. A real obsession, this tea ! Then he told me that he was a healer and that he treated many people. One day he even thanked me for taking all his phone calls and writing down his appointments ! He said he didn't know what he would do if I wasn't there. He even wanted to pay me, but I refused outright. And then he was always talking about illnesses, boasting that he could cure them all, except for strokes, which he said gave him a lot of trouble. He even told me one day that he had cured a minister ! Can you believe it ?

She paused for a moment to catch her breath and sort out her memories.

– Oh yes," she continued, "I also remember him saying that we should be careful because the Ministry of Health was watching him closely and the doctors might be jealous of his success. You know, Madam, he was a very strange man.

Jeanne had a very unpleasant intuition that had been running through her mind for a few moments :

– And... You don't think he was drinking ?

– I wondered about that too, you can imagine !
But I never saw him drunk, never ! However, the night before he disappeared, it was a Saturday I think, it looked like he was fighting with someone. He was having a racket !

The two women remained silent, each immersed in her own suppositions. Desperate to find no solution, Jeanne began to think aloud :

– If only we could get into his house ! Maybe he needs help !

Rose reacted immediately :

– Get in ? But we can get in, I have a spare key !
He gave it to me, one evening...

Of course, Jeanne remembered having read it somewhere in her long confession. It was, if she remembered correctly, the day Justin had taken a sleeping pill. He had been afraid of sleeping late and had asked his neighbour to come and shake him up. So there was a mixture of fantasy and reality in his story. How strange !

Rose only had to reach out, all her keys hanging by the front door. The two women crossed the landing in one motion and a few seconds later the lock gave way without resistance, finally revealing the mysterious domain of Justin Planchard.

The first thing they noticed was a musty smell that immediately rose to their nostrils. The place had obviously not been aired for several days. The hallway was dark and they had to turn on the light switch to get a better look.

And what she saw stunned her.

A dusty old pedestal table held a few torn maga-

zines and a small moulded plastic chair faced it. A poster of an ugly sunset had been pinned to the wall. It looked like a bad draft of a waiting room... My God, how could this be ?

Full of apprehension, Jeanne turned the handle of the only door facing her. The room was dusty, with old, half-peeled wallpaper, but what she noticed most was a camping table and two chairs set on either side, as if to receive a guest. On this table was an old metal box with small cardboard cards and a pen. And behind the table, a shelf with a few books whose edges reminded him once again of Justin's long confession : "Healing with Plants", "Magnetism for Everyone", "The Secrets of the Druids", etc... The floor itself was littered with popular medical magazines and leaflets picked up in the local pharmacies.

Jeanne felt she was losing her balance and had to stand at the door. This surreal setting made her relive the story she had just read, but with disturbing distortions. It looked like a poorly staged production, hastily put together by a clumsy actor. She didn't know where she stood.

– Well," Rose exclaimed, almost startling her, "when I think that poor Mr. Planchard was boasting about being rich ! What misery...

Jeanne answered nothing, a ball of anxiety gripping her throat tighter and tighter. She didn't want to see what happened next, but at the same time an almost morbid curiosity pushed her in the dreaded direction : the kitchen.

She slowly opened the yellowish door with its peeling paint and saw it. Or rather she saw them : a

small shrub with golden leaves and, just beside it, a simple thermos bottle glowing in the darkness.

So the plant existed...

So nothing was made up, everything made sense, but reality seemed distorted by a highly imaginative mind. In any case, one could not assume that the occupant of this place was receiving patients and curing them all the time. No one would have dared to come and be treated in such a hovel.

It was as if, Jeanne thought, Justin had set up the whole scene as if in a daydream. Just like a child playing with a rag doll and thinking in his mind that he was cradling a real infant.

Yet he had had moments of lucidity. For example, she remembered, he had seen the cardboard box on his door and the camping table in the middle of his living room, but he had reversed everything, mistaking reality for a dream... and his dreams for reality... How strange. Was it a mental illness ?

As she passed back into the main room, she stopped at the small metal table and its old box full of cardboard cards. Most of the cards were blank, only a few had more or less legible inscriptions. And it was as she tried to decipher the first of them that her blood ran cold : "Jeanne Lefrançois, stroke". She then took her head between her closed fists and clenched it until her skull exploded.

– Let's get out of here ! I'm going to go crazy !

No one knew what happened to Justin Plan-chard. Some claimed to have seen him heading for the mountain, others swore they had seen him get back on the train, others had seen him follow the stream, but in fact no one knew anything for sure.

But up there, high above the village, a shepherd despaired that he had just missed him. For Justin had come precisely at the moment when he had gone to gather his sheep. Seeing him in the distance, the shepherd had called out to him, but the other had not seemed to hear him and had gone back to the valley. What a pity !

Cyprian would have really liked to see this stranger who had fallen from the sky, literally and figuratively, almost a year before.

He remembered it as if it were yesterday. The stranger had suffered a lot from his swollen knee and had not been able to sleep at night. So, to relieve him a little, the shepherd had concocted an herbal tea of which he had the secret. And as the remedy had proved effective, he had given him more of it several times in the days that followed.

Under the effect of the drink, the stranger seemed to lose his sense of reality and began to invent fabulous stories, but no matter, he was no longer suffering and even seemed happy. After a few days, having recovered the use of his leg, the stranger left. In an act of generosity, Cyprian had even offered him a stem of his wonderful shrub.

He thought that he would have liked to know what had become of this shy and withdrawn little man. Had this piece of shrubbery changed anything in the course of his life ?

– Had I done the right thing in giving him this special gift ? Did he follow my recommendations ? Did he not abuse it ? Because one can never be too careful, can one, when giving... a hallucinogenic plant !

The old shepherd really regretted not having been able to question the stranger and try to find out if his hallucinations had been beneficial to him. What kind of persona had he found himself in ? Had he thought he was a king, a minister, a scientist, an explorer, an astronaut... ? With what delusions had he embellished his miserable existence, to what magical skies had the little hallucinogenic leaves propelled him ?

And Cyprian the shepherd shrugged his shoulders, grabbed his stick and walked away, calling to his sheep.

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