

CHAPTER I

The negro orchestra—they were all the rage in the great restaurants of Paris in 1950—was concluding the frenzied andante rhythm of the first act of *Yolulu*, a Chinese opera that was said to surpass the most beautiful French works, and which, in any case, manifested for alert minds the long-foreseen realization of the yellow peril. One of the musicians—the one who had been blowing an ophicleide with the greatest force—detached himself from the group of black contortionists and slipped between the tables to pick up the gold coins earned by the noise with which he had just stunned the customers.

He was a superb fellow, who might have been thought to be made of bronze. His primitive legs, clad in narrow bright red trousers and his orangutan back, espoused by his tight green waistcoat, excited the covetousness of all the bejeweled young female diners. What amused them the most, however, was his skill in catching the coins that they threw in his mouth. He collected them with such a flash of his white teeth that the generosity of the women, spurred by a competitive ostentation, went beyond measure. Fifty louis were engulfed in that natural alms-box.

At one of the tables at the back, two men indifferent to the banal spectacle were smoking and chatting. One of them, the older, looked slight out of place in the elegant milieu. Dressed, as was his companion, in a heliotrope suit with a square-cut shirt-front, according to the latest fashion, he appeared to be about fifty years of age, of medium height, with a protruding abdomen and massive short and slightly twisted legs. His face, lustrous with acne, was hidden behind a bushy gray beard, so abundant that the luminosity of his large nose was scarcely visible, while a bald spot, encircled by a crown of hair that was still black, seemed astonishing, like a desert succeeding the vegetation of a fecund plain. In spite of that hirsute appearance, however, one immediately experienced a sympathy for his physiognomy, simultaneously wild and humorous, his rubicund complexion, the delicacy of his cloudy and weary blue eyes and the more accentuated brown bushiness of his eyebrows.

The other diner contrasted with him by virtue of the powerful and harmonious beauty of his twenty-eight years and the distinction of his bearing. Although a temporary infirmity forced him to keep one of his arms in a sling, he revealed vigorous muscles, broad shoulders and a slim build. Nothing affirmed his grace and strength as much as the charming and energetic contours of his face, where one might have thought that the pale brown beard, vaporous over the lips, stiff and pointed at the chin, reflected its ardent color in the delicate profile of the nose, the clear and lively expression of the green eyes and the abundance of his naturally curly hair, darker brown in color. Sometimes his gaze strove to pierce the blue spirals of the smoke, and then filled with a mirage particular to those whose heart is supporting the offense of a chagrin; immediately returning it to the door to the room, however, he kept watch on every entrance and exit. Such an evident preoccupation attracted the reproaches of his companion.

“Come on, my dear Marcel, will you give up looking outside now?”

“What if H el ene were to appear, though? Tell me, Choumaque, what should I do?”

Choumaque slid his hands toward his belt to hitch up his trousers, although they had no reason to fall. It was a tic that instinctively accompanied every anxiety of his thought. Then, chewing his almost-extinct cigar, which was yellowing his beard, he said: “My friend, I’m a Stoic philosopher, a disciple of the great Seneca. In addition, I have, as you know, created a doctrine of equilibria—and those combined principles permit me to face up to all the insults of life. Nevertheless, I can’t bear much longer hearing you talk any longer about the woman who has caused you such great annoyance. I’ve already made a great many sacrifices.

“Let’s recapitulate. When you were ten years old, and your parents Monsieur and Madame Girard, sugar wholesalers—now departed, alas—confided you to me, I was able, for a sum of three thousand francs a year, to master my irritation at having to correct the solecisms and barbarities pullulating in your exercise books. It was hard. However, I had the courage to guide you to the completion of your studies and enable you to triumph in examinations until you joined the navy.

“When, subsequently, as lieutenant of a vessel, you threw your resignation at the anarchist government’s head and exchanged your naval saber for a boulevardier’s swagger-stick, again I had the virtue—no less heroic, believe me—of striving to contain your passions, as the great Seneca did for his pupil, Nero. I accompanied you in the civil broadsides that you fired, and warned you against the parasites who were sinking their claws into your rich inheritance.

“Then came your love for H  l  ne, the noble whore with the innocent air, who cost you very dear, at the same time as she was deceiving you with all your friends except me. I was then teaching philosophy at a baccalaureate-factory with P  re Frontispice, who flirted with his kitchen staff, had his way with them and then sacked them for immorality, changing them every fortnight.

“It was necessary for me to stand up to both of you, to throw myself into the whirlwind of parties, go with you to racecourses, listen to stupid plays every evening, sup champagne in late-night restaurants, stuff myself with Chinese music, run after you through bars and dens of vice, ingurgitate many fiery liqueurs in the company of pimps and prostitutes, and finally to occupy the banquette of the carriage that you took when you went home to bed, witnessing the preliminary manifestations of your tenderness.

“I never got to bed before three o’clock in the morning. I let go of my dear philosophers, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, Spencer and Hegel. I moved on, and worse. I no longer knew the joy of rediscovering them, those precious friends, of disputing their ideas and proving to them—with my feet in slippers, slumped in an armchair by the fireside, my pipe in my mouth—that my doctrine of equilibria, influenced though it was by the stoicism of Seneca, my great ancestor, was a thousand times better than their theories for explaining the world.

“Oh, the exhaustion of the following days! My appearances before the dunces at school! My hours of teaching, spent struggling to find another drop of saliva on my arid palate! You’ll never know how much I cursed the two of you, my lad! H  l  ne especially, the whore, who made a complete fool of you! In vain I strove to render her more faithful to you. In vain I swore, every time I discovered the thread of a new intrigue, to show you where it led, to separate you from her. But every time, too, a sentiment retained me, the dread of tearing the rag that then replaced your heart.

“Finally, when the happy moment arrived when the treachery of your mistress became too evident, when you caught her swooning in the arms of your best coachman; when, enraged by seeing you stopping the compensation for her...displacements, she tried to have you murdered by hired thugs—an attack whose effects still force you to wear your arm in a sling—I renounced my position as a schoolmaster, abandoned my dear Latin quarter, my dunces, my books of philosophy, and my games of chess in smoky taverns in front of foaming beer-tankards, in order to come and install myself at your bedside and look after you as a Sister of Charity would have done.

“That, I esteem, is the very weight of devotion. It required, in order for me to be capable of it, all the affection that I have for your twenty-eight years, and the irresistible sympathy I have for your delightful naivety...

“Well, I tell you this: if you mention one more time that H  l  ne, whom you’d have been wiser to have locked up—indeed, if I even read her memory one more time in your desolate eyes—I swear to you, as truly as my name is Z  phirin Choumaque, aged fifty, born in P  rinchies in the d  partement of the Nord, independent professor of philosophy, dry fruit of university courses and sworn enemy of the untranscendental University...as truly as I am all of that, I’ll drop you where you stand, for I’m determined not to run around Paris any longer”—Choumaque pronounced it Pah-ris—“in order to enable you to fall back into the claws of that H  l  ne.”

In spite of the violence of his speech, the philosopher, in concluding with an absurdity, had imprinted a contented smile on his bushy lips—which had not cheered up his pupil. On the contrary, the latter squeezed the philosopher’s arm in a surge of despair. “Don’t do that, Master. What would become of me without you? I’m suffering so much!”

“Don’t complain about it, damn it! For only those who suffer know the value of happiness. Is not suffering the preparation for joy? Why, alas, aren’t we able to suffer any more?”

Already, Choumaque was rounding out his gesture to support a scholarly argument with which his pupil was very familiar, when the latter stopped him and directed his attention to the entrance of an individual who had just sat down a few tables away and was asking for a menu urgently.

“Look! That’s the man who was looking at us so insistently the other day.”

The newcomer did not look seem very remarkable. Had it not been for the memory that the two conversationalists attached to his person, they might not have paid any attention to his exaggerated nose, the enormous cabochons that flashed on his shirt-front or the indefinable expression of antiquity emitted by his seemingly young silhouette. As he set about eating, with a hearty appetite, he took a small round box from his waistcoat pocket, reminiscent of the earpiece of a telephone, and put it to his large ear at intervals.

“Let’s leave the flashy foreigner—doubtless some merchant enriched in the pork business—and rise up toward the heavens of the wings of ethics,” Choumaque continued, spreading his arms again. “So, I was saying that we’re no longer able to suffer, and that, in consequence, we’re no longer able to enjoy ourselves. Life envelops us with such a succession of sensations, such a whirlwind of hastily-realized necessities, that the self no longer has the leisure to collect itself in order to desire then, or to appreciate their satisfaction.

“The result is that, in that overexcitement, we traverse the oases of existence at a run, and scarcely have time to palpitate at the falls we make into gulfs. *Nobis vivere non licet*...we no longer have time to live, says Seneca, who foresaw this state of affairs clearly, when he treated the brevity of life—and yet, in his epoch, people were still able to breathe.

“Nowadays, science, whose benefits are acclaimed, the comforts with which it helps us, the genius with which it suppresses our difficulties, no longer leaves us the possibility of drawing breath and savoring things. An example: we go into a dark place; immediately, we flick a switch, the electric light comes on. From then on, what can darkness matter to us? Can we appreciate the *fiat lux*, when it is so easy to procure light? In Seneca’s time, it was necessary to strike a flint, and the first spark delighted the heart as well as the eyes.

“Well, that simple example might stand for everything that is desirable. In our day, a woman’s caprice leads to a furnished hotel in ten minutes. Good restaurants are crowded, and no longer have any unknown tastes. Electric trains and balloons allow the healthy fatigue of traveling on foot to remain unknown. Doctors anesthetize suffering. Frantic publicity opposes our meditation. It’s a perpetual tension of our nerves, at the end of which society is exacerbated, to fall into senility.

“I’m not speaking for myself, a sage who knows better than to consume my life in the delirium of passions or a series of frivolous occupations. But take this place where we’re eating now, this environment of yours. Look at that depraved woman, lit up by the thighs of the negro into whose mouth she’s throwing gold coins. Tomorrow, she’ll offer herself to that musculature, in between two social visits. A brief epilepsy, if she experiences any. What will she get out of it, in regard to happiness?

“Observe, next, the haste with which that gross socialist orator, fresh from preaching and talking about fraternity, the love of the poor and disdain for the rich, is devouring his food, slobbering over his collar. He ought to dwell upon those enjoyments stolen from the rich, which his lies have earned him, but he hardly has time to moisten his lips!

“It’s a whirlwind, I tell you—a whirlwind in which the individual is lifted up, spun and then hurled to the ground, bewildered, uncomprehending, unknowing, unfeeling, only to be carried off again. What’s the result? It’s that mad gyration, man falling victim to man. Scarcely has a discovery been made, scarcely has a fashion caught on, than others surge forth, more ingenious and more tormented than the last, to which it’s necessary to submit. It’s a perpetual motion, which leaves no respite, retreat or pardon. Everything creaks, grinds and seethes—and in wanting to engage with it, people exhaust themselves. They work themselves to death in order to submit to the slavery of incessant sensuality, to run after the lure of a happiness they can’t grasp. They have to pay dearly for this life of steam and electricity. Women impose skimpy sensualities upon them, leadenly. The palate can’t taste that which is too rapidly swallowed. Anesthetized nerves end up no longer being able to vibrate. Publicity vulgarizes marvels.

“We swim in wellbeing, commodities, pleasures—but alas, we aren’t aware of them, and are no longer able to appreciate them.”

“Where are you going with this, Master?”

“To tell you this: that it’s necessary to give thanks to the god of torments who is breaking your heart. You’ll have the chance to suffer and to sense the price of deliverance, while you’re cured of your love for Hélène. What bliss it will be to disdain her then! She’s done you a favor, the whore who had you stabbed!

“Thus, every dolor has its compensation in benefits. I know, it’s true, that in the final analysis, as my doctrine of equilibria determines that you won’t get a bigger share than a road-sweeper, and that in the hour of your death, the same proportionality of joys and dolors will level out your passage through this base world as for anyone else—but what does it matter? You’ll have lived more intensely than the road-sweeper and all the people who surround us, for you’ll have appreciated better than them the rewards than beneficent suffering yields!”

“A glass of liqueur, Master? Another cigar?”

The Stoic, after a gesture of supreme indifference, nevertheless accepted the alcohol and the tobacco. The avidity with which he savored them, and the contentment resplendent in his mischievous blue eyes, testified that his rigor could not stand up to proof, for the moment.

They were about to leave. Marcel was already tapping the rim of his plate to request the bill when a movement by the diner they had noticed before stopped them, astonishing them. The individual in question got up and casually came to sit down at their table, after having picked up his plate. Then, while continuing eating, he said, in a distinct German accent: “I overheard your conversation, Messieurs. It amused me greatly.”

“You overheard?”

“Yes, thanks to the microphone I carry with me.” He showed them the little round box similar to the earpiece of a telephone, with he replaced in his waistcoat pocket. Then, absorbing the contents of a large glass of champagne, into which his curved nose plunged, he went on: “If I’ve understood correctly, Monsieur Girard is suffering from lovesickness and has lost his appetite for life, while Monsieur Choumaque is complaining that the world is no longer able to appreciate felicity accurately. Is that correct?”

“That is, indeed, correct.”

“Well then, I simply propose that Monsieur Girard come to live in a marvelous country where he will forget his suffering, and in which every citizen enjoys a complete eternal and supreme happiness. But first, permit me to introduce myself, for I imagine that what I’m doing might seem unusual to you.”

He rummaged in a pocket in which gold coins linked, and pulled a card out of a wad of banknotes, which he held out. The two friends read:

ZADOCHBACH
Chief Representative of Caresco
Juvisy Eucrasia

Choumaque and Marcel could not tear their surprise-dilated eyes away from the card.

Armand Caresco! What a formidable name! Thirty years ago, that surgeon, the master of a world—of *the* world—had retired to the new land that had emerged from the sea following a cataclysm, and had built a new humankind!

There was no story more improbable, no fairy tale more extraordinary than the adventurous existence of that man, once a bandit of the scalpel, who had made a colossal fortune with the point of his blade, which his business acumen had increased even further, and had suddenly become—no one knew by virtue of what remorse of conscience or generous folly—a benevolent philanthropist, a kind of merciful creator, having understood all the miseries and dolors of life, and wanting to spare a chosen people therefrom.

In truth, very little was known about the new realm and its protagonist. The day when the legendary surgeon had quit France thirty years before, followed by the desperate regrets of some and the ferocious

hatred of others, a press campaign had aroused the anxiety of nations regarding that new autocrat who was so easily taking possession of a country already coveted by all.

It was no more than a morsel of lava, with no apparent possibility of cultivation and no incentive for immediate colonization, but it was as large as Scotland, commanding the Atlantic, and England had already planted her flag there. A little gunfire and dynamite would, therefore, have sufficed to reduce the philanthropic usurper to impotence and reckon with him, had Caresco not taken a precaution before his disappearance that immediately assured him of the respect of civilized peoples.

Convening, in England itself, a committee of scientists and military men of all nations, he had, before their very eyes, devastated and ravaged an entire region ten kilometers square, killing everyone. Should one not leave in peace the inventor of an explosive that, simultaneously with its blast, expanded a profusion of deleterious gases sufficient to poison an entire population?

A single experiment had sufficed to convince governments, although Caresco had offered them a second, so scornful was he of the work of destruction. As a possessor of such force, he held war and peace in the palm of his hand; it would have been possible for him to install himself as he pleased on the old thrones of kings or the young armchairs of republican presidents and enslave the world. He preferred his morsel of lava, that absolutely new platform, sterilized by fire, where he could build his empire in accordance with his will.

Since then, diplomats had decided to ignore him, and he, leaving the nations to continue their paltry conflicts, had contented himself with reigning over his rock, enigmatic, redoubtable and formidable, the only master, the only god. And when, one day, a secret emissary of the British Foreign Office had come to poison him, it was that emissary who swallowed the toxic dose. Some time afterwards, moreover, a bomb had annihilated an entire district of London in a terrible fashion, and as it had been recognized as a device similar to the one employed in Caresco's experiments, Albion remained tranquil thereafter, enclosed in her wounded vanity.

Since then, an airplane had arrived every month at Juvisy, in the vicinity of Paris, where an immense hangar encircled by walls had been reserved for it. It always arrived by night and departed the same way. Nothing was seen of its phantom but the two luminous disks of its beacon lights, like the eyes of a gigantic bird. Neither its gilded wings nor the red color of its fuel tank, dotted with golden vibrions,¹ was visible. For some time, it was thought to be the whim of a hobbyist aeronaut or a scientist's experiment.

From its initial voyages on, the airplane collected and returned the engineers, workmen, artists and inventors who collaborated in the edification of the new empire: an entire host of laborers who departed poor and came back enriched by the money earned in that mysterious toil. The police and reporters interrogated them, but they did not reply, terrorized as they were by a threat made before their return.

Then, when the Customs, the General Company of Aerial Transport, and various State administrations, ever ready to complicate international trade, learned that goods were being stored, that travelers were being displaced and that there were no papers regulating these transactions, they had become excited and cried fraud, but the scandal they had attempted to kick up was suddenly aborted when the name of Caresco was pronounced. A decree from the French Head of State legitimized the illegalities, and the airplane was able to continue its embarkations in complete tranquility.

The agency at Juvisy, although everything was still invisible, became a center of attention. Innumerable supplications were deposited in the letter-box of the only door opening into the warehouses. They solicited Caresco's favor; they expressed the desire to seek refuge on his island. All the madmen, all the desperate individuals and all the adventurers in the world placed their petitions therein, and never received any reply. Sometimes, however, when the applicants were young and handsome, or capable by virtue of their knowledge or their genius of assisting the impetus of the new fatherland, after discreet enquiries had been made, they disappeared. Their families mourned them in vain; no material trace was ever found of their bodies, nor of their fortunes, if they were wealthy.

¹ The term vibrion is nowadays attributed, even by dictionaries that admit its obsolescence, to bacteria, but at the beginning of the twentieth century it was a common euphemism for a sperm-cell, as viewed through a microscope. That is its meaning throughout the present work, although ovules are occasionally gathered under the same heading.

That was all that was known for sure about Caresco and his realm. Everything else that was said: the legend of the curious social organization built in his name; the marvels that the most powerful telescopes scarcely allowed to be discerned from far out at sea—for the potentate had forbidden any approach to his island for forty leagues around—was only rumor, sensational false news put out in order to raise the circulation of one-centime newspapers or to interest the readers of papers distributed gratuitously, which had become the custom of almost all dailies half way through the twentieth century.

So, Marcel Girard and Zéphirin Choumaque were equally ignorant of the land of ideal pretention of which Zadochbach's card had so abruptly evoked the suggestion.

The latter did not seem to be rejoicing in the effect that he had just produced, and continued eating.

"Yes, Monsieur Girard, if you consent, I shall take you to Eucrasia. My master's genius has edified society there in such a way that happiness is absolute, whatever Monsieur Choumaque might say in denying the possibility; and other amours—and what amours, Messieurs!—will soon have banished the memory of the beautiful Hélène."

"Oh, Master, Master, not to suffer any longer!" said Marcel, suddenly possessed by that mirage.

"It would be the most unfortunate thing that could happen to you, my friend!"

"Stupid!" muttered Zadochbach, addressing himself to Choumaque—and then, more insistently, to Marcel: "Not to suffer any longer! To forget! To enjoy, perpetually and uniformly. Say the word..."

"What do you think, Master? Will you go with me? You know what a lamentable state my heart is in! Hélène, after all her treasons, would like to get me back, and I'll succumb again, I know it! Think about the mire she's dragged me through! Think about what she might drag me through yet! Departure, forgetfulness, is the cure!" Marcel, hypnotized by the hope, was carried away.

But at the condition imposed by the young man, desirous of bringing his friend, the Representative frowned.

"Choumaque, coming with you? Pooh! What do you expect us to do with that old windbag in Eucrasia? Anyway, I'll have to refer the matter to Caresco. Send me a written request at Juvisy, and we'll see. Perhaps you'll receive instructions..."

"You'll accept, Master?" the pupil insisted. "I beg you, don't abandon me—accept!"

"I'm a Stoic. I'm stoical enough to consent not to suffer any longer, if that's possible, although it's inconceivable. And then, to see Eucrasia...that's truly tempting..."

"It would be necessary," Zadochbach observed, "for you to abandon your entire fortune."

"A sage can lose everything without suffering any damage, because all the wealth he has is internal," said Choumaque sententiously. Then he added: "It's true that I have nothing to lose, having no luggage but my wardrobe...and even that is in dire need of renewal."

The Representative had finished eating. They stood up in order to put on their overcoats—but while their backs were turned, Zadochbach disappeared, forgetting to pay for his meal, for which Marcel scrupulously settled the bill.