

Damon Knight reports: "Claude Veillot is a newspaperman by trade, 36 years old, and has written a book about artificial satellites and one about the art of moviemaking. When last heard from, he was in North Africa working on a movie for which he had written the script." None of which seems to have anything directly to do with this account of invaders of Earth. . . .

THE FIRST DAYS OF MAY

by Claude Veillot

(translated by Damon Knight)

IT'S THE NOISE THAT HAS drawn me toward the slit between the closed shutters. A furtive noise of crumbling, of crushed mica, of walnut shells being slowly cracked. For two days, not a sound has risen from that street which I can see with my eyes closed: the grocery across the way, with its windows broken by looters, its bags of dried beans spilled out as far as the gutter; the apartment house on the corner, half fallen down, its façade tumbled into the street, exposing the cross-sections of apartments, furniture hanging out mockingly over emptiness; abandoned cars, some parked along the side of the street, others left where they stopped, blocking the way,

tires flat; and then those incongruous remnants strewn across the flagstones and asphalt—handbags, bundles of laundry, a baby carriage, broken bottles, scraps of newspaper, a roll of blankets, a few mismated shoes, a sewing machine . . .

Four days, only four days ago, that street was full of people. You couldn't know then that the bed in the third-floor apartment of the building opposite was covered with pink cretonne, because the façade was still in place. Customers went into the grocery. "And what will it be today, madam?" A baby was drooling in the carriage, the sewing machine was purring behind an unbroken win-

dow, cars were running in the streets where no rag-pickers' clutter was strewn.

Only four days, and already you have the feeling that all that never existed. Wasn't it all a dream? Did I really, one day, a long time ago, walk in the sun with my fellows? Come home to a woman I loved in the evening? Listen to records? Complain about the high cost of living? Read books? Make love?

Today, the reality is this vile sound, this quiet and continuous grating noise whose significance I now know. There are two of them, coupling right under my shutters, near an automobile with its windows broken, and that horrible crunching means simply that the female is in the act of devouring the male.

They have been compared to praying mantises too often. In fact, when it's a question of that praying mantis that has such an effect on us, standing upright on a twig, with its globular eyes and its armored claws, we always have the recourse of crushing it with a blow, at the cost of fighting back a spasm of nausea. But when the mantis is as big as a kangaroo . . .

And then what kind of mantises were they, that they could conceive and use those machines that we saw on the first day, the day it all began? (Or should I say: the day when it all ended?)

I can't take my eyes away from the terrible sight. A faintness of horror makes me go on staring at that monstrous copulation, the clinging of those greenish abdomens, the vibrating wing-cases, and above all, that kind of parrot's beak grinding the corselet of the still living male, who trembles gently in all his limbs, as if in a horrible ecstasy.

Now there is another sound, thin as a cricket's chirp, then swelling to a piercing whistle, like the sound of those defective mikes at the meetings and neighborhood dances, not so long ago.

I can't help moving back a step. It's the female who is shrilling. That's where their name comes from: the Shrills. Nobody had time or inclination to think of anything else, and all things considered, it's the best name for them.

Their true, their only power lies not in being so frightful and cruel as to make us forget our worst nightmares. Nor in being so many that no one has ever been able to estimate their numbers exactly. Their true, their only superiority is in their ability to shrill. When that modulated whistling goes into the supersonic, becomes inaudible to any terrestrial ear, you can see men and beasts fall like flies, not to rise again as long as the sound lasts.

But there's worse to come, for they have succeeded in analysing

that physiological peculiarity, defining it and then applying it to instruments of war, multiplying its effectiveness. The Shrills needed no cannon to gut our apartment buildings: the ultrasonics were enough.

Below, in the street, the female Shrill goes on modulating her love whistle. A wave of fear and hatred washes over me. Stop that hideous noise, that disgusting nibbling, the whole obscene business! I've snatched up my revolver out of the open valise on the table. The shutters fly back against the wall. Suddenly the sun cleanses this miserable hotel room where I've lived four days alone, glued in my fear, after everyone else has run off.

Shots crash out, echoing, almost joyful in the sinister silence of the empty suburb. One, two, three shots . . . The head with its monstrous eyes is burst open. The female Shrill is dead between one spasm and the next, but I can't stop firing, four, five, six, before the hammer falls on an empty cartridge.

After all these hours of isolation, of shadow and muffled silence, let there be light, noise, action . . . I'm not afraid any longer. The smell of the powder is still floating in the air. The fact that the half-devoured Shrill is still trembling doesn't frighten me, on the contrary, it sends me into a mad rage.

I've sprung out of my room,

hurled myself down the stairs, torn apart the barricade of furniture and mattresses that I'd piled up in front of the entrance. . . . There's a fuel can tied onto the abandoned car; I've cut the string with one or two strokes of my knife, and pulled it down. I've soaked the two Shrills. Ten, twenty liters of gasoline . . .

I'm watching their bodies burn, crackle, snap, crack open, burst, suppurate in the red bonfire which, at the very beginning, carried off their wings and wing-cases in a quick, high blaze. I'm so close to the flames that I'm sweating, gasping—And I'm laughing.

Hours of walking through the silent streets, choked with wreckage and rubble. The smell that comes from the demolished buildings is terrible.

I couldn't stay in my hotel room any longer. Maybe the Shrills patrol past there? If they'd found the two burned monsters, they would have been quick to pluck me out of my hole in turn.

It's true that there's no lack of Shrill corpses. Crossing an amusement park, I've seen more than fifty of them rotting on the paths, on the edge of the pond and even in the middle of the little red cars, and the miniature bicycles of a ride. They had been ripped apart by bullets.

I've also seen those who brought off this fine butchery: the crew of

two heavy machine guns set up at the exits of the park. They were twisted on the ground, fists over their ears, in the poignant stillness of violent death. A big helmet had rolled to the base of a plane tree. Some machine-gun belts were strewn about.

There must have been some of them nearly everywhere in the city, these elements of the rear guard who'd been left there to permit the evacuation of the civil population. Sacrifices, ordered to slow up the invasion by a few minutes, a few seconds, before the buildings started to come apart around them, and repellant silhouettes appeared at the street-corners, carrying in their faceted eyes the hundred-fold reflection of the same horrified human face. . . .

Isn't what I've been doing pure idiocy? There isn't a single person still living in the city, that's clear. Why should Maria have stayed? Even if she'd wanted to, they would have made her go with the rest. The first day, I remember, radio cars went through every district: "Your attention please! It is necessary to evacuate the city temporarily—the invader has succeeded in overrunning our troops! Get out to the country! Don't stay in the city! Get out to the country! Any person who ignores this order will be in mortal danger!"

From the window of my hotel I saw that infernal stampede, the brutality, fear and disorder, that

frothing exodus, to which all the half-hearted official appeals couldn't bring a semblance of dignity.

I couldn't leave. Not without Maria. And perhaps also because I was more frightened than the rest, frightened enough to stay cooped up four days in a dark room. Like a coward, after all. But what is a coward, what's a hero when it comes to the Shrills?

I'm frozen to the spot when I hear the noise. In the deathly silence of the abandoned city, it echoes like an explosion. Nevertheless, as soon as my heartbeat slows down a little, I identify the sound. Memories of coffee with cream, smells of anisette, Martinis, cognac, hubbub of voices and laughter. . . . It's the authoritative bell of a cash register.

I push open the glass door of the café. Moleskin cushions. Marble tables. Is it possible that this familiar décor has anything to do with all that ridiculous horror outside?

The man hasn't seen me. Leaning over the showcase, he's carefully counting some bills, pausing every so often to lick his finger.

I barely touch his shoulder. With remarkable agility, he turns and in the same movement draws a big blue-barreled Colt. In his thin, whiskery face, his eyes are cruel and nervous at the same time; and he shows his teeth like a dog. "What the hell are you doing here?"

He's a noncom; there's a stripe on his dirty, torn khaki sleeve.

"I haven't seen anyone for four days," I say. "I'm looking for my wife." And after a pause, "What's the news?"

He spins the pistol gracefully around his forefinger before holstering it again. "Don't waste your breath!" And tapping himself on the ear: "Stone deaf! See what they've done with their vibrations, those lousy bugs!"

Suspicious again, he examines me from head to foot. "Say, don't you know all civilians were supposed to evacuate the city?"

Then he shrugs, goes around the counter, takes down a bottle and two glasses. "Civilians, military, what the hell difference does all that stuff make now? Two days ago, I was in position near the plastic works, you know, on the other side of the river. Had to watch the people filing past, trucks, buses, cars, bikes, carts, people on foot. . . . Couldn't have been one out of two that knew what was happening to them. The radio hardly had time to explain what was going on and bang! No more radio! 'It's the Russians!' they said; or else, 'It's the Americans!' Nobody wanted to believe the official statement—that story about invaders that they called . . . how'd it go again? . . . extra-terrestrial."

He lifts his glass to clink it with mine. "Never mind telling me

bottoms up, I won't hear you! . . . It was the same with us, anyhow, we didn't put much stock in that story. It was hard to swallow, am I right? Well, they explained it to us, anyhow, that these characters came from another planet. But which one? They told us they had them already in the U.S., Canada, England too, maybe even in Russia. But how could we tell? They said we'd have to fight, this time, not for territory or for ideas, but for our own skin. Okay, but what with?"

Aiming his two forefingers one behind the other, he whistles between his teeth. "Oh, the flame-throwers, they didn't go so bad at the beginning. We went at it hot and heavy, I can tell you! Have you seen those bugs up close? Don't know why, you get a crazy urge to kill them, crush them, destroy 'em. We went after them with our torches—we burned piles and piles of them! But that didn't last. They started in shrilling. Nearly the whole company went down. We fell back to this side of the river, and if you'll believe it, the Genius blew up the bridge!"

He bursts into laughter which suggests anything but gaiety.

"As if that would keep them from jumping, those bugs! A Shrill can hop a good twenty meters, and with those damned wings they can keep going a little longer. I understand they could do a lot

better, if Earth gravity didn't bother them! No, no, don't bother to open your mouth, I tell you! I can't hear a thing! You know what we're going to do, you and me? We're going to try to find a car, or an army jeep, and we're going to get out of this damned town. The people must be somewhere, right?"

I shake my head.

"What? You don't want to stay here the rest of your life, do you?"

I open my mouth, then change my mind, tear a sheet out of my notebook and write: "I've got to find my wife."

Leaning his elbows on the counter, in the familiar attitude of a saloonkeeper, he scratches his ear, at once ironic and compassionate. "Oh well anyhow, that's love for you!"

What a strange feeling to go through this series of motions: take a key out of my pocket, slide it into a lock. I've entered my apartment this way hundreds of times. Maria would be waiting for me. That seemed natural. There'll never be enough time to regret the indifference with which I took that simple happiness.

The apartment is full of darkness; all the shutters are closed. I don't recognize the familiar smell that means home. In its place, there's an intrusive odor, persistent and heavy: the scent of a cigar.

I open a door. A man is sitting crosswise in an upholstered chair, his legs hanging over the arm-rest. He has on a grayish undershirt; he's smoking an enormous cigar and reading one of my books, while he scratches a three-day beard.

To top it all, it's he who looks at me and exclaims, "Well! Don't stand on ceremony!"

The only light on him comes from three candles stuck to the top shelf of the bookcase. He has hollow cheeks, anxious eyes. Do I, too, have that hunted look?

I take a step. "Maybe you don't know it, but you're in *my* chair!"

He puffs. "The persistence of bourgeois concepts after the disappearance of the society which created them is one of the most hilarious aspects of the event."

A phrase-maker. Good. He can't be very dangerous. See him encompass space with a gesture. "Nothing left! All consumed! Everything is broken down in the most frenetic, most repugnant, most definitive of routs! And what do we behold now? A survivor . . . Who knows? The last, perhaps? And what does he do? Does he repent? Does he swear to rebuild a better world? No. He demands *his* chair."

I let myself fall on the sofa; fatigue cuts my hamstrings. In the wavering light of the candles, I watch the man suck on his cigar. He takes it out of his mouth and

says quietly, *"And the shapes of the locusts were like unto horses prepared unto battle."* His voice rises slowly. ". . . *And their faces were as the faces of men. . .*" Eyes on the ceiling, he seems to be deciphering the prophetic text up there. *"And they had hair as the hair of women, and their teeth were as the teeth of lions!"*

The Apocalypse!

"I recognize you! You live on the sixth floor. You're the one who writes books. . . ."

"I lived on the sixth floor, correct! But this is bigger, more comfortable. And then there's the bar, and the library as well. My word, you were a man of taste!"

"I'm looking for my wife."

"That way too, you were a man of taste! But I must tell you she's not here. When I picked your lock, it was because I knew there was nobody left in here."

"She's gone?"

He makes a vague gesture which flattens the candle-flames for a moment. "Gone with all the rest, when they passed with their loud-speakers. Idiots! Leave, to go where?"

She is gone. She didn't wait for me. She was afraid. But didn't I myself stay shut up four days in a hotel, too terrified even to open the shutters?

"What about you—you decided to stay?"

He puts on a profoundly disgusted expression. "It's because I

can't stand crowds. During the exodus, in '40, when I was a kid, too many people stepped on my feet. Morning and evening, for weeks, the crowds of people that mashed my feet! Anyhow, do you want me to tell you where they ended up, the ones who listened to the loud-speakers? In camps."

"Camps?"

"Camps, yes. Prison camps. That's what I don't understand. After that slaughter, the Shrills cared for the survivors. As soon as we stopped resisting, they stopped destroying. Curious, isn't it?"

He relights his dead cigar. "You think I've been here all this time without budging? You're mistaken. I've gone out, I've walked, I've pinched bicycles and even a car. Not to escape—to look. I've seen some things, some things. . . . What a spectacle! Have you gone down in the subway passages? There are thousands of burned Shrills. You walk in pulp up to the knees. They installed their first colonies down there. The army poured in tons of incendiary fluids through all the entrances and the air-holes. . . . You can bet, after that there was a shrilling!

"I also argued with dozens of people, soldiers, civil defense guys, chemists, biologists, scientists. . . . They were looking for something, a method. . . . Some of them talked about making contact, negotiating a settlement. Pitiful! The Shrills have never tried to

communicate. They arrive, they shrill and that's all! Some say they're organized, therefore intelligent. Oh, certainly! After all, so are the ants and the bees! But you've got to attack the problem from the other end. Imagine for a moment that in their eyes, *we're* the ants. Would it bother you much to break up an anthill with a few kicks? And did you ever think about negotiating in any way with the ants?"

He gets up, opens my bar with great ease of manner and takes out two glasses, into which he pours stingily. "I'm saving the whisky. There isn't much left. You know, actually, these Shrills interest me. What do they want? We don't even know where they come from. From one of the moons of Jupiter, a scientist claimed, the other night on the radio—before the radio stopped like everything else. But what did he know about it, *hm*? I ask you. In any case, one thing is certain: they have absolutely no interest in us as thinking beings. They don't even seem to be aware of that peculiarity of which we're so proud. They're intelligent and highly developed too, undoubtedly, but in a way so different from ours that it doesn't pay to look for points of comparison."

He points his cigar-butt at me. "Have you seen a Shrill visit just one house? Examine a machine? Try to start a car? Show any trace of curiosity in a heavy machine-

gun or a telephone booth? No. Except for the machines that brought them here, you'd think they lack even the idea of technology. Of course, I haven't forgotten the shrilling machines, the ones that knock buildings down, but who can say he's seen one? I heard a biologist remark that they could get the same results just as well by simply shrilling in chorus. So?"

He goes on talking as if to himself, getting rid of thoughts he's repeated over and over, in his hours and days of solitude. "They haven't tried to rebuild, or even occupy, damaged cities. Even the colonies in the subway were provisional. Later they were satisfied to set up their gelatinous towns out in the open fields, like heaps of yellowish cocoons, piles of insect nests. A collectivist activity, a purely functional civilization, whose standards are entirely alien to human intelligence."

He slaps his knee. "But just the same, by heaven, if they've come all this way, there's a reason for it!"

I drain my glass and get up suddenly. "I have no intention of looking for the reason here, while I jabber into a glass of whisky. I want to find my wife."

He salutes me, with a nonchalant hand at his brow. "Good luck, noble spouse! Close the door carefully as you leave."

"Those camps you were talking about—where are they?"

"At the city exits. They're not camps, properly speaking. They look more like gypsy tents, or vacationers' camp-sites. No fences, no barbed wire. They're surrounded by Shrills, that's all. I've watched one, at a distance, naturally, with a pair of field-glasses, from the top of an HLM building. The people seemed to be in good condition. There were kitchen details. Things were organized. I saw women doing their laundry in tubs, some guys playing ball. I saw kids, too."

He falls silent. In his burning eyes I see again the anguished flame they had at the beginning. "Don't ask me to go with you. I won't go. That camp with the wooden barracks, the tents, the washing on the lines, kids playing, and then all around, here and there, those goddam big grasshoppers . . ."

His shoulders shake with disgust. "Those people guarded by—by that—it was more horrible than anything else, than houses destroyed, corpses in the streets, the crazy soldiers with their hands over their ears, the stink of the subway—I don't want to see that camp again."

"If I recognize my wife there, can I get to her?"

"Oh, certainly! The Shrills are understanding, just think of it! While I was watching, up on that roof, I saw a lot of people go in, poor starved characters, attracted

by the smell of cooking. But as for getting out again . . . No, I won't go with you, even if I have to croak here of hunger and thirst."

I put my glass down, move slowly toward the door and turn. I can't help smiling. "Have you looked in the kitchen, on the top shelf of the cabinet? There must be still a full bottle there."

I didn't get as far as the camp. I met the man long before that. He was walking in the middle of the street with a self-assurance, a lack of caution, that was absolutely stupefying. His leather-visored cap, the bandolier he'd squeezed on over his overalls, the carbine he was carrying by the strap—were these really enough to give him that swaggering confidence, that complete detachment, as if he were convinced of his own invulnerability?

All the same, when I hailed him, he seized the weapon quickly and brought it up to his hip. He handled it with impressive skill.

I stepped away from the bus with the flat tires, behind which I'd hidden when I first heard his footsteps.

"What are you doing there? Aren't you in camp with the rest?" He stared at me, finger on the trigger.

"That's just it, I'm looking for the camp—my wife may be there. I've got to find her, you understand?"

He relaxes a little. His teeth show in a smile. "Are you really trying to get into a camp?"

"Into the one where I'll find my wife, yes. I've got to find her. The war is over, isn't it?"

His smile widens. "Sure, it's good and over. A long time ago! And as long as you want to go to the camp—why, I'll just take you there."

He turns, holding his weapon by the strap again. Another man, a skinny little guy with the thick glasses of the near-sighted, had just appeared at the corner of a devastated bakery. Sticking up over the shoulder of his checkered jacket, the Garand rifle seemed as huge as it was incongruous. Five others followed him, but these were weaponless, their shoulders drooping, eyes full of dull pain. They were being pushed along from behind by the barrels of machine-pistols.

"This gentleman wants to go to the camp!"

The tone of his voice chilled me. The armed men broke out into astonishing smiles; the others were staring at me with bewilderment, and the little near-sighted man let out a sort of yelp: "A volunteer! Now I've seen everything, everything!" He stamped his feet with joy.

The man with the leather visor was bowing with artificial politeness. "Will the gentleman allow himself to be searched?"

The near-sighted little guy began to go awkwardly through my pockets. He finished by taking out my billfold, examined it, closed it, then made as if to hand it back. When I went to take the billfold, it slipped through his fingers, and it almost seemed to me that he'd done it on purpose.

I bent over, feeling as if I were in the midst of a nightmare, watching myself live through a story invented by myself with God knows what goal of horrid pleasure. At the moment when I was about to pick up the billfold, somebody's foot sent me flying.

I got up. Behind the porthole-thick glasses, the nearsighted little man's eyes were like those of a fish. No more malignant, no more friendly.

Now I'm marching with the rest. The man with the leather visor walks fifty meters ahead of us across the wreckage and rubble. The nearsighted little man and his skirmishers follow us in dispersed order.

"What came over you? Are you crazy or what?" It's the man next to me, muttering between his teeth, without turning his head toward me. On the collar of his navy blue uniform are the gilded insignia of the combined transport service. To keep his hands from trembling, he's squeezing them together behind his back.

"I want to find my wife. She must be in a camp."

"My wife was at the camp too. She was there with me. Then yesterday, they came looking for her."

"The Shrills?"

"No, of course not. The Shrills don't come into the camps. They're satisfied to hang around the outside. It's these guys here that come looking for people."

"These men? I thought—"

He chuckles. "You see the little guy with the big glasses? Don't argue with him—do whatever he tells you. I saw him kill with his rifle two women, who tried to escape from camp."

A nauseating thing. I had thought the Shrills were rotten, but the Shrills aren't men. . . .

"What now? Where are they taking us?"

"I don't know. When they take away a bunch like this, you never see them again. I waited for my wife. They didn't bring her back."

"Maybe they're regrouping people in other camps? Maybe we're going to the camp where your wife is already?"

He shrugs. "You're kidding! You've seen what happened, haven't you? You've seen how those vermin destroyed everything, killed everybody in four days? You've seen these characters that are guarding us? If they're taking us someplace else, it's because it's useful to them—the Shrills. That's all."

"If that's how it really is, why not run for it?"

He turns his head toward me with a wan smile. Go ahead, try!"

At the entrance to the Winter Circus, a number of Shrills are crouching on their barbed legs. They're the first I've seen since the ones I burned this morning, in front of the hotel. I stop short, my blood frozen. It goes beyond fear—it's an unconquerable repulsion that glues my feet to the ground.

A hand pushes me between the shoulderblades; it's the little near-sighted man. "Keep going—they won't eat you!"

The other guards guffaw.

Does that curious noise come from the Circus—that whirring sound, thin and yet loud, that reminds me of the sound of crickets in the wastelands of Provence? And where does that heavy, thick, stale odor come from, that green smell? . . .

I didn't see anything at first except the circular fence set up on the outside of the track. And in that cage, a Shrill. He was standing upright, the anterior legs stiffened horizontally, and pivoting slowly around. I realized immediately why he was turning that way, and I felt the hairs prickle on the back of my neck: a man was facing him, walking slowly around him, with a saber bayonet in his hand.

I hear one of the men next to me whisper, "My God!" while our guards push us into a box. I go

closer to the railing, fascinated. Down there, the man and the Shrill are keeping their faces turned toward each other. They're both on the defensive, watching each other, waiting. Sweat is streaming down the torso of the man with the bayonet. He has leather leggings on his calves; he's a soldier. I can't tell if it's brute fear or the courage of despair that I see in his eyes. Both, maybe.

Those legs, sharp as saw-blades, have suddenly lashed the air. The man has leaped aside, with astonishing agility. A notch is cut into his bare shoulder.

The low grating sound which fills the whole Circus is suddenly amplified, and at the same instant, I see what the terrible spectacle in the cage has kept me from noticing. They are there, filling the seats, in the penumbra surrounding the track. Hundreds and hundreds of them. Almost frozen motionless, prodigiously attentive. The Shrills.

But that isn't the worst: among the Shrills I can make out men, and some women too, their faces pale with anxious pleasure, their mouths half open, eyes fixed, riveted in the same expectancy. One of them is dressed in her best. She's wearing a white hat, and a resplendent clip in the lapel of her tailored suit. I can't take my eyes off that clip.

Once more, the heavy collective vibration has turned feverish.

There's a yell from the jeweled woman. The man in the cage tears himself out of a clinch at the very moment when that parrot's beak is about to seize him by the nape. Blood spurts out of his torn back. From where I am, I can hear the whistling in his lungs.

"You're next! Get ready!" The man with the leather visor is looking at us through the railing in which we're confined. He shows his uneven teeth in an open smile.

"You can't let it go on! You can't! Don't you understand?" One of my companions, a fat man who till now has never stopped taking off his rimless glasses and putting them on again, is clinging to the bars, making them shake with his own trembling. "You can't! You're a man like us!"

The other man falls back a step. "Why can't I? It's a fair fight, isn't it? For one thing, we give you a bayonet. And then, your opponent doesn't have the right to shrill. The audience either, of course."

He adds, turning his head away: "What do you think, I invented this game?"

Others are throwing themselves on the bars too. One of them, a big young man in blue jeans, sobs hysterically and falls to his knees. Only the man in the navy-blue pea-jacket, the one who spoke to me before, remains to one side. He's pale, his nostrils are pinched; he holds himself very straight,

closing his eyes. If he weren't here, I'd grab hold of the bars too, I'd howl too, the way the rest are doing.

The murmur has suddenly turned to an intense humming, like the sound that comes from an overturned hive. I can't help looking. The soldier has managed to leap onto his enemy's back. His courage is too much for me. Why so much vitality, when there's no hope?

Then everything happens very quickly. The bayonet scythes through the air. The Shrill's head leaps like a football, while the huge trembling body, in a final spasm, sends the man rolling in the sawdust. He springs up, hurls himself back—his weapon rips open the green abdomen, which bursts and empties itself; then he attacks the corselet and splits it. But it's all over. The long, armored legs are moving only in an imperceptible, interminable shiver. The feverish humming fills my ears. I hear the voice of the man with the leather visor:

"You're in luck! It's not often that one of them gets it in the neck! When that happens, the games are postponed till the next day. Come on, get going!"

"The first days of May, they're the best for vacations. Remember the woods? The smell of the woods? The smell of leaves? Remember the squirrel in Mervent forest? The mill at the water's

edge? Remember the lost clearing, where the silence is so beautiful that it makes you weep? The only sound is that of the green woodpecker. Rap, rap! It sounds like a stubborn elf who's knocking endlessly at the door. His wife doesn't want to let him in, so he knocks, he knocks. . . . In May we'll go back there!"

So spoke Maria.

It's May, and I'm rolling across the countryside, but it's in a truck that stinks of fuel oil and sweat, packed in with strangers, men and dejected women, their eyes empty.

Those who guard us have metal helmets or cloth caps. With their weapons between their knees, they are at the same time watchful and distant, as if detached from us.

I watch them. Some are dull brutes, others half mad, still others are cowards. But they are men. Don't they understand what they're doing? I look at them, but they will not meet my gaze. I know how they react when questions are added to these looks. One of us is lying on the floor, his forehead laid open by a blow from a rifle butt.

When the truck stopped, the first thing I saw was the farmhouse. It seemed so simple, so natural with its old rough-cast walls, its untrimmed vines climbing around the garret windows, so simple and so beautiful that tears came to my eyes. But it was immured in silence, and no one

moved in the house, nor in the deserted stable, nor in the vacant barnyard. Even the doghouse was empty. On the tractor seat was a baby doll, one of those big celluloid dolls that little girls dress up in wool jumpers. It had an arm missing.

Then I looked beyond, at the fields.

"Gelatinous masses, like heaps of yellowish cocoons, piles of insect nests." That was the way my neighbor, the writer, had described the Shrill towns.

The paths we followed to get to it were hard and beaten, as if thousands of feet had trodden them before us. When the first Shrills showed themselves, a few of my companions fell to their knees and had to be dragged.

I don't think I'll ever go insane, or I would be insane now. How could we have let ourselves be pushed, dragged into the interior of . . . of what, in fact? What kind of a town are these domes joined together, piled up one on another, these hills of moist cotton, secreted no doubt by the same creatures who live in them?

Someone laughs nearby, a girl with short hair who looks around her with a happy expression, as if in a dream. That one, perhaps, has found her deliverance.

In the tunnels, the stale, viscous smell grows so thick you can almost feel it. A pale, cold daylight, without brilliance, springs from

no visible source, maybe just from these fibrous walls which, when you bump into them accidentally—and not without repulsion—deposit on your sleeves cottony, gluey particles, feebly luminous.

Other guards have replaced the first ones, and there are Shrills with them now. We walk, but we no longer know where we're going. Some are crying soundlessly, but they don't know they're crying. Are we really living through this, have we forgotten who we are?

The tunnels cross and multiply without ever rising or descending. And why should we be surprised when we cross that larger gallery, as big as a subway station, with walls pierced by a thousand cells? Why should we be surprised if, in each one of these cells, an oblong form is stretched out, enveloped as in a cocoon by that cottony, gluey substance? We're no longer of this world, are we?

They don't move, but their eyes are open. They don't speak, their features are frozen, but in their pupils shines the wavering spark of life. Horror and despair, incredulity, hatred and madness.

More tunnels. More cells. Hundreds, thousands of cells, and then the end. Time is suddenly suspended. Silence, and the waiting Shrills.

Their bellies are gigantic, swollen to the bursting point. These are the females. The first days of May . . . egg-laying time.

Why does that old man suddenly begin to struggle, and that woman with the dyed hair, too? Since three guards can hold them easily? Since the sting of the female Shrill is so quick? Since ankylosis and paralysis, in a few minutes at most, will seize their numbed members, their defeated muscles, leaving only the vital organs functioning, and the brain clear?

That blonde hair, spread out on the floor of a cell, is like Maria's hair, and those golden eyes that stare at me are like Maria's eyes. This blonde woman looking at me, entangled in her nightmare, frozen with horror—does she already feel inside her the slow working of incubation? How long has she been there, and how many little Shrills will be born inside her, to feed on her, before they emerge from her torn flesh into the gray light of the tunnels?

I've found you, Maria. For you might easily be Maria, mightn't you? Do you want to be? You're of my race and you're my wife, and I've searched for you and found you. The Shrills don't understand what we are. The Shrills keep us in camps the way we keep herds on the range, but we're not cattle. The Shrills lead us to combat like bulls in the ring, but we're men, just the same. The Shrills store us

and pile us up the way wasps store up their provision of flies for the winter, but we're not flies. And the female Shrills lay their eggs in us and leave us to be devoured alive by their little ones, but in spite of everything you are Maria and I'm the one you loved. The Shrills don't understand that, never will understand it and that's why we're greater than the Shrills, Maria.

Two guards take me by the elbows. I point with my chin toward the shadow from which the wide-open golden eyes are still staring at me.

"Next to that one is where I want to be!"

"All right," says one of the two without looking at me. And he adds, with an odd catch in his voice, "You realize, we're not responsible!"

Not responsible? No, of course not. No one is responsible, or else everyone is.

The man who drank my whisky had it by heart: "*And the shapes of the locusts were like unto horses prepared unto battle. . . . And their faces were as the faces of men. . . . And they had hair as the hair of women, and their teeth were as the teeth of lions . . .*"

The female Shrill is coming nearer . . . She doesn't even seem horrible to me.

