

THE ENCHANTED CITY

Chapter I *The Demons of the Lake*

On 13 March 1877, in the heart of equatorial Africa, the first rays of dawn illuminated the prelude to one of those dramas that the journals of great voyagers only insert in terms full of fear.

The scene was about to unfold not far from Cape Nyonggo, whose white point, like the prow of a ship, cuts neatly into the waters of Lake Tanganyika at 27°30 east longitude and 3°23 south latitude.

A confused mass of tortuous and profoundly-ravined ridges, the bulk of the cape is dominated by a vast plateau, the arid soil of which nourishes only a single tree, but a giant of the kind. It is a baobab whose leafy crown measures no less than a hundred and fifty meters in circumference, and which, under that immense mass of branches, could easily shelter an entire regiment from the rain. The trunk of that sovereign among vegetables is bizarrely carved around its perimeter. Guided by the spirit of whimsy that presides over the execution of infantile works, temeritous hands have sculpted a number of monsters with human faces there, in the thickness of the bark, with an artistry that bears no resemblance to that of our master woodcarvers. Those images, unpleasant to behold, are framed by hideous realities: chaplets of freshly severed heads, festoons of tresses scalped from enemies and garlands of skulls that time has polished like ivory.

Thus, on the thirteenth of March, at daybreak, three prisoners had just been attached to the foot of the baobab on the plateau of Nyonggo, solidly tied with the aid of ropes of aloe fiber mixed with tiger grass. One of those unfortunates was white, another of Semitic blood with a negro tint, and the third a mulatto.

The white man seemed to be about twenty-eight years of age. Of medium height and robust constitution, he had a high forehead, brown eyes and a Grecian nose following the principles of esthetics. His lips were a trifle thin, but did not advertise any malevolence. His mouth even sketched an excellent smile—a sad smile, but still proud, which allowed a glimpse of two rows of dazzling pearly white teeth. A crow's wing beard, smooth and bushy, set off his sun-tanned complexion advantageously. Coiffed in a hat made of reed stems, clad in a tunic and trousers in grey wool, he wore a buffalo hide belt around his waist.

The black man, who seemed to be about thirty, was tall and respectably plump; his hands were delicate and chubby. He had a broad forehead, fleshy cheeks, a double chin and beautiful long-lashed eyes with a tender and profound gaze. His face radiated calm and placidity. His costume did not differ much from that of Algerian Arabs; he wore a red skullcap on his head with a silken *h'aik* and a black camel-hide *brima*. Two or three burnouses were superimposed on his body; on his legs, red morocco boots each affected the form of the trunk of a banana tree. A chaplet of large beads hung around his neck, descending to the middle of his chest.

The mulatto was a tall lanky fellow, thin and stiff, with a slightly arched back. The uncommon length of his legs gave his gait some analogy with that of the wading bird known as a secretary bird. His head, rather broad at the height of his cheekbones, took on the shape of a quadrangular pyramid in the cranial region, gently rounded at the summit. His ears were gigantic; his eyes presented the particular obliquity typical of the natives of the Congo; his lower jaw was equipped with long and pointed teeth. His physiognomy was suggestive of a humble and timid character. As for his mode of dress, it was absolutely grotesque.

In fact, the bare-headed and barefooted mulatto wore tight trousers with yellow piping and a huge red jacket, probably plundered from one of Queen Victoria's horse-guards. The jacket was tightened at the waist by means of a belt—or, rather, a rope—from which was suspended, by a little leather thong, a

pocketknife of a study kind. Another rope or strap was passed over the shoulder of the red coat, whose two ends were fixed to a canvas bag like the *musettes* in which the cavalymen of French regiments keep their grooming equipment. In sum, the tall fellow was decked out in a fashion resembling, save for his height, one of the monkeys paraded around by organ grinders.

Around the three prisoners bound to the baobab, a multitude of delirious individuals were stamping their feet, uttering blood-curdling howls. They were black-skinned men of medium height, but of a type very different from the vulgar native with the flat nose, thick lips and curly hair. On the contrary, they had flat hair, long eyelashes, bushy eyebrows, keen eyes profoundly sunk in their orbits, a straight nose, thin lips and small ears. An enormous torso, broad hips and thin legs collaborated in giving them an extremely original appearance.

Dressed, for the most part, in the skins of big cats, the rest of the body was smeared with white, red and blue, the three colors of war in the regions of central Africa. A few guinea fowl or green pigeon feathers were stuck in the hair. Some of them wore little mantles of bark on their shoulders, with a kind of wolf-skin cape. On their knees and ankles there were bracelets with wooden bells; on their wrists, ivory rings; on their heads, turbans or crowns of wisteria. Finally, a few, aristocratic in their bearing, were clad in white fleecy goatskin skirts and mantles made of hedgehog skin, with their lower legs fringed with brass bells. Their coiffure consisted of fur caps ornamented with glass beads and a red feather. From the center of that headdress emerged a long hank of hair, thrown backwards following the arc of a circle, from which a large bouquet of goat hair was suspended.

In the first rank of the bloodthirsty blacks, a chain of horrible women was agitating, summarily dressed in small goatskin aprons edged with little bells made with iron hoops. By way of ornament, those harpies had fixed bunched of sun-dried lizards to their heads.

Bursts of savage music cruelly accompanied the overture of the drama anticipated by the spectators. Applied to the mouths of artistes with robust lungs, long buffalo horns cast sonorous waves to the winds that collided violently. The rhythm of the funeral march was beaten by vigorous hands on leopard-skin war drums, sheet metal bells and leather bucklers. All the instruments of the orchestra combined their effects in accordance with astonishing principles, to which our professors of harmony have doubtless never had the idea of exposing their pupils.

Suddenly, in response to an imperceptible signal, the din calmed down.

An old man, a woman and a young man detached themselves from the furious circle.

Clad in a long white robe, the old man had a kind of dolman on his shoulders made of human hair; a small copper bell tinkled at the end of each of those carefully combed banks, heightened with glass beads. His head disappeared beneath an enormous tuft of ostrich feathers; his torso was ornamented with chaplets of teeth. In his hand he was holding a large white weapon with several blades, similar to a short-handled halberd. That long-bearded old man was the *kilombe*, the chief of the national magicians.

The woman's only garment was a kind of girdle from which were suspended leather thongs ornamented with shells, teeth and coral. The rest of her body was tattooed with diamond shapes. Every hair on her head was threaded through a number of cylindrical glass beads, somewhat reminiscent of fragments of pipe stem. In her left hand she held a small buckler shaped like a violin; in the right was a lance with a flaxen tuft for a pennon. The hideous virago was an eminent sorceress.

The young man sported a large pink shell on his forehead and a sheep's horn at each of his temples; on his breast he wore a bison horn tied with a piece of cord to a zebra hoof. He was carrying a *troumbache*, a weapon made of black wood, flat in form and pointed at either end. The young man—or, rather, the adolescent—was a simple *ganga*, a run-of-the-mill magician who, by reason of his special armament, was known as a *troumbachaganga*.

There was a profound silence.

The three individuals marched at a solemn pace toward the baobab, making ostentatious genuflections before the images sculpted in the bark of the tree. Those graffiti represented Loubari, the African Satan; Mgooussa, the evil spirit; and Mousammouira, the spirit of storms.

Having piously invoked the demons of Tanganyika, the three magicians prepared to torture the prisoners in accordance with local custom. The *troumbachaganga* took up the position of someone about

to throw in a game of darts. The tattooed harpy pointed her lance like a fencing foil. The kilombe, twirling his blade, took up a stance with his legs braced, ready to leap forward.

Chapter II
The Gamble of Those Condemned to Death

How had the unfortunates who were about to play the part of bloody sacrifices to the Spirits of the Lake come to be lost in the heart of the African continent? The three poor wretches, attached to the service of a great voyager, had, one might say, fallen on the battlefield of fidelity and devotion. For two years they had followed their master, sharing in his good and bad fortune, and now found themselves separated from him for the first time. One day, they had allowed themselves to be taken by surprise and overrun by a dense band of blacks; overwhelmed by the weight of their numbers, they had been captured.

The white foreigner answered to the name of Isidore Chauvelot—a name that betrayed his nationality. He was, in fact, a Frenchman, and a Frenchman of the Var, a native of Six-Fours, the beautiful eagle's nest that overlooks the bay of Toulon, coquettishly reflected in the blue waters of Saint Nazaire.

Isidore was the cook of the dispersed expedition. The senior personnel prized his talents highly, and that was only just. After an initial apprenticeship served at the Hôtel de la Croix-de-Malte in Toulon, and then at the Hôtel des Colonies in Marseilles, he had taken lessons from an eminent professor in Toulouse, who had revealed to him the secrets of the art, particularly the formula for a certain Sinhalese curry that had made him famous. Finally, he had gone to Paris to complete his studies. By dint of hard work, perseverance and genius, he had ended up working at the Grand Hôtel in the capacity of *sous-chef*. It was there that the Sultan of Zanzibar, wonderstruck by his guinea fowl with Haitian sauce, had attempted to woo him away with the offer of a host of considerable dignities, notably that of director-general of his fishponds, gardens, pheasantries, poultry yards and aviaries.

The *sous-chef*, whose success was celebrated by the Parisian press, had declined all those honors—but then, bored and weary of the asphalt horizons of Paris that he had perpetually before his eyes, tormented by the spirit of adventure, he had allowed himself to be collected by voyagers—Frenchmen, those!—who were bravely going to explore the heart of Africa.

To complete that biography, it is necessary to say that, interrupting the course of his studies one day, the cook had done a stint in the 1st zouaves in the capacity of drummer. History also records that the doctor of sauces was a crack shot with a rifle. The echoes of the Kasbah of Medeah have conserved the memory of the brio that distinguished his manner of beating the reveille and rolling out mortal fire.

As if those instrumental and culinary talents were not sufficient, nature had also endowed young Isidore with a host of solid qualities. He was, it may be said, an excellent fellow, regular in his conduct, absolutely sober, limiting his pleasure to cigarettes, of which, to tell the truth, he was a heavy smoker. He always seemed cheerful, even something of a joker, always philosophical and full of enthusiasm. Unfortunately, these perfections were eclipsed, more than once a day, by the mists of one intolerable fault: Isidore was prodigiously vain. His vanity, moreover, revealed itself in a singular fashion. He, who had only ever had to go pale beneath the works of the *Cuisinière bourgeoise* and other technical treatises of the same stripe had—who would have believed it?—immense pretensions in matters of literature and ineradicable pretensions to intuitive science, especially in matters of history, politics and geography.

His discourse, moreover, testified to an admirably incoherent education. His schoolmaster had taught him a little about everything and very little about anything in particular, all without any method or determined plan, making him read publications of all sorts: stories of voyages, cheap newspapers, novels and poetry, carefully refraining from seasoning his pupil's reading with any kind of critical observation. Isidore had drunk cheerfully from all these springs; he had furnished his brain with a host of variegated fragments, had made the mountain of Six-Fours into a Parnassus populated with muses who twittered like linnets and reasoned like crows.

As for any slightly rational enchainment of ideas, he scarcely paid any heed to it, intrepidly coupling, at the risk of making them howl, words that made a natural contrast, committing to memory prodigious anachronisms, making stews of the most disparate morsels. Knowing a little about a great many disparate

things, he firmly believed that he knew everything; he was intent on passing for a superior man and never ceased to complain about the ill luck that prevented him from emerging from obscurity.

The pretentious ignoramus annoyed his masters by professing incredible enormities in a loud voice, and his comrades by heaping them with disdain. How many times had he not treated as simpletons the poor companions now attached, as he was, to a baobab?

The black man to the right of the arrogant cook was named Mimoun-ben-Abdallah. He was an Algerian Arab. Born in El Kseur in the south, he had served in the Senegal spahis. With regard to the commander of the expedition Mimoun served the functions of hunter; with remarkable skill, he regularly brought venison to the camp. He was a zealous Muslim, always calm, absorbed in contemplation, resigned to the will of Allah, only opening his mouth to emit verses from the Koran.

The mulatto placed to Isidore's left had been baptized Choka, a name that the facetious cook had rapidly transformed into Chocolat. The son of a native woman from Saint Paul de Loanda,¹ Chocolat had been brought up by a Portuguese missionary, but the fruits of that distinguished education were reduced to a few fragments of Latin with which he enameled his speech and his practices of puerile devotion at San José de Cacucaco.² Forgetting the reverend's serious lessons, in the school of the bush, the eccentric had not taken long to mold himself on the model of the Bohemian that one encounters in all the ports on the African coast, and whom the English call by the generic denomination of Jack-Jack.

Ordinarily, having no other domicile than the harbor steps, jack-jacks exercise, in turn or simultaneously, a host of different professions, according to the weather, fortune or opportunity. They are, as the whim takes them, street porters, domestic servants, messengers, criers, sailors, and chiefs of pagazis or baggage porters. It was thus that Chocolat had been picked up on the dock at Saint Paul and enrolled in the capacity of laborer. As often as not, Isidore took possession of him to pluck fowl, peel vegetables, wash the saucepans or turn the handle of the coffee grinder.

The excellent jack-jack lent himself readily to everything that was asked of him, for he was naturally obliging, mild and timid; but he also had good reasons for being obliging in the functions of scullion, the accomplishment of which was always worth a few meager rewards of scraps and leftovers. The poor fellow was afflicted by the malady known as hunger sickness; he ate incessantly, but incessantly thought that he was on the point of starvation.

In the course of the preparations for their torture, the three designated victims adopted different attitudes.

Chocolat, dying of hunger, was on the point of falling unconscious, sighing as he cast his gaze toward the zenith, where he perceived, oscillating over his head, the beautiful fruits of the baobab, which measure no less than thirty centimeters in length, and are known as "monkey-bread."³ He was weeping, and scarcely had the strength to invoke San José de Cacucaco in bad Latin.

Mimoun, more than ever confided to resignation, never ceased to murmur: "Allahu Akbar!"—God is great.

As for Isidore, he muttered to himself, not without arrogance: "Oh, these savages...! These savages who want my skin are beasts...my God, are they beasts! There's not one of them who seems to understand! Oh, it's more than a crime they're going to commit here; it's a sin, as Buffon said—for, after all, I'm not just anyone. To think that they're going to put an end to a man like me!"

Then these gusts of pride *in extremis* were chased away by fits of sinister laughter. "They're going to devour us, of course," Isidore added, "but to want to eat me, a cook...that's too much! And you, Chocolat, you great simpleton, who can't do anything but cry famine, wait a little...they're going to invite you to dinner! Don't worry, we're going to be served...to these Messieurs of the Black Band...!"

¹ I have retained the author's Frenchified version of the name of the chief seaport and capital city of Angola, then known as São Paulo da Assunção de Loanda and nowadays simply known as Luanda.

² Again, I have retained the author's version of what appears to be a conflation of the names of two local villages long since swallowed up by the city of Luanda, São José do Calumbo and Cacucaco.

³ The fruits of the baobab, *Adansonia digitata*, were indeed known as *pain de singe* [monkey-bread] at the time, but are not to be confused with the modern American pastry to which the same name was applied in the 1950s.

It was at the moment that these strangled words emerged from Isidore's mouth that the sacrificers were about to strike their victims. The harpy, brandishing her lance, was making abominable grimaces at Mimoun's beard, when the strident sound of a horn rang out.

Then the scene changed

The entire audience, sorceress and gangas included, fell face down on the ground, as if moved by a spring. There was no longer anything around the baobab but humbly prostrated people, their arms extended at right angles to their bodies, uttering howls like distressed dogs.