

ЭЖЕН СЮ

THE INFANT'S SKULL;
OR, THE END OF THE
WORLD. A TALE OF THE
MILLENNIUM

Эжен Жозеф Сю
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Eugène Sue

The Infant's Skull; Or, The End of the World. A Tale of the Millennium

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

Among the historic phenomena of what may be called "modern antiquity," there is none comparable to that which was witnessed on the first day of the year 1000, together with its second or adjourned catastrophe thirty-two years later. The end of the world, at first daily expected by the Apostles, then postponed – upon the authority of Judaic apocalyptic writings, together with the Revelations of St. John the Divine, – to the year 1000, and then again to thirty-two years later, until it was finally adjourned *sine die*, was one of those beliefs, called "theologic," that have had vast and disastrous mundane effect. *The Infant's Skull; or, The End of the World*, figures at that period. It is one of that series of charming stories by Eugene Sue in which historic personages and events are so artistically grouped that, without the fiction losing by the otherwise solid facts, and without the solid facts suffering by the fiction, both are enhanced, and combinedly

act as a flash-light upon the past – and no less so upon the future.

As with all the stories of this series by the talented Sue, *The Infant's Skull; or, The End of the World*, although, one of the shortest, rescues invaluable historic facts from the dark and dusty recesses where only the privileged few can otherwise reach them. Thus its educational value is equal to its entertaining merit. It is a gem in the necklace of gems that the distinguished author has felicitously named *The Mysteries of the People; or The History of a Proletarian Family Across the Ages*.

DANIEL DE LEON.

New York, April 20, 1904.

PART I.

THE CASTLE OF COMPIEGNE

CHAPTER I.

THE FOUNTAIN OF THE HINDS

A spring of living water, known in the neighborhood by the appropriate name of the "Fountain of the Hinds," empties its trickling stream under the oaks of one of the most secret recesses of the forest of Compiègne. Stags and hinds, deers and does, bucks and she-goats come to water at the spot, leaving behind them numerous imprints of their steps on the borders of the rill, or on the sandy soil of the narrow paths that these wild animals have worn across the copse.

One early morning in the year 987, the sun being up barely an hour, a woman, plainly dressed and breathing hard with rapid walking, stepped out of one of these paths and stopped at the Fountain of the Hinds. She looked in all directions in surprise as if she expected to have been preceded by some one at the solitary rendezvous. Finding her hopes deceived, she made an impatient motion, sat down, still out of breath, on a rock near the fountain, and threw off her cape.

The woman, barely twenty years of age, had black hair, eyes

and eye-brows; her complexion was brown; and cherry-red her lips. Her features were handsome, while the mobility of her inflated nostrils and the quickness of her motions betokened a violent nature. She had rested only a little while when she rose again and walked up and down with hurried steps, stopping every now and then to listen for approaching footsteps. Catching at last the sounds of a distant footfall, she thrilled with joy and ran to the encounter of him she had been expecting. He appeared. It was a man, also in plain garb and in the vigor of age, large-sized and robust, with a piercing eye and somber, wily countenance. The young woman leaped at a bound into the arms of this personage, and passionately addressed him: "Hugh, I meant to overwhelm you with reproaches; I meant to strike you; but here you are and I forget everything," and in a transport of amorous delight she added, suiting the deed to the words: "Your lips! Oh, give me your lips to kiss!"

After the exchange of a shower of kisses, and disengaging himself, not without some effort, from the embrace of the fascinated woman, Hugh said to her gravely: "We cannot indulge in love at this hour."

"At this hour, to-day, yesterday, to-morrow, everywhere and always, I love and shall continue to love you."

"Blanche, they are foolhardy people who use the word 'always,' when barely fourteen years separate us from the term assigned for the end of the world! This is a grave and a fearful matter!"

"What! Can you have given me this early morning appointment at this secreted place, whither I have come under pretext of visiting the hermitage of St. Eusebius, to talk to me about the end of the world? Hugh ... Hugh... To me there is no end of the world but when your love ends!"

"Trifle not with sacred matters! Do you not know that in fourteen years, the first day of the year 1000, this world will cease to be and with it the people who inhabit it?"

Struck by the coldness of her lover's answers, Blanche brusquely stepped back. Her brows contracted, her nostrils dilated, her breast heaved in pain, and she darted a look at Hugh that seemed to wish to fathom the very bottom of his heart. For a few instants her gaze remained fixed upon him; she then cried in a voice trembling with rage: "You love some other woman! You love me no more!"

"Your words are senseless!"

"Heaven and earth! Am I also to be despised... I the Queen!.. Yes, you love some other woman, your own wife, perhaps; that Adelaide of Poitiers whom you promised me you would rid yourself of by a divorce!" Further utterances having expired upon her lips, the wife of King Louis the Do-nothing broke down sobbing, and with eyes that glistened with fury she shook her fists at the Count of Paris: "Hugh, if I were sure of that, I would kill both you and your wife; I would stab you both to death!"

"Blanche," said Hugh slowly and watching the effect of his words upon the face of the Queen, who, with eyes fixed upon

the ground, seemed to be meditating some sinister project: "I am not merely Count of Paris and Duke of France, as my ancestors were, I am also Abbot of Saint Martin of Tours and of Saint-Germain-des-Pres, abbot not only by virtue of my cowl – but by virtue of my faith. Accordingly, I blame your incredulity on the subject of the approaching end of the world. The holiest bishops have prophesied it, and have urged the faithful to hasten to save their souls during the fourteen years that still separate them from the last judgment... Fourteen years!.. A very short period within which to gain the eternal paradise!"

"By the hell that burns in my heart, the man is delivering a sermon to me!" cried the Queen with an outburst of caustic laughter. "What are you driving at? Are you spreading a snare for me? Malediction! this man is a compound of ruse, artifice and darkness, and yet I love him! I am insane!.. Oh, there must be some magic charm in this!" and biting into her handkerchief with suppressed rage, she said to him: "I shall not interrupt again, even if I should choke with anger. Proceed, Hugh the Capet! Explain yourself!"

"Blanche, the approach of the dreadful day when the world is to end makes me uneasy about my salvation. I look with fright at our double adultery, seeing we are both married." Stopping with a gesture a fresh explosion of rage on the part of the Queen, the Count of Paris added solemnly raising his hand heavenward: "I swear to God by the salvation of my soul, were you a widow, I would obtain a divorce from the Pope, and I would marry you

with holy joy. But likewise do I swear to God by the salvation of my soul, I wish no longer to brave eternal punishment by continuing a criminal intercourse with a woman bound, as I am myself, by the sacrament of marriage. I wish to spend in the mortification of the flesh, in fasting, abstinence, repentance and prayer the years that still separate us from the year 1000, to the end that I may obtain from our Lord God the remission of my sins and of my adultery with you. Blanche, seek not to alter my decision. According as the caprice of your love led you, you have alternately boasted over and cursed the inflexibility of my character. Now, what I have said is said. This shall be the last day of our adulterous intercourse. Our carnal relations shall then end."

While Hugh the Capet was speaking, the wife of Louis the Do-nothing contemplated his face with devouring attention. When he finished, so far from breathing forth desperate criminations, she carried both her hands to her forehead and seemed steeped in meditation. Looking askance upon Blanche, the Count of Paris anxiously waited for the first word from the Queen. Finally, a tremor shook her frame, she raised her head, as if struck by a sudden thought, and curbing her emotions she asked: "Do you believe that King Lothaire, the father of my husband Louis, died of poison in March of last year?"

"I believe he was poisoned."

"Do you believe that Imma, his wife, was guilty of poisoning her husband?"

"She is accused of the crime."

"Do you believe Imma guilty of the crime?"

"I believe what I see."

"And when you do not see?"

"Doubt is then natural."

"Do you know that in that murder Queen Imma's accomplice was her lover Adalberon, bishop of Laon?"

"It was a great scandal to the church!"

"After the poisoning of Lothaire, the Queen and the bishop, finally delivered from the eyes of her husband, indulged their love more freely."

"A double and horrible sacrilege!" cried the Count of Paris with indignation. "A bishop and a Queen adulterers and homicides!"

Blanche seemed astonished at the indignation of Hugh the Capet and again contemplated him attentively. She then proceeded with her interrogatory:

"Are you aware, Count of Paris, that King Lothaire's death is a happy circumstance for you – provided you were ambitious? Bishop Adalberon, the accomplice and lover of the Queen, that bishop, expert in poisons, was your friend!"

"He was my friend before his crime."

"You repudiate his friendship, but you profit by his crime. That is high statecraft."

"In what way, Blanche, have I profited by that odious crime? Does not the son of Lothaire reign to-day? When my ancestors,

the Counts of Paris, aspired at the crown they did not assassinate the kings, they dethroned them. Thus Eudes dethroned Charles the Fat, and Rothbert, Charles the Simple. A transmission of crowns is easy."

"All of which did not prevent Charles the Simple, the nephew of Charles the Fat from re-ascending the throne, the same as Louis Outer-mer, the son of Charles the Simple, also resumed his crown. On the other hand, King Lothaire, who was poisoned last year, will never reign again. Whence we see, it is better to kill the kings than to dethrone them ... if one wishes to reign in their stead. Not so, Count of Paris?"

"Yes, provided one does not care for the excommunications of the bishops, nor for the eternal flames."

"Hugh, if perchance my husband, although young, should die?... That might happen."

"The will of the Lord is all-powerful," answered Hugh with a contrite air. "There be those who to-day are full of life and youth, and to-morrow are corpses and dust! The designs of God are impenetrable."

"So that if perchance the King, my husband, should die," rejoined Blanche, without taking her eyes from the face of the Count of Paris, "in short, if some day or other I become a widow – your scruples will then cease ... my love will no longer be adulterous, would it, Hugh?"

"No, you would then be free."

"And will you remain faithful to what you have just said ...

'Blanche, I swear to God by the salvation of my soul, if you should become a widow I shall separate from my wife Adelaide of Poitiers, and I shall marry you with a pure and holy joy.' ... Will you be faithful to that oath?"

"Blanche, I repeat it," answered Hugh the Capet avoiding the Queen's eyes that remained obstinately fixed upon him. "I swear to God by the salvation of my soul, if you become a widow I shall demand of the Pope permission to divorce Adelaide of Poitiers, and I shall marry you. Our love will then have ceased to be criminal."

An interval of silence again followed the words of the Count of Paris, whereupon Blanche resumed slowly:

"Hugh, there are strange and sudden deaths."

"Indeed, strange and sudden deaths have been seen in royal families."

"None is safe from accident. Neither princes nor subjects."

"Only the will of heaven disposes of our fates. We must bow before the decrees of God."

"My husband, Louis, the Do-nothing, is, like all other people, subject to death and the decrees of Providence."

"Indeed, kings as well as subjects."

"It may then happen, although he is now barely twenty, that he die suddenly ... within a year ... within six months ... to-morrow ... to-day..."

"Man's end is death."

"Should that misfortune arrive," the Queen proceeded after a

pause, "there is one thing that alarms me, Hugh, and on which I desire your advice."

"What, my dear Blanche?"

"Calumniators, seeing Louis dies so suddenly, might talk ... about poison."

"A pure conscience despises calumny. The wicked may be disregarded."

"Oh, as to me, I would despise them. But, you, Hugh, my beloved, whatever may be said, would you also accuse me of being a poisoner? Would you pass such a judgment upon me?"

"I believe what I see... If I do not see, I doubt. Blanche, may the curse of heaven fall upon me if I ever could be infamous enough to conceive such a suspicion against you!" cried Hugh the Capet taking the Queen in his arms with passionate tenderness. "What! If the Lord should call your husband to Him He would fulfil the most cherished dreams of my life! He would allow me to sanctify with marriage the ardent love that I would sacrifice everything to, everything except my eternal salvation! And would I, instead of thanking God, suspect you of an odious crime! You the soul of my life!"

The Queen seemed overwhelmed with ecstasy. Hugh the Capet proceeded in a low and tremulous voice: "Oh, joy of my heart, if some day you should be my wife before God, our souls would then merge in one and in a love that would then be pure and holy. Then, Oh joy of Heaven, we shall not age! The end of the world approaches. Together we shall quit life full of ardor

and love!" saying which the Count of Paris drew his mouth close to the lips of the Queen. The latter closed her eyes and muttered a few words in a faint voice. Hugh the Capet, however, suddenly and with great effort disengaged himself from Blanche's arms exclaiming: "A superhuman courage is needed to overcome the passion that consumes me! Adieu, Blanche, well-beloved of my heart, I return to Paris!"

With these words Hugh the Capet disappeared in the copse, while the Queen, overpowered with passion and the struggle within herself, followed him with her eyes: "Hugh, my lover, I shall be a widow, and you King!"

CHAPTER II.

THE IDIOT

Among the household serfs of the royal domain of Compiègne was a young lad of eighteen named Yvon. Since the death of his father, a forester serf, he lived with his grandmother, the washerwoman for the castle, who had received permission from the bailiff to keep her grandson near her. Yvon was at first employed in the stables; but having long lived in the woods, he looked so wild and stupid that he was presently taken for an idiot, went by the name of Yvon the Calf, and became the butt of all. The King himself, Louis the Do-nothing, amused himself occasionally with the foolish pranks of the young serf. He was taught to mimic dogs by barking and walking on all fours; he was made to eat lizards, spiders and grass-hoppers for general amusement. Yvon always obeyed with an idiotic leer. Thus delivered to the sport and contempt of all, since his grandmother's death, the lad met at the castle with the sympathy of none except a poor female serf named Marceline the Golden-haired from the abundant gold-blond ornament of her head. The young girl was a helper of Adelaide, the favorite lady of the Queen's chamber.

The morning of the day that Blanche and Hugh the Capet had met at the Fountain of the Hinds, Marceline, carrying on her head a bucket of water, was crossing one of the yards of the

castle towards the room of her mistress. Suddenly she heard a volley of hisses, and immediately after she saw Yvon enter the yard pursued by several serfs and children of the domain, crying at the top of their voices: "The Calf!" "The Calf!" and throwing stones and offal at the idiot. Marceline revealed the goodness of her heart by interesting herself in the wretch, not that Yvon's features or limbs were deformed, but that the idiotic expression of his face affected her. He was in the habit of dressing his long black hair in five or six plaids interwoven with wisps of straw, and the coiffure fell upon his neck like as many tails. Barely clad in a sorry hose that was patched with materials of different colors, his shoes were of rabbit or squirrel skin fastened with osiers to his feet and legs. Closely pursued from various sides by the serfs of the castle, Yvon made several doublings in the yard in order to escape his tormentors, but perceiving Marceline, who, standing upon the first step of the turret stairs that she was about to ascend, contemplated the idiot with pity, he ran towards the young girl, and throwing himself at her feet said joining his hands: "Pardon me, Marceline, but protect poor Yvon against these wicked people!"

"Climb the stairs quick!" Marceline said to the idiot, pointing up the turret. Yvon rose and swiftly followed the advice of the serf maid, who, placing herself at the door, lay down her bucket of water, and addressing Yvon's tormentors, who were drawing near, said to them: "Have pity for the poor idiot, he harms no one."

"I have just seen him leap like a wolf out of the copse of the forest from the side of the Fountain of the Hinds," cried a forester serf. "His hair and the rags he has on are wet with dew. He must have been in some thicket spreading nets for game which he eats raw."

"Oh, he is a worthy son of Leduecq, the forester, who lived like a savage in his den, never coming out of the woods!" observed another serf. "We must have some fun with the Calf."

"Yes, yes, let us dip him up to his ears in the neighboring pool in punishment for spreading nets to catch game with," said the forester; and taking a step toward Marceline who remained at the door: "Get out of the way, you servant of the devil, or we shall give you a ducking along with the Calf!"

"My mistress, Dame Adelaide, a lady of the Queen's chamber, will know how to punish you if you ill-treat me. Begone, you heartless people!"

"The devil take Adelaide! To the pool with the Calf!"

"Yes, to the pool with him! And Marceline also! A good mud-bath for both!"

At the height of the tumult, one of the casements of the castle was thrown open, and a young man of twenty years at most leaned out and cried angrily: "I shall have your backs flayed with a sound strapping, you accursed barking dogs!"

"The King!" exclaimed the tormentors of Yvon, and a minute later all had fled by the gate of the yard.

"Halloa, you girl!" called out Louis the Do-nothing to

Marceline who was taking up her bucket of water. "What was the cause of the infernal racket made by that noisy pack?"

"Seigneur," answered Marceline trembling, "they wanted to ill-treat poor Yvon."

"Is the Calf about?"

"Seigneur, I know not where he is gone to hide," explained the maid who feared lest Yvon, barely escaped from one set of tormentors, should fall into the hands of the whimsical King. As the latter thereupon withdrew from the window, Marceline hastened to ascend the stair of the turret. She had scarcely mounted a dozen steps when she saw Yvon crouching with his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands. At the sight of the maid he shook his head and with a voice full of emotion said: "Good you; oh, you good! Marceline good!" and he fixed his eyes so full of gratitude upon her that she observed aloud with a sigh: "Who would believe that this wretch, with eyes at times so captivating, still is deprived of reason?" and again laying down her bucket she said to the idiot: "Yvon, why did you go this morning into the forest? Your hair and rags are really moist with dew. Is it true that you spread nets to take game?" The idiot answered with a stupid smile, swaying his head backward and forward. "Yvon," said Marceline, "do you understand me?" The idiot remained mute, but presently observing the bucket of water that the maid had laid down at his feet, he lifted it up, placed it on his own head, and motioned to Marceline to go up ahead of him. "The poor creature is expressing his gratitude as well as

he can," Marceline was thinking to herself when she heard steps above coming down the stairs, and a voice cried out:

"Oh, Calf, is it you?"

"That is the voice of one of the King's servants," said Marceline. "He is coming for you, Yvon. Oh, you are going to fall into another tormentor's hands!"

Indeed, one of the men of the royal chamber appeared at the turning of the winding stairs and said to the idiot: "Come, get up quick and follow me! Our lord the King wishes to amuse himself with you, you double Calf!"

"The King! Oh! Oh! The King!" cried Yvon with a triumphant air, clapping his hands gayly. The bucket being left unsupported on his head, fell and broke open at the feet of the King's servitor whose legs were thereby drenched up to his knees.

"A plague upon the idiot!" cried Marceline despite all her good-heartedness. "There is the bucket broken! My mistress will beat me!"

Furious at the accident that drenched his clothes, the royal servitor hurled imprecations and insults upon Yvon the Calf, who, however, seeming not to notice either the imprecations or the insults, continued to repeat triumphantly: "The King! Oh! Oh! The King!"

CHAPTER III.

LOUIS THE DO-NOTHING

Like his wife Louis the Do-nothing was barely twenty years of age. Justly nicknamed the "Do-nothing," he looked as nonchalant as he seemed bored. After having scolded through the window at the serfs, whose noise annoyed him, he stretched himself out again upon his lounge. Several of his familiar attendants stood around him. Yawning fit to dislocate his jaws, he said to them: "What a notion that was of the Queen's to go at sunrise with only one lady of the chamber to pray at the hermitage of St. Eusebius! Once awakened, I could not fall asleep again. So I rose! Oh, this day will be endless!"

"Seigneur King, would you like to hunt?" suggested one of the attendants. "The day is fine. We would certainly kill some game."

"The hunt fatigues me. It is a rude sport."

"Seigneur King, would you prefer fishing?"

"Fishing tires me; it is a stupid pastime."

"Seigneur King, if you call your flute and lute-players, you might enjoy a dance."

"Music racks my head, and I cannot bear dancing. Let's try something else."

"Seigneur King, shall your chaplain read to you out of some fine work?"

"I hate reading. I think I could amuse myself with the idiot."

Where is he?"

"Seigneur King, one of your attendants has gone out to find him... I hear steps... It is surely he coming."

The door opened and a servitor bent the knee and let in Yvon. From the moment of his entrance Yvon started to walk on all fours, barking like a dog; after a little while he grew livelier, jumped and cavorted about clapping his hands and shouting with such grotesque contortions that the King and the attendants began to laugh merrily. Encouraged by these signs of approbation and ever cavorting about, Yvon mimicked alternately the crowing of a rooster, the mewling of a cat, the grunting of a hog and the braying of an ass, interspersing his sounds with clownish gestures and ridiculous leaps, that redoubled the hilarity of the King and his courtiers. The merriment was at its height when the door was again thrown open, and one of the chamberlains announced in a loud voice from the threshold where he remained: "Seigneur King, the Queen approaches!" At these words the attendants of Louis, some of whom had dropped upon stools convulsing with laughter, rose hastily and crowded to the door to salute the Queen at her entrance. Louis, however, who lay stretched on his lounge, continued laughing and cried out to the idiot: "Keep on dancing, Calf! Dance on! You are worth your weight in gold! I never amused myself better!"

"Seigneur King, here is the Queen!" said one of the courtiers, seeing Blanche cross the contiguous chamber and approach the door. The wing of this door, when thrown open almost reached

the corner of a large table that was covered with a splendid Oriental piece of tapestry, the folds of which reached to the floor. Yvon the Calf continued his gambols, slowly approaching the table, and concealed from the eyes of the King by the head-piece of the lounge on which the latter remained stretched. Ranged at the entrance of the door in order to salute the Queen, the prince's attendants had their backs turned to the table under which Yvon quickly blotted himself out at the moment when the seigneurs were bowing low before Blanche. The Queen answered their salute, and preceding them by a few steps moved towards Louis, who had not yet ceased laughing and crying out: "Ho, Calf, where are you? Come over this way that I may see your capers... Have you suddenly turned mute, you who can bark, mew and crow so well?"

"My beloved Louis is quite merry this morning," observed Blanche caressingly and approaching her husband's lounge. "Whence proceeds the mirth of my dear husband?"

"That idiot could make a dead man laugh with his capers. Ho, there, Calf! Come this way, you scamp, or I'll have your bones broken!"

"Seigneur King," said one of the attendants after glancing around the room for Yvon, "the Calf must have escaped at the moment when the door was opened to admit the Queen. He is not here, nor in the adjoining room."

"Fetch him back, he can not be far!" cried the King impatiently and with rising anger. "Bring him back here

immediately!"

One of the seigneurs hurried out to execute the King's orders, while Blanche letting herself down near him, said, smiling tenderly: "I shall try, my beloved seigneur, to enable you to wait patiently for the idiot's return."

"Fetch him back. All of you run after him; the more of you look after him, the quicker will he be found."

Bowing to the King's orders, the courtiers trooped out of the apartment in search of Yvon.

CHAPTER IV.

A ROYAL COUPLE

Blanche remained alone with her husband, whose face, that for a moment had brightened up, speedily resumed its normal expression of lassitude. The Queen had thrown off her simple vestment of the morning to don a more elaborate costume. Her black hair, braided with pearls, was combed with skill. She wore an orange colored robe of rich material, with wide flowing sleeves, leaving half exposed her breast and shoulders. A collar and gold bracelets studded with precious stones ornamented her neck and arms. Still reclining on his lounge, now shared by his wife who sat down at its edge, Louis did not even bestow a glance upon her. With his head leaning upon one of the pillows, he was mumbling: "You will see the clumsy fellows will turn out more stupid than the idiot; they will not catch him."

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