

## THE TOWER OF DESTINY:

### *A Story of Events That Did Not Happen*

#### *Foreword*

One day, following the advice of one of our wittiest and most charming writers, Jules Lecomte<sup>1</sup> I shall publish a book entitled *My Feverish Nights*. Those nights have a special kind of dreams, a phantasmagoria of Chinese shadows, that other nights lack. The *aegri somnia* is more fantastic than the *bene valentis somnium*. Fever is the mother of imagination.

In the meantime, here is a succession of dreams that are the offspring of health. I ought to tell you that I have a privilege—perhaps I'm flattering myself but the word is written and I don't have time to erase it; my indefatigable publisher, Michel Lévy, is waiting. Perhaps everyone has my privilege, in which case it no longer exists. Judge for yourself.

When I begin an interesting dream, I continue it. If two nights are insufficient, I take four, five or ten. I divide it into chapters; I put bookmarks on my pillow. The next episode follows on. Those sorts of dreams have a reasonably physiognomy, and make me see things as they are; there is not that crazy incoherence that leads you to the altar with a young blonde and leaves you, in the nuptial chamber, with a white-haired old woman smiling at you. These dreams, in chapters, don't play you such nasty tricks; they have a relentless common sense; they begin methodically, at the beginning, and guide you, by way of logical deductions, to the end.

However, it is necessary not to abuse these sensible dreams too much; one might as well not go to sleep. One only dreams to continue wakefulness. The absurd has its charm, and one does not marry old women every night.

One day, I saw an artillery regiment filing along the Boulevard du Temple, which was returning to Vincennes with its cannon. The artillerymen were young, vigorous and well-equipped. The canon were shining in the sunlight like gold. I don't know why, but I made this remark to Monsieur Féraud: "If only Bonaparte had had those men and those cannon at Saint-Jean-d'Acre, eh?"<sup>2</sup>

Monsieur Féraud is an industrialist and an accredited national guardsman. He stared at me and said: "Well, what?"

I understood the error that I had committed, in communicating my reflection to a pacifist who did not care about Saint-Jean-d'Acre, and refused any explanation.

Fortunately, the omnibus that goes along the boulevard passed in front of us, not full, and Monsieur Féraud leapt aboard.

Left alone, I communicated to myself the explanation refused to Monsieur Féraud; if it had evaporated in the atmosphere of the boulevard, in the deaf ear of an excessively pacifist interlocutor, it would have lost the degree of concentration that excites the fibers of the brain and predisposes them to the vagabondage of the imagination. The process is obscure; if I had the time, I would make it clearer; but then it would seem less profound to serious men.

In 1799, I said to myself, Bonaparte launched sixty attacks on Saint-Jean-d'Acre and did not capture it. There was a tower there, nicknamed the Accursed—an infernal tower—that resisted everything. The French had poor Turkish cannon, captured at Jaffa; the English had captured ours. Those Turkish cannon made breaches, but they were sealed. A renegade French engineer was directing operations in the city. Sidney Smith, who subsequently became a philanthropist and invented a mechanical seed-drill, was in command of two vessels, *Tiger* and *Theseus*, and peppered the bank with

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<sup>1</sup> Jules Lecomte (1814-1864) had a career and interests very similar to Méry's, working as a journalist and travel-writer, with particular interests in French maritime history and antiquities. He quarrelled violently with Méry's friend Alexandre Dumas, but that does not seem to have affected his friendship with Méry.

<sup>2</sup> The port of Acre, now in northern Israel, was renamed "St. John of Acre" when it was taken by the crusaders; the expanded name never caught on in English but was sternly retained in French. I have retained the French version because it seems more appropriate to the story.

an inexhaustible prodigality of musket-fire.<sup>3</sup> In brief, it was necessary to lift the siege after the sixtieth attack, and Bonaparte pronounced these words, which no one nearby understood: “The fate of the world is in that tower.”

Bonaparte had despaired of the Occident, like Alexander of Macedon—and like him, too, he wanted to reawaken the civilization asleep in the fabulous realm of the great Indian domain that extends from the Himalayas to the cape of Ceylon, and which was, in the earliest ages, the cradle of the arts, the sciences and poetry, because it was the cradle of the sun. In 1799 a struggle was engaged between the sultans of India and England; Tippoo-Sahib appealed for help to Bonaparte, but Bonaparte, held at Saint-Jean-d’Acre, did not succeed in reaching Bengal, and reluctantly let India’s cry of distress expire in its deserts.

If Saint-Jean-d’Acre had been taken, another history would obviously have commenced, and nothing that we have read or seen would have happened. Bonaparte would have become Emperor of India, and Lord Cornwallis would not have invaded Mysore. History would not have recorded Marengo, nor Austerlitz, not Friedland. Moscow would not have burned. Waterloo would have retained its anonymity. St. Helena would not have made the acquaintance of the imperial Prometheus. The accursed tower of Saint-Jean-d’Acre was the tower of destiny, *Turris fatidica*.

Now, on that day, having entertained these thoughts without communicating them expansively to an interlocutor, I went home with a veritable despair in my heart.

There are professors of the humanities who exhale poignant regrets from their chairs at the idea that Hannibal did not march on Rome after the battle of Cannes. Those professors cannot console themselves; one might think that they would have gained something from that march by Hannibal, and that their university salaries would have been doubled. I resemble those professors somewhat myself; my regrets nevertheless seem to me to be more legitimate. I have never shed tears over the delights of Capua, but I am profoundly saddened by the check at Saint-Jean-d’Acre, the loss of India and the defeat of our heroic ally the Sultan of Mysore.

A touch of the Indian sun put me to sleep in the midst of those thoughts, and in a series of dreams enlightened by Bengal fire I saw a whole other French history, beginning with the sixty-first and victorious attack on Saint-Jean-d’Acre and ending with Bonaparte’s triumphant entry into Tippoo Sahib’s capital.<sup>4</sup> One consoles oneself with dreams, and the lies of one’s nights often compensate us for the verities of our days.

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<sup>3</sup> Méry does not mention that the “renegade engineer” in question, Antoine Phélippeaux, had been at military school with Bonaparte, where the two conceived a mutual loathing that was almost settled by a duel. After the Revolution, when Phélippeaux emigrated to England, the personal enmity seems to have lingered. It was Phélippeaux who liberated Sidney Smith from prison in Paris, by means of an exploit worthy of the Scarlet Pimpernel, thus enabling the two of them to lend Djeddar Pasha much-needed support at Acre against Bonaparte. Bonaparte later said of Smith that “That man made me miss my destiny”—thus lending some encouragement to the central thesis of Méry’s story—but he might equally well have said it of Phélippeaux, who paid with his life for the defense of Acre, dying there of the plague not long after Bonaparte’s withdrawal. The comment about Smith’s seed-drill is a trifle churlish; his philanthropic endeavors were mostly associated with his stern opposition to slavery.

<sup>4</sup> The story is actually anachronistic in more ways than one. Bonaparte’s siege was not abandoned until May 20, by which time Tippoo Sahib was already dead (in our history), having been killed at Seringapatam on May 4. Méry must have known that, but presumably chose to overlook it, in the interests of the story. In a more general sense, France had effectively given up its last hope of building an empire in India in the treaty signed to end the third Carnatic War in 1763; from then on, the English were effectively mopping up (although they never did quite mop up Afghanistan, whose stubborn fighters put up infinitely more effective resistance than those imagined by Méry).

Sergeant Lamanon, a prisoner in Saint-Jean-d'Acre, had obtained permission to walk for an hour every day on the ramparts. The day after the sixtieth attack, Lamanon, despairing of deliverance, measured the height of the wall with his eyes. It was about seventy feet above the level of the ditch; there was little chance of finding his salvation in such a fall. Hesitation was permissible, as on the Baron des Adrets' platform.<sup>5</sup>

At the same moment, two Turkish sentinels advanced to the edge of the rampart in order to watch the maneuvers of the two English vessels *Tiger* and *Theseus*, commanded by Sidney Smith. A sudden idea occurred to the imprisoned sergeant, and he made a mental calculation of patriotic proportion. *There are two of them, and one of me; there is, therefore, a fifty per cent benefit to France.* Thinking thus, the sergeant vigorously grabbed hold of the two sentinels and dragged them with him in his fall. Three bodies fell together to the foot of the rampart. Two did not get up again; Lamanon got away with a slight sprain, and got back of Bonaparte's camp easily enough, under a hail of bullets that escorted him harmoniously but did not reach him.

The rumor of that escape, and the mathematical calculation that had prompted it, soon spread throughout the camp.

The young Joachim Murat, deeply touched by the sergeant's heroic action, took him to the tent of the commander-in-chief, and there the brave Lamanon, while giving a simple account of his escape, gave many precious details about the condition of the besieged town. He affirmed that the engineer Phélippeaux had been wounded the day before; that Commodore Sidney Smith, by virtue of lavishing his vessels' ammunition on the shore, had only one round of cartridges left; that the garrison, weakened by its numerous daily losses, was only sustained by the terror inspired by the ferocious Djeddar Pasha; and, finally, that the Accursed Tower, pierced all the way through, ought to crumble under one last effort of the artillerymen.

Sergeant Lamanon received General Bonaparte's felicitations, and on leaving the tent he was surrounded by his comrades, eager to hear the same story and the same details.

At that moment, Kléber, Murat, Eugène Beauharnais and Lannes were at Bonaparte's side, and they made twenty mental conjectures regarding the meditative silence that the young general maintained after Lamanon had told his story.

Suddenly, Junot came in and said: "General the men of my advance guard are ready. When the first star rises this evening, we'll be on the road to Jaffa."

Bonaparte made an abrupt movement, and extended his right hand, as if he wanted to halt that advance guard. "Junot," he said, "You're not leaving."

A murmur of astonishment ran around the tent.

"That surprises you, my friends," Bonaparte added. "In war, one sometimes changes one's mind. We're not leaving."

Murat jumped for joy and cried: "Very good, Bonaparte! That's a superb idea! The other day, I almost took Saint-Jean-d'Acre by myself. We're fifteen thousand strong; we'll take it."

"I hope so," said Bonaparte, with a serious smile. "That's why we're not leaving." He pointed to the west. "Our business no longer lies in that direction. Destiny is driving us toward other lands. Our fleet has been annihilated at Aboukir. Mustapha Pasha has arrived from Constantinople with a fresh army, and will join up with Mourad Bey, whom Desaix cannot hold for long in Upper Egypt. The road to France is closed; Nelson holds the sea, and Commodore Sidney Smith will serve as his scout.

"Our boats are burned. Alexander the Great and Fernand Cortès burned their own. Thus, one was forced to defeat Porus and take Lahore; the other vanquished Montezuma and took Mexico. Fleets are an obstacle to great conquests; they chain you to a shore. Our feet are free. Like Themistocles' Athenians, 'we have only to find our salvation in wooden walls.' Let's take Saint-Jean-D'Acre, and then seek the footprints of Alexander; they're imprinted in the desert.

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<sup>5</sup> The Baron des Adrets was a 16th century Huguenot leader famed for his cruelty in persecuting Catholics, who subsequently converted to Catholicism, presumably for political reasons, in the final phase of an extremely turbulent career.

“As I said to you, in showing you the Accursed Tower, *the fate of the world is in that tower!* The Orient is appealing to the Occident; the sovereign of Mysore, Hyder Ali, the Mahrattes and the people of the Deccan have been appealing to France since the English took Pondicherry in 1761; Tippoo Sahib, the son of Hyder Ali, has continued his father’s work and made the same vows. Let’s go visit the cradle of the sun; we’ll go back to France when the advocates of the Directoire are no longer talking.”

An unprecedented enthusiasm burst forth among Bonaparte’s young lieutenants; their heroic hands closed on the hilts of their sabers; their eyes darted flames toward the promised Orient.

Junot cried: “Now we need my dromedary squadron, which I tried out in the battle of Mont Tabor; there are riding dromedaries in the vicinity; I’ll fill the empty spaces, and I request, General, to be maintained in my command.”

Only the sage Berthier retained a cool attitude—which did not escape Bonaparte’s penetrating eye.

“My dear Berthier,” he said, with a charming softness, “I believe I know what you’re thinking; you’re making calculations. I can see the mathematical lines on your forehead. Well, don’t worry. We have unity; we shall find the zeroes. Our army comprises fifteen thousand men. You think we can’t go far with that number. Wrong! We can go anywhere. The zeroes await us. Mithridates, in his plan of campaign, counted on the Dacians, the Panonnians and the Germans. Hannibal had scarcely twenty thousand Africans at Sagonte; he had a quarter of a million men at Cannes. The Iberians, the Gauls, the Ligurians and the Etruscans had joined the Carthaginians. Fernand Cortès had only six hundred Spaniards and fifteen horses, but with his Uacalan auxiliaries he fought twenty-five thousand Mexicans at the battle of Ottumba, which opened the doors of Mexico to him.

Berthier nodded his head, smiling, and appeared to yield to these historical demonstrations..

“Eugène,” said Bonaparte, “go give my orders to the engineers immediately; after sunset, it’s necessary that they repair the Dufalga battery and the Rampon battery with the greatest urgency. The decisive blow will depart from there. You, my friends, steep yourselves in my thoughts and prepare the minds of the soldiers for the great things we shall accomplish.”

The young hero, left alone and wanting to prepare for a long night, lay down on a heap of dry maize-leaves and soon went to sleep, in order to continue his beautiful dream of the Orient.

The next day, at dawn, two unmasked batteries commenced a terrible fire against the tower, which collapsed like a chess-piece, dragging part of the rampart down as it fell, and thus opened a vast breach, impossible to fill in. When the gusts of the south wind carried the smoke of the artillery out to sea, they saw the interior of the town and the parvis of the great mosque inundated with women and children. At the same moment, the drums and clarions sounded the charge. Murat, Kléber, Lannes, Junot and Eugène Beauharnais set themselves at the head of the assault columns.

The simoom seemed to carry our soldiers forward on its wings of flame. The floodgate was finally broken, and a living flood surged over a hill of rubble. It extinguished all the fires; it uprooted the obstacles; it swept away the weapons from the strongest hands. Thus, the town was finally invaded, in a matter of hours, and Bonaparte finally held the key to the Orient, so long disputed by a kind of infernal power.

Bonaparte installed himself in Djezzar’s palace, whose terraces overlooked the harbor and the sea. From there one could see Sidney Smith’s two vessels heading out to sea under full sail to avoid the fire of our artillery, already positioned in the fort’s batteries.

Djezzar Pasha had been killed on the breach. Phélippeaux and four other renegades had disappeared. The inhabitants, reassured by a proclamation by Bonaparte, welcomed the victors hospitably. The Muslims, who expected, after such a long siege, to be subjected to all the horrors destined for towns taken by storm, blessed the young Christian general who ordered that the mosques and harems be respected, and protected their houses and wives. The rumor of that magnanimous generosity did not expire within the walls of Saint-Jean-d’Acre; it was to expand everywhere and prepare favorable results for the expedition.

Bonaparte had before his eyes at that moment the two venerable towers of a palace much more ancient than Djezzar’s, and pointed them out to his lieutenants, saying:

“Louis IX has preceded us here; there’s the palace in which the hero of Damiette and Mansourah resided some five hundred and fifty years ago. That’s where he waited for a ship in order to return to France after his first captivity. What a glorious history ours is! Louis IX had also dreamed of the

conquest of the Orient. From 1095, when the first crusade was preached at Clermont in the Auvergne by Pope Urban VI, until 1270, the efforts of France were turned against the Orient six times. The time has come to collect the harvest sown by our ancestors and watered with their blood. Joinville relates that the Sultan granted Louis IX permission to make a pilgrimage from Saint-Jean-d'Acre to Jerusalem. We shall make ours too, and too bad for the children of Voltaire who will criticize us! A Bonaparte, my ancestor, fought courageously for Pope Clement VII during the siege of Rome; it shall not be said that his descendant passed through the Holy Land without visiting Jerusalem. We shall begin our voyage there; that will be our first stopping-point. Afterwards, the star of the Magi will be ours; it will guide us on the high road to the Orient. I believe in my star more than ever."<sup>6</sup>

Bonaparte's young lieutenants did not share profoundly in his vast oriental dream, but they would have followed him to the ends of the Earth without worrying about the goal, so great was their confidence in him. Bonaparte completed the excitement of their imagination by adding: "The day after the Battle of the Pyramids, remember, Murat, Eugène, Kléber, Junot, Lannes, Desaix and I left Cairo on horseback; the heat was excessive; your uniforms of thick cloth and your fur hats were a great inconvenience, for it was a matter of scaling the pyramid of Cheops to the summit. Half way up the monument, you adjusted your clothing—or, to put it more accurately, stripped down to your underclothes. It would have been impossible, you said, to climb any higher with your northern equipment. We called a halt."

Desaix took over, saying: "Alexander the Great, Parmenion, Ephestion and Clitus climbed that pyramid, like us, three hundred and thirty years before the Christian Era. Macedonian armor and helmets were even heavier than our uniforms, and I wondered whether they stripped off, as we did."

"Then I said to Desaix: 'Alexander climbed much higher in the Macedonian uniform; he reached the Indus.'

"'We shan't go as high as that,' Desaix said.

"'Why not?' I said to him.

"'Well, in that case,' he said, 'we'll wear the costume of the Indus.'

"'Certainly, we'll take it,' said Kléber. 'Alexander the Great was born in a hot country; if he'd been born in Strasbourg, like me, he wouldn't have reached the Indus in the golden helmet and breastplate he wore at the siege of Oxidraka...'

"Today, my friends," Bonaparte added, "I'm reminding you of that conversation on the pyramid to enjoin you to discuss between yourselves the reform of our costume and headgear. You'll adopt what seems to you to be appropriate for this long and ardent expedition. We shan't stop mid-way up the pyramid; let's go all the way to the summit."

From that moment on, there was a great activity of preparation in Saint-Jean-d'Acre. The soldiers, initiated into the secret of the new expedition, redoubled the ardor of their labor, each in the specialty of his primary profession, in order to hasten the moment of departure that would launch them on the road to the Indian unknown. They carefully reestablished the fortifications dismantled by the long siege, for not all of them were to follow Bonaparte; five hundred men, chosen from among the youngest and less nimble, were reserved to occupy Saint-Jean-d'Acre and defend it against any attack from land or sea.

The soldiers' new costumes bore no resemblance to the vestments of the Macedonians; they were reminiscent of the Albanian and Greek militias. Every man carried a light rolled-up cloak that would serve for crossing mountains and would often be useful during wet nights in hot climates.

Before leaving they waited for the arrival of Christian from the valley of Lebanon and the division that Desaix had brought from Upper Egypt. Those two reinforcements were welcomed with equal joy. Denon accompanied Desaix and brought his treasure of Egyptian antiquities with him.

"My dear Denon," Bonaparte said to him, "your work is magnificent, but I'm going to take you into a country where you'll find better things than Tentyris and Luxor."

Only Desaix manifested a slight hesitation, or at least some scruple; he wanted to know whether the Directoire had approved the new expedition. Bonaparte took Desaix aside and said to him: "The Directoire is treating me as the senate of Carthage treated Hannibal. The Directoire won't send me a

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<sup>6</sup> The author inserts a footnote: "*Vidimus enim stellam ejus in oriente* (Gospel of the Epiphany)" The quotation is taken from the Vulgate Bible's version of the gospel according to St. Matthew; the English equivalent is "We have seen a star in the East."

single soldier or ship. If Hannibal, instead of finding himself at Tarente, with Sicily or Greece ahead of him, had found himself at the gates of India, like me, he wouldn't have ended up dying stupidly in the home of Prusias, king of Bythina, from whom he had requested hospitality as an exile. Europe is old; the oriental lands are still young; glory is everywhere. Let's give France the département of the sun. The Directoire will weave crowns for us when we've succeeded.

The austere Desaix made a sign of assent and said to Bonaparte: "You're the commander-in-chief; I obey you. I'm already converted."

The next day, the French army, twenty thousand strong and provisioned with every kind of munitions and food-supplies, set off to march to Jerusalem. The fanfares sent the triumphal air of Grétry's *Caravane* to echo from the mountains of Garizim and Carmel.

They stopped for a while in Samaria, where the last crest of the Carmel expires, and at Emmaus, immortalized by all the immortal painters. Then they crossed the final summits that separate ancient Nicopolis from Jerusalem, and at sunrise, Bonaparte bowed in salute to the holy city, which appeared on the horizon. Immediately, the sons of the soldiers of Godefroy and Louis IX cried "Jerusalem!" as their ancestors had, and presented arms to the cupola of the Holy Sepulcher and the distant crest of Golgotha.

## II

The expedition had been blessed in Jerusalem; Godefroy's holy spur had touched Bonaparte's horse. They left the vestiges of the crusades behind, following in the footsteps of Alexander, who had also bowed to Jerusalem.

Enriched by the immense treasures of Djezzar, Pasha of Saint-Jean-d'Acre, our soldiers, on arriving at Damascus, bought superb weapons, of which that city is the eternal arsenal. Murat and Junot experiences the joy of Achilles at Scyros, and added to their traveling panoplies the curved sabers that cut silk cushions and iron lances in two.

The inhabitants of Damascus, delighted by the generosity of an army that could have taken anything but bought everything, accompanied Bonaparte as far as the paved road that leads to Ephesus, under vaults of trees and flowers.

From Ephesus, where the army rested, Bonaparte set out, with Desaix, Denon and a few cavalymen, to salute the noble cadaver of Palmyra. At the sight of the silent plain that was the noisy city of Zenobia, Bonaparte said to Desaix: "It's sad to think that there are people stifling in our European cities, where the people rise up to demand air and sunlight, while there are stones lying idle here with which to build a new Paris in a delightful land! We shall repopulate this void."

The army then crossed the Euphrates near Circesium and entered the land of Mesopotamia. Nineveh was soon revealed, with its hills of ruins and its solemn desolation. Every time they arrived on august terrain, Bonaparte dictated a page to Berthier, which, swiftly printed and distributed to the soldiers as a verse of their poem, told them of the things once accomplished in those places. Before Nineveh, the army was touched to read, at the foot of the order of the heroic day, the quotation of the prophecy of Jonah: *Within forty days, Nineveh will be destroyed!*

From Nineveh, they set out to march to Arbela, and there our soldiers saluted enthusiastically the battlefield of Alexander and Darius.

They descended into Assyria and followed the banks of the Euphrates as far as the ruins of Babylon. Since leaving Jerusalem they had only halted for one day and one night; they stayed for three days between the Tigris and the Euphrates in order to visit the ancient domain of Semiramis religiously. The bulletin dictated to Berthier had a verse of the Bible for its epithet: *Super flumina Babylonis sedimus...*<sup>7</sup>

That evening, Bonaparte, Murat, Junot, Desaix and Denon were sitting up late in the same tent, open to the breezes of the Euphrates, and Murat, in response to a sign from Junot, shook the beautiful leonine mane of his hair and said to Bonaparte: "General, we've been passing through lands for some time in which a great many battles have been fought, and we've found none for us. Our army is a mere caravan; we're no longer soldiers but voyagers. What has become of the sons of those fathers who fought so well here?"

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<sup>7</sup> The opening words of Psalm 137: "By the waters of Babylon we sat down..."

“Be patient, my dear Murat,” Bonaparte said. “Your Damascene weapons will be useful to you. The voyagers will become soldiers again.”

“It’s just that it’s cruel,” said Junot, “to follow in the footsteps of Alexander and not to find the shadow of a Darius. When I was told that we were coming to Arbela, I put my hand on the hilt of my sword, for it seemed impossible to pass through Arbela without at least a cavalry charge.”

“My friends,” said Bonaparte, “Since Damascus we’ve followed Alexander the Great, but we haven’t arrived at his Pillars of Hercules.”

“But he died in Babylon, at which we’ve arrived!” said Junot.

“Yes,” Bonaparte replied, “he died in Babylon, but on the way back. We’re following his campaign into the ancient kingdoms of Taxile and Porus.”

“Those people,” said Murat, “still seem to me not to have left any children, like Darius.”

“Ask Denon,” Bonaparte added. “Denon, you can tell us about Alexander.”

“On the contrary,” said Denon. “Taxile and Porus have left innumerable children; once they called themselves the Oxidrachians, the Ossadians, the Sibes, the Catheans and the Assaceniens; today, there is Afghanistan, Kabul, Punjab and the Kingdom of Lahore. All these lands of Taxile and Porus are more populous than before; the men there are brave and strong.”

“Ah!” said Junot. “So much the better!”

“And if we go as far as the limit known as the twelve altars of Alexander,” Denon continued, “I believe that we’ll have to fight, as under Taxile and Porus.”

“Good!” said Junot. “Now, I’d like to know why Alexander stopped at his twelve altars.”

“That was the young hero’s great despair,” Denon went on. “It appears that his soldiers refused to go any further. He was certainly not a man to stop voluntarily at the limits of his beautiful oriental dream; he was thirty-two years old, and he was ambitious; he divined Bengal and the islands of the Indian Ocean; his ardent imagination suspected the existence of a new world, of which he wanted to be the conqueror and the king. He looked with scorn upon the meager Italian peninsula, the narrow Peloponnese, the pale banks of the Euxine; he glimpsed Asia Major, and for one side of the globe he anticipated Christopher Columbus. What Alexander lacked was an army worthy of him. He didn’t want to survive the extinction of his dream; he turned violent hands against himself, and died in Babylon like Sardanapalus, in the flames of orgies and feasting.

“We would have followed him,” said Junot.

Bonaparte thanked Junot for such well-disguised flattery, shook his hand and said: “If Alexander had had the soldiers and generals of the Pyramids and Tabor, he would have changed the face of the world and left nothing great to do thereafter. His Macedonians were good enough soldiers against the effeminate Persians. With all due respect to Denon, Alexander did cast a glance one day toward Italy, in the time of the consulate of Papirius Cursor, but he soon changed his mind and understood that Darius would be easier to vanquish than the Roman consul.”

Denon persisted in his opinion and added: “Judge him by yourself, General Bonaparte. You’ve fought a brilliant campaign in Italy, ennobling by your victories a few of the names of the vulgar geography of the bourgeois map; you’ve crossed the Lombard rivers that a hundred general, our compatriots, have crossed. Well, your Oriental glory already eclipses your Occidental radiance. The Nile, the Pyramids and Mont Tabor have given you the ancient and holy aureole that made a hero a demigod. Now look what awaits you on Indian soil! What are the streams of Italy compared with the Indus and the Ganges? What are Venice and the Adriatic compared with Calcutta and its Ocean? That’s what Alexander had understood, what he had dreamed—that which you alone can accomplish!”

“Alone...with my army,” said Bonaparte, smiling. “I agree with your opinion.”

It is with those sorts of conversations that the leisure-time of halts was taken up. A host of soldiers and young officers surrounded the general’s tent on those occasions; they listened religiously, and nothing thereafter could have made the army forget what Bonaparte and his lieutenants had said.

On the fourth day, before sunrise, the Catholic monks of Mont Liban celebrated mass in the ruins of the temple of Belus, and the army resumed its march, heading for Susa.

After leaving Susa, Alexander had followed the River Euleus as far as the lake of Chaldea. The King of Macedonia knew his roads; he knew how to take advantage of all the accidents of the terrain, in order not to exhaust his army, and by dint of intelligence, he always divined the favorable path when he came into unknown territory. Thus, Bonaparte, who knew Alexander’s itinerary admirably, did not hesitate to take the River Euleus for his guide, which would take him to the Persian Gulf on the

borders of ancient Chaldea. That journey pleased the soldiers, who thus savored without interruption the coolness of trees and water, and found delightful encampments. Denon did not fail to remark on the admirable clarity of the nights and the splendidly starry sky that had revealed astronomy to the first Chaldean shepherds.

Xenophon, in relating with so much charm the retreat of the Ten Thousand, speaks of the delirious joy that burst forth among the Greeks when, after having traversed so many barbaric lands, especially the formidable ravines of Chalybes, they finally discovered the sea from the height of the crest of Teches and the mountains of Colchis. In intelligent and far-ranging armies there are traditions of enthusiasm that the passage of centuries cannot interrupt. Thus, the sixth hussars—who had clapped their hands before the colossi of Memnon as the Romans of Mutius' tenth legion had under Diocletian—on finding themselves the advance guard on the road to India, greeted the Persian Gulf with a great cry of joy, as Xenophon's soldiers had on seeing the Euxine.

At that cry, Junot, with his squadron of Syrian dromedaries, and Murat, with his cavalry, climbed the last hill alongside the Euleus. The entire army followed, and twenty thousand voices saluted the splendid sheet of azure and gold that sparkled on the horizon like the mirror of the Indian skies.

Bonaparte, surrounded by his lieutenants, said to them with an entirely new emotion:

“My friends, there is the road to Malabar and Mysore; there, thirty years ago, cries of distress rose up toward France, but the noise of our civil discord drowned them out. Colonies and principles perished. To the left, we have the ancient kingdoms of Taxile and Porus. Opposite is the port to which Alexander gave his name. Overhead shines a sun that has given birth to the great civilizations of the Carnatic and Java, the ancestors of Egypt and Greece. There before you is the cradle of the wisdom of the world; France, which has opened the gates of the Orient six times in the last five centuries, has merited the conquest of those plains, those archipelagoes, those oceans and gulfs, where civilization is extinct, where the sun alone has conserved its light, where life will reappear everywhere in the wind arriving from the Occident.”

The entire army understood then the great mission with which it was charged, and the meaning of the memorable words pronounced in before Saint-Jean-d'Acre—“The fate of the world is in that tower!”—was evident to everyone.

They resumed marching immediately, with an ardor that the proximity of an objective seemed to increase, and after further fatigues, heroically endured, they arrived one evening at the ancient part of Apostona, before Alexander's Isle.

The locale was almost deserted; a few sparse houses and huts attracted the gaze at first, but the soldiers of the advance guard, on examining the port, discovered with an unparalleled surprise a tricolor flag rising up in the midst of the masts of fishing-boats. That curious news was immediately relayed to Bonaparte, who did not manifest any astonishment, as he had expected some such encounter. In fact, there was nothing extraordinary about it. At that time, the Indian seas played host to many French corsairs, who always took their leaves far from enemy possessions. It was, therefore, a compatriot corsair sheltering in the deserted harbor of Apostona.

A few moments later, all doubts were clarified. Three young mariners, whose attitude expressed an unequalled amazement, came to meet the advance guard and greeted them in a language they all understood. They embraced one another, in expectation of introductions, and when the name of Bonaparte was pronounced, the three sailors uttered a cry of joy.

The one that seemed to be the leader exclaimed: “We were expecting him! We've all been expecting him, and for a long time. Personally, I was convinced that he'd come! Where is he? Take me to him; I have many things to tell him. We've come from over there.” And he pointed at the horizon of Malabar.

The corsair was taken to Bonaparte, who gave him a very friendly welcome, and asked him for information regarding the situation in Bengal.

“Oh, General,” said the mariner, “things are not going very well. Why didn't you come when the Bailiff of Suffren asked Versailles for help, in the name of Tippoo-Sahib? It's said that you were amusing yourselves making revolutions—it's here that revolutions needed to be made! Anyway, the harm is done; let's not talk about it anymore. In Bengal, we had the support of the Mahrattes; they've abandoned us. What can you expect? The Mahrattes are not at fault. People said to them: the French will come, the French will come—but the French never arrived. They were making revolutions. Then the Mahrattes didn't want to hear any more mention of us. We need allies in India, though—where can



we get them? I think that the Sultan of Kabul or the King of the Sikhs might easily become our auxiliaries. They have good soldiers, and if we had them with us, we wouldn't miss the Mahrattes and our former allies in the Deccan."

Bonaparte thanked the corsair and said: "We'll have a great deal to ask you, but what you've just told me is interesting. Stay here."

Junot shook his head and said to Bonaparte: "If Taxile and Porus want to be our fiends, with who shall we fight?"

Bonaparte extended his right hand toward Junot, with a gesture that signified: *Wait!*