

# GABRIEL DE TARDE

UNDERGROUND MAN

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**Underground Man**

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**de Tarde G.**

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# Gabriel de Tarde

## Underground Man

**The whole of Tarde is in this little book.**

He has put into it along with a charming fancy his genialness and depth of spirit, his ideas on the influence of art and the importance of love, in an exceptional social milieu.

This agreeable day-dream is vigorously thought out. On reading it we fancy we are again seeing and hearing Tarde. In order to indulge in a repetition of the illusion, a pious friendship has desired to clothe this fascinating work in an appropriate dress.

*A.L.*

## PREFACE

It reflects not at all on Mr Cloudesley Brereton's admirable work of translation to remark how subtly the spirit of such work as this of M. Tarde's changes in such a process. There are certain things peculiar, I suppose, to every language in the world, certain distinctive possibilities in each. To French far more than to English, belong the intellectual liveliness, the cheerful, ironical note, the professorial playfulness of this present work. English is a less nimble, more various and moodier tongue, not only in the sound and form of its sentences but in its forms of thought. It clots and coagulates, it proliferates and darkens, one jests in it with difficulty and great danger to a sober reputation, and one attempts in vain to figure Professor Giddings and Mr Benjamin Kidd, Doctor Beattie Crozier and Mr Wordsworth Donisthorpe glittering out into any so cheerful an exploit as this before us. Like Mr Gilbert's elderly naval man, they "never larks nor plays", and if indeed they did so far triumph over the turgid intricacies of our speech and the conscientious gravity of our style of thought, there would still be the English public to consider, a public easily offended by any lack of straightforwardness in its humorists, preferring to be amused by known and recognised specialists in that line, in relation to themes of recognised humorous tendency, and requiring in its professors as the concomitant of a certain dignified inaccessibility of thought and language, an honourable abstinence from the treacheries, as it would consider them, of irony and satire. Imagine a *Story of the Future* from Mr Herbert Spencer! America and the north of England would have swept him out of all respect... But M. Tarde being not only a Member of the Institute and Professor at the College of France, but a Frenchman, was free to give these fancies that entertained him, public, literary, and witty expression, without self-destruction, and produce what has, in its English dress, a curiously unfamiliar effect. Yet the English reader who can overcome his natural disinclination to this union of intelligence and jesting will find a vast amount of suggestion in M. Tarde's fantastic abundance, and bringing his habitual gravity to bear may even succeed in digesting off the humour altogether, and emerging with edification of – it must be admitted – a rather miscellaneous sort.

It is perhaps remarkable that for so many people, so tremendous a theme as the material future of mankind should only be approachable either through a method of conscientiously technical, pseudo-scientific discussion that is in effect scarcely an approach at all or else in this mood of levity. I know of no book in this direction that can claim to be a permanent success which combines a tolerable intelligibility with a simple good faith in the reader. One may speculate how this comes about? The subject it would seem is so grave and great as to be incompatibly out of proportion to the affairs and conditions of the individual life about which our workaday thinking goes on. We are interested indeed, but at the same time we feel it is outside us and beyond us. To turn one's attention to it is at once to get an effect of presumption, strain, and extravagant absurdity. It is like picking up a spade to attack a mountain, and one's instinct is to put oneself right in the eyes of one's fellow-men at once, by a few unmistakably facetious flourishes. It is the same instinct really as that protective "foolery" in which schoolboys indulge when they embark upon some hopeless undertaking, or find themselves entirely outclassed at a game.

The same instinct one finds in the facetious "parley vous Francey" of a low class Englishman who would in secret like very much to speak French, but in practice only admits such an idea as a laughable absurdity. To give a concrete form to your sociological speculations is to strip them of all their poor pretensions, and leave them shivering in palpable inadequacy. It is not because the question is unimportant, but because it is so overwhelmingly important that this jesting about the Future, this fantastic and "ironical" fiction goes on. It is the only medium to express the vague, ill-formed, new ideas with which we are all labouring. It does not give any measure of our real sense of the proportion of things that the Future should appear in our literature as a sort of comic rally and harlequinade after the serious drama of the Present – in which the heroes and heroines of the latter turn up again

in novel and undignified positions; but it seems to be the only method at present available by which we may talk about our race's material Destiny at all.

M. Tarde, in this special case before us, pursues a course of elusive ironies; sometimes he jests at contemporary ideas by imagining them in burlesque realisation, sometimes he jests at contemporary facts by transposing them into strange surroundings, sometimes he broaches fancies of his own chiefly for their own sake, yet with the well-managed literary equivalent of the palliating laugh of conversational diffidence. It is interesting to remark upon the clearness, the French reasonableness and order of his conceptions throughout. He thinks, as the French seem always to think, in terms of a humanity at once more lucid and more limited than the mankind with which we English have to deal. There are no lapses, no fogs and mysteries, no total inadequacies, no brutalities and left-handedness – and no dark gleams of the divinity, about these amused bright people of five hundred years ahead, who are overtaken by the great solar catastrophe. They have established a world state and eliminated the ugly and feeble. You imagine the gentlemen in that Utopia moving gracefully – with beautifully trimmed nails and beards – about the most elegant and ravishing of ladies, their charm greatly enhanced by the *pince-nez*, that is in universal wear. They all speak not Esperanto – but Greek, which strikes one as a little out of the picture – and all being more or less wealthy and pretty women and handsome men, "as common as blackberries" and as available, "human desire rushed with all its might towards the only field that remained open to it", – politics. From that it was presently turned back again by a certain philosophical financier, who, most delightfully, secured his work for ever, as the reader may learn in detail, by erecting a statue of Louis Philippe in wrought aluminium against any return of the flood – and then what remained? The most brilliant efflorescence of poetry and art!

One does not quite know how far M. Tarde is in this first part of his story jesting at his common countrymen's precisions and finalities and unenterprising, exact arrangements, and how far he is sharing them. Throughout he seems to assume that men can really make finished plans, and carry them out, and settle things for ever, and so assure us this state of elegant promenading among the arts, whereas the whole charm and interest of making plans and carrying out, lies to the more typical kind of Englishman, in his ineradicable, his innate, instinctive conviction, that he will, try as he may, never carry them out at all, but something else adventurously and happily unexpected and different. M. Tarde gives his world the unexpected, but it comes, not insidiously as a unique difference in every individual and item concerned, but from without. Just as Humanity, handsome and charming, has grouped itself pleasantly, rationally, and in the best of taste for ever in its studios, in its *salons*, at its little green tables, at its *tables d'hôte*, in its *cabinets particuliers* – the sun goes out!

In the idea of that solar extinction there are extraordinary imaginative possibilities, and M. Tarde must have exercised considerable restraint to prevent their running away with him and so jarring with the ironical lightness of his earlier passages. The conception of the sun seized in a mysterious, chill grip and flickering from hue to hue in the skies of a darkened, amazed and terrified world, could be presented in images of stupendous majesty and splendour. There arise visions of darkened cities and indistinct, multitudinous, fleeing crowds, of wide country-sides of chill dismay, of beasts silent with the fear of this last eclipse, and bats and night-birds abroad amidst the lost daylight creatures and fluttering perplexed on noiseless wings. Then the abrupt sight of the countless stars made visible by this great abdication, the thickening of the sky to stormy masses of cloud so that these are hidden again, the souging of a world-wide wind, and then first little flakes and then the drift and driving of the multiplying snow into the dim illumination of lamps, of windows, of street lights lit untimely. Then again, the shiver of the cold, the clutching of hands at coats and wraps, the blind hurrying to shelter and the comfort of a fire – the blaze of fires. One sees the red-lit faces about the fires, sees the furtive glances at the wind-tormented windows, hears the furious knocking of those other strangers barred out, for, "we cannot have everyone in here". The darkness deepens, the cries without die away, and nothing is left but the shift and falling of the incessant snow from roof to ground. Every now and then the disjointed talk would cease altogether, and in the stillness one would hear the faint yet

insistent creeping sound of the snowfall. "There is a little food downstairs," one would say. "The servants must not eat it... We had better lock it upstairs. We may be here – for days." Grim stuff, indeed, one might make of it all, if one dealt with it in realistic fashion, and great and increasing toil one would find to carry on the tale. M. Tarde was well advised to let his hand pass lightly over this episode, to give us a simply pyrotechnic effect of red, yellow, green and pale blue, to let his people flee and die like marionettes beneath the paper snows of a shop window dressed for Christmas, and to emerge after the change with his urbanity unimpaired. His apt jest at the endurance of artists' models, his easy allusion to the hardening effects of fashionable décolletage, is the measure of his dexterous success; his mention of hotel furniture on the terminal moraines of the returning Alpine glaciers, just a happy touch of that flavouring of reality which in abundance would have altogether overwhelmed his purpose.

Directly one thinks at all seriously of such a thing as this solar extinction, one perceives how preposterously hopeless it is to imagine that mankind would make any head against so swift and absolute a fate. Our race would behave just as any single man behaves when death takes him suddenly through some cardiac failure. It would feel very queer, it would want to sit down and alleviate its strange discomfort, it would say something stupid or inarticulate, make an odd gesture or so, and flicker out. But it is compatible with the fantastic and ironical style for M. Tarde to mock our conceit in our race's capacity and pretend men did all sorts of organized and wholesale things quite beyond their capabilities. People flee in "hordes" to Arabia Petræa and the Sahara, and there perform prodigies of resistance. There arises the heroic leader and preserver, Miltiades, who preaches Neo-troglodytism and loves the peerless Lydia, and leads the remnant of humanity underground. So M. Tarde arrives at the idea he is most concerned in developing, the idea of an introverted world, and people following the dwindling heat of the interior, generation after generation, through gallery and tunnel to the core. About that conception he weaves the finest and richest and most suggestive of his fantastic filaments.

Perhaps the best sustained thread in this admirably entertaining tissue is the entire satisfaction of the imaginary historian at the new conditions of life. The earth is made into an interminable honeycomb, all other forms of life than man are eliminated, and our race has developed into a community sustained at a high level of happiness and satisfaction by a constant resort to "social tonics". Half mockingly, half approvingly, M. Tarde here indicates a new conception of human intercourse and criticises with a richly suggestive detachment, the social relationships of to-day. He moves indicatively and lightly over deeps of human possibility; it is in these later passages that our author is essentially found. One may regret he did not further expand his happy opportunity of treating all the social types to-day as ice embedded fossils, his comments on the peasant and artisan are so fine as to provoke the appetite. He rejects the proposition that "society consists in an exchange of services" with the confidence of a man who has thought it finely out. He gives out clearly what so many of us are beginning dimly perhaps to apprehend, that "society consists in the exchange of reflections". The passages subsequent to this pronouncement will be the seed of many interesting developments in any mind sufficiently attuned to his. They constitute the body, the serious reality to which all the rest of this little book is so much dress, adornment and concealment. Very many of us, I believe, are dreaming of the possibility of human groupings based on interest and a common creative impulse rather than on justice and a trade in help and services; and I do not scruple therefore to put my heavy underline and marginal note to M. Tarde's most intimate moment. A page or so further on he is back below his ironical mask again, jesting at the "tribe of sociologists" – the most unsociable of mankind. Thereafter jest, picturesque suggestion, fantasy, philosophical whim, alternate in a continuously delightful fashion to the end – but always with the gleam of a definite intention coming and going within sight of the surface – and one ends at last a half convinced Neo-troglodyte, invaded by a passion of intellectual regret for the varied interests of that inaccessible world and its irradiating love. The description of the development of science, and particularly of troglodytic astronomy, robbed of its material, is a delightful freak of intellectual fantasy, and the



philosophical dream of the slow concentration of human life into the final form of a single culminating omniscient, and therefore a completely retrospective and anticipatory being, a being that is, that has cast aside the time garment, is one of these suggestions that have at once something penetratingly plausible, and a sort of colossal and absurd monstrosity. If I may be forgiven a personal intrusion at this point, there is a singular parallelism between this foreshadowed Last Man of M. Tarde's stalactitic philosopher, and a certain *Grand Lunar* I once wrote about in a book called "The First Men in the Moon". And I remember coming upon the same idea in a book by Merejkowski, the title of which I am now totally unable to recall... But I will not write further on this curiously attractive and deep seated suggestion. My proper business here is, I think, chiefly to direct the reader past the lightness and cheerful superficiality of the opening portions of this book, and its – at the first blush, rather disappointing but critically justifiable, treatment of the actual catastrophe, to these obscure but curiously stimulating and interesting caves, and tunnels, and galleries in which the elusive real thought of M. Tarde lurks – for those who care to follow it up and seize it and understand.

H. G. WELLS.

## INTRODUCTORY

It was towards the end of the twentieth century of the prehistoric era, formerly called the Christian, that took place, as is well known, the unexpected catastrophe with which the present epoch began, that fortunate disaster which compelled the overflowing flood of civilisation to disappear for the benefit of mankind. I have briefly to relate this universal cataclysm and the unhopd-for redemption so rapidly effected within a few centuries of heroic and triumphant efforts. Of course, I shall pass over in silence the particular details which are known to everybody, and shall merely confine myself to the general outlines of the story. But first of all it may be as well to recall in a few words the degree of relative progress already attained by mankind, while still living above ground and on the surface of the earth, on the eve of this momentous event.

# I

## PROSPERITY

The zenith of human prosperity seemed to have been reached in the superficial and frivolous sense of the word. For the last fifty years, the final establishment of the great Asiatic-American-European confederacy, and its indisputable supremacy over what was still left, here and there, in Oceania and central Africa of barbarous tribes incapable of assimilation, had habituated all the nations, now converted into provinces, to the delights of universal and henceforth inviolable peace. It had required not less than 150 years of warfare to arrive at this wonderful result. But all these horrors were forgotten. True, there had been many terrific battles between armies of three and four million men, between trains with armour-clad carriages, flung, at full speed, against one another, and opening fire on every side; engagements between squadrons of sub-marines which blew one another up with electric discharges; between fleets of iron-clad balloons, harpooned and ripped up by aerial torpedoes, hurled headlong from the clouds, with thousands of parachutes which violently opened and enveloped each other in a storm of grape-shot as they fell together to earth. Yet of all this warlike mania there only remained a vague poetic remembrance. Forgetfulness is the beginning of happiness, as fear is the beginning of wisdom.

As a solitary exception to the general rule, the nations, after this gigantic blood-letting, did not experience the lethargy that follows from exhaustion, but the calm that the accession of strength produces. The explanation is easy. For about a hundred years the military selection committees had broken with the blind routine of the past and made it a practice to pick out carefully the strongest and best made among the young men, in order to exempt them from the burden of military service which had become purely mechanical, and to send to the depot all the weaklings who were good enough to fulfil the sorely diminished functions of the soldier and even of the non-commissioned officer. That was really a piece of intelligent selection; and the historian cannot conscientiously refuse gratefully to praise this innovation, thanks to which the incomparable beauty of the human race to-day has been gradually developed. In fact, when we now look through the glass cases of our museums of antiquities at those singular collections of caricatures which our ancestors used to call their photographic albums, we can confirm the vastness of the progress thus accomplished, if it is really true that we are actually descended from these dwarfs and scare-crows, as an otherwise trustworthy tradition attests.

From this epoch dates the discovery of the last microbes, which had not yet been analysed by the neo-Pasteurian school. Once the cause of every disease was known, the remedy was not long in becoming known as well, and from that moment, a consumptive or rheumatic patient, or an invalid of any kind became as rare a phenomenon as a double-headed monster formerly was, or an honest publican. Ever since that epoch we have dropped the ridiculous employment of those inquiries about health with which the conversations of our ancestors were needlessly interlarded, such as "How are you?" or "How do you do?" Short-sightedness alone continued its lamentable progress, being stimulated by the extraordinary spread of journalism. There was not a woman or a child, who did not wear a *pince-nez*. This drawback, which besides was only momentary, was largely compensated for by the progress it caused in the optician's art.

Alongside of the political unity which did away with the enmities of nations, there appeared a linguistic unity which rapidly blotted out the last differences between them. Already since the twentieth century the need of a single common language, similar to Latin in the Middle Ages, had become sufficiently intense among the learned throughout the whole world to induce them to make use of an international idiom in all their writings. At the end of a long struggle for supremacy with English and Spanish, Greek finally established its claims, after the break-up of the British Empire and the recapture of Constantinople by the Græco-Russian Empire. Gradually, or rather with the

rapidity characteristic of all modern progress, its usage descended from strata to strata till it reached the lowest layers of society, and from the middle of the twenty-second century there was not a little child between the Loire and the River Amour who could not express itself with ease in the language of Demosthenes. Here and there a few isolated villages in the hollows of the mountains still persisted, in spite of the protests of their schoolmasters, to mangle the old dialect formerly called French, German, or Italian, but the sound of this gibberish in the towns would have raised a hearty laugh.

All contemporary documents agree in bearing witness to the rapidity, the depth, and the universality of the change which took place in the customs, ideas, and needs, and in all the forms of social life, thus reduced to a common level from one pole to the other, as a result of this unification of language. It seemed as if the course of civilisation had been hitherto confined within high banks and that now, when for the first time all the banks had burst, it readily spread over the whole globe. It was no longer millions but thousands of millions that the least newly discovered improvement in industry brought in to its inventor; for henceforth there was no barrier to stop in its star-like radiation the expansion of any idea, no matter where it originated. For the same reason it was no longer by hundreds but by thousands, that were reckoned the editions of any book, which appealed but moderately to the public taste, or the performance of a play which was ever so little applauded. The rivalry between authors had therefore risen to its fullest diapason. Their fancy, moreover, could find full scope, for the first effect of this deluge of universalised neo-Hellenism had been to overwhelm for ever all the pretended literatures of our rude ancestors. They became unintelligible, even to the very titles of what they were pleased to call their classical masterpieces, even to the barbarous names of Shakespeare, Goethe, and Hugo, who are now forgotten, and whose rugged verses are deciphered with such difficulty by our scholars. To plagiarise these folks whom hardly anyone could henceforth read, was to render them service, nay, to pay them too much honour. One did not fail to do so; and prodigious was the success of these audacious imitations which were offered as original works. The material thus to turn to account was abundant, and indeed inexhaustible.

Unfortunately for the young writers the ancient poets who had been dead for centuries, Homer, Sophocles, Euripides, had returned to life, a hundred times more hale and hearty than at the time of Pericles himself; and this unexpected competition proved a singular thorn in the side of the newcomers. It was in fact in vain that original geniuses produced on the stage such sensational novelties as *Athalias*, *Hernanias*, *Macbethès*; the public often turned its back on them to rush off to performances of *Oedipus Rex* or the *Birds* (of Aristophanes). And *Nanais*, though a vigorous sketch of a novelist of the new school, was a complete failure owing to the frenzied success of a popular edition of the *Odyssey*. The ears of the people were saturated with Alexandrines classical, romantic, and the rest. They were bored by the childish tricks of cæsure and rhyme which sometimes attempted a see-saw effect by producing now a poor and now a full rhyme, or again made a pretence of hiding away and keeping out of sight in order to induce the hearer to hunt it out. The splendid, untrammelled, and exuberant hexameters of Homer, the stanzas of Sappho, the iambics of Sophocles, furnished them with unspeakable pleasure, which did the greatest harm to the music of a certain Wagner. Music in general fell to the secondary position to which it really belongs in the hierarchy of the fine arts. To make up for it, in the midst of this scholarly renaissance of the human spirit, there arose an occasion for an unexpected literary outburst which allowed poetry to regain its legitimate rank, that is to say, the foremost. In fact it never fails to flower again when language takes a new lease of life, and all the more so when the latter undergoes a complete metamorphosis, and the pleasure arises of expressing anew the eternal truisms.

It was not merely a simple means of diversion for the cultured. The masses took their share in it with enthusiasm. Certainly they now had leisure to read and appreciate the masterpieces of art. The transmission of force at a distance by electricity, and its enlistment under a thousand forms, for instance, in that of cylinders of compressed air, which could be easily carried from place to place, had reduced manual labour to a mere nothing. The waterfalls, the winds and the tides had become the

slaves of man, as steam had once been in the remote ages and in an infinitely less degree. Intelligently distributed and turned to account by means of improved machines, as simple as they were ingenious, this enormous energy freely furnished by nature had long rendered superfluous every kind of domestic servant and the greater number of artisans. The voluntary workmen, who still existed, spent barely three hours a day in the international factories, magnificent co-operative workshops, in which the productivity of human energy, multiplied tenfold, and even a hundredfold, surpassed the expectations of their founders.

This does not mean that the social problem had been thereby solved. In default of want, it is true, there were no longer any quarrels; wealth or a competence had become the lot of every man, with the result that hardly anyone henceforth set any store by them. In default of ugliness, also, love was scarcely an object of either appreciation or jealousy, owing to the abundance of pretty women and handsome men who were as common as blackberries and not difficult to please, in appearance at least. Thus expelled from its two former principal paths, human desire rushed with all its might towards the only field which remained open to it, the conquest of political power, which grew vaster every day owing to the progress of socialistic centralisation. Overflowing ambition, swollen all at once with all the evil passions pouring into it alone, with the covetousness, lust, envious hunger, and hungry envy of preceding ages, reached at that time an appalling height. It was a struggle as to who should make himself master of that *summum bonum*, the State; as to who should make the omnipotence and omniscience of the Universal State minister to the realisation of his personal programme or his humanitarian dreams. The result was not, as had been prophesied, a vast democratic republic. Such an immense outburst of pride could not fail to set up a new throne, the highest, the mightiest, the most glorious that has ever been. Besides, inasmuch as the population of the Single State was reckoned by thousands of millions, universal suffrage had become impracticable and illusory. To obviate the greater inconvenience of deliberative assemblies, ten or a hundred times too numerous, it had been found necessary so to increase the electoral districts that each deputy represented at least ten million electors. That is not surprising if one reflects that it was the first time that the very simple idea had won acceptance of extending to women and children the right of voting exercised in their name, naturally enough, by their father or by their lawful or natural husband. Incidentally one may note that this salutary and necessary reform, as much in accordance with common sense as with logic, required alike by the principle of national sovereignty and by the needs of social stability, nearly failed to pass, incredible as it may seem, in the face of a coalition of celibate electors.

Tradition informs us that the bill relating to this indispensable extension of the franchise would have been infallibly rejected, if, luckily, the recent election of a multi-millionaire suspected of imperialistic tendencies had not scared the assembly. It fancied it would injure the popularity of this ambitious pretender by hastening to welcome this proposal in which it only saw one thing, that is, that the fathers and husbands, outraged or alarmed by the gallantries of the new Cæsar, would be all the stronger for impeding his triumphant march. But this expectation was, it appears, unrealised.

Whatever may be the truth of this legend, it is certain that, owing to the enlargement of the electoral districts, combined with the suppression of the electoral privileges, the election of a deputy was a veritable coronation, and ordinarily produced in the elect a species of megalomania. This reconstituted feudalism was bound to end in a reconstitution of monarchy. For a moment the learned wore this cosmic crown, following the prophecy of an ancient philosopher, but they did not keep it. The popularisation of knowledge through innumerable schools had made science as common an object as a charming woman or an elegant suite of furniture. It had been extraordinarily simplified by the thorough way in which it had been worked out, complete as regards its general outlines, in which no change could be expected, and its henceforth rigid classification abundantly garnished with data. Only advancing at an imperceptible pace, it held, in short, but an insignificant place in the background of the brain, in which it simply replaced the catechism of former days. The bulk of intellectual energy was therefore to be found in another direction, as were also its glory and prestige. Already the scientific

bodies, venerable in their antiquity, began, alas! to acquire a slight tinge and veneer of ridicule, which raised a smile and recalled the synods of bonzes or ecclesiastical conferences, such as are represented in very ancient pictures. It is, therefore, not surprising that this first dynasty of imperial physicists and geometricians, genial copies of the Antonines, were promptly succeeded by a dynasty of artists who had deserted art to wield the sceptre, as they lately had wielded the bow, the roughing chisel, and the brush. The most famous of all, a man possessed of an overflowing imagination which was yet well under control, and ministered to by an unparalleled energy, was an architect who among other gigantic projects formed the idea of rasing to the ground his capital, Constantinople, in order to rebuild it elsewhere, on the site of ancient Babylon, which for three thousand years had been a desert – a truly luminous idea. In this incomparable plain of Chaldea watered by a second Nile there was another still more beautiful and fertile Egypt awaiting resurrection and metamorphosis, an infinite expanse extending as far as the eye could see, to be covered with striking public buildings constructed with magical speed, with a teeming and throbbing population, with golden harvests beneath a sky of changeless blue, with an iron net-work of railways radiating from the town of Nebuchadnesor to the furthest ends of Europe, Africa and Asia, and crossing the Himalayas, the Caucasus, and the Sahara. The stored energy, electrically conveyed, of a hundred Abyssinian waterfalls, and of, I do not know, how many cyclones, hardly sufficed to transport from the mountains of Armenia the necessary stone, wood and iron for these numerous constructions. One day an excursion train, composed of a thousand and one carriages, having passed too close to the electric cable at the moment when the current was at its maximum, was destroyed and reduced to ashes in the twinkling of an eye. None the less Babylon, the proud city of muddy clay, with its paltry splendours of unbaked and painted brick, found itself rebuilt in marble and granite, to the utmost confusion of the Nabopolassars, the Belshazzars, the Cyruses, and the Alexanders. It is needless to add that the archaeologists made on this occasion the most priceless discoveries, in the several successive strata, of Babylonian and Assyrian antiquities. The mania for Assyriology went so far that every sculptor's studio, the palaces, and even the King's armorial bearings were invaded by winged bulls with human heads, just as formerly the museums were full of cupids or cherubims, "with their cravat-like wings". Certain school books for primary schools were actually printed in cuneiform characters in order to enhance their authority over the youthful imagination.

This imperial orgy in bricks and mortar having unhappily occasioned the seventh, eighth, and ninth bankruptcy of the State and several consecutive inundations of paper-money, the people in general rejoiced to see after this brilliant reign the crown borne by a philosophical financier. Order had hardly been re-established in the finances, when he made his preparation for applying on a grand scale his ideal of government, which was of a highly remarkable nature. One was not long in noticing, in fact, after his accession, that all the newly chosen ladies of honour, who were otherwise very intelligent but entirely lacking in wit, were chiefly conspicuous for their striking ugliness; that the liveries of the court were of a grey and lifeless colour; that the court balls reproduced by instantaneous cinematography to the tune of millions of copies furnished a collection of the most honest and insignificant faces and unappetising forms that one could possibly see; that the candidates recently appointed, after a preliminary despatch of their portraits, to the highest dignities of the Empire, were pre-eminently distinguished by the commonness of their bearing; in short, that the races and the public holidays (the date of which were notified in advance by secret telegrams announcing the arrival of a cyclone from America), happened nine times out of ten to take place on a day of thick fog, or of pelting rain, which transformed them into an immense array of waterproofs and umbrellas. Alike in his legislative proposals, as in his appointments, the choice of the prince was always the following: the most useful and the best among the most unattractive. An insufferable sameness of colour, a depressing monotony, a sickening insipidity were the distinctive note of all the acts of the government. People laughed, grew excited, waxed indignant, and got used to it. The result was that at the end of a certain time it was impossible to meet an office-seeker or a politician, that is to say, an

artist or literary man, out of his element and in search of the beautiful in an alien sphere, who did not turn his back on the pursuit of a government appointment in order to return to rhyming, sculpture and painting. And from that moment the following aphorism has won general acceptance, that the superiority of the politician is only mediocrity raised to its highest power.

This is the great benefit that we owe to this eminent monarch. The lofty purpose of his reign has been revealed by the posthumous publication of his memoirs. Of these writings with which we can so ill dispense, we have only left this fragment which is well calculated to make us regret the loss of the remainder: "Who is the true founder of Sociology? Auguste Comte? No, Menenius Agrippa. This great man understood that government is the stomach, not the head of the social organism. Now, the merit of a stomach is to be good and ugly, useful and repulsive to the eye, for if this indispensable organ were agreeable to look upon, it would be much to be feared that people would meddle with it and nature would not have taken such care to conceal and defend it. What sensible person prides himself on having a beautiful digestive apparatus, a lovely liver or elegant lungs? Such a pretension would, however, not be more ridiculous than the foible of cutting a great dash in politics. What wants cultivating is the substantial and the commonplace. My poor predecessors." ... Here follows a blank; a little further on, we read: "The best government is that which holds to being so perfectly humdrum, regular, neuter, and even emasculated, that no one can henceforth get up any enthusiasm either for or against it."

Such was the last successor of Semiramis. On the re-discovered site of the Hanging-gardens he caused to be erected, at the expense of the State, a statue of Louis Philippe in wrought aluminium, in the middle of a public garden planted with common laurels and cauliflowers.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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