

*“Par la barbe d’un bouc vert!”* It was French for “by a green goat’s beard.” I recognized the voice and the strange curse immediately. I looked up from my newspaper and, there, beside a nearby telephone booth, stood my old friend, Jules de Grandin!

I felt myself grinning with anticipation when he looked back at me and exclaimed: “Doctor Trowbridge, good to see you. Pack your bags—we leave at once!” I enjoyed my friendship and time with Jules for his colorful personality and unique use of the French language, as well as for the fantastic adventures which we usually found ourselves on.

We left that afternoon for Paris, where we spent two days. We stayed in his apartment there as he prepared for our adventure which I still did not know anything about. He had received a telegram which obviously disturbed and intrigued him, but he had become so distracted and lost in his own thoughts that all he had told me was that something terrible was happening, and it had been going on since March 21. But despite my repeated protests, he still would not tell me where we were going, or what was so terrible. I began to feel quite anxious.

Paris is an easy place to distract oneself, however, and thus I spent my time roaming the city and browsing through Jules’ private library, which contained an amazing collection of books, covering virtually every topic of interest to man.

By training, Jules was a scientist and had become one of France’s top forensics expert. He was on track to receive a tenured position at the Faculté de Medecine of Paris. He probably could have made a fortune in private practice, but during the Great War he had enlisted, like many patriotic young men. His courage and skills at espionage became legendary and, eventually, he took part in various missions for the French Secret Service, thus virtually ending his medical career. He also participated in missions far outside the theaters of war, assignments that took him to South America, to the Arctic reaches of the far north.

Finally, on our third day in Paris, he called me into his office and announced that it was time to go—that he was ready. I asked him where we were going. He pointed to a map of France on the far wall. He walked over to the map and tapped with his finger on a tiny dot in the foothills of the Pyrénées Mountains in the South of France. “Here, my friend, is a small troubled village named Raynat. Will you join me?”

I quickly replied: “But of course. I always have time for adventuring with Jules de Grandin! But what is so special about this village, Jules?”

He seemed deep in thought. He unconsciously twisted the ends of his moustache. “I think it is best that I not tell you so that you can remain objective and not be influenced by my own speculations. But I think that what we might find there will be a once-in-a-lifetime experience—like nothing you will ever experience again. Oh my, look at me—already I begin to ramble!”

Jules had rented a Citroen AC4 Torpedo, a big, tough motorcar, perfect for the untamed, mountainous region where Raynat lay. We drove for two days until we reached Campagne-sur-Ayroule, the closest major city to Raynat. There, Jules found a hotel and then disappeared into the town for the day. I bought a book about the region and began reading it. The next morning, Jules showed up, announced that it was time to go and that we should bring our revolvers with us. I nervously joked that he had not warned me that we were heading into combat.

He responded: “Well, I’m telling you now—I don’t think we have run into a foe like this before. Handguns may not be enough.” This last part, he said to himself, but I heard it and my anxiety tripled.

As we drove, I asked him questions about where we were going and what he had been doing in Campagne-sur-Ayroule. He somehow managed to dodge all my questions. Part of it was the beauty of the country we were driving through—as we progressed toward the mountains, the world seemed to fill with trees.

Finally, we arrived in Raynat. The village appeared deserted. In the middle of town, in the central square, we saw three men erecting a pole approximately 15 feet high. Jules parked the car in front of a fountain. I noticed the statue of a giant, upright bear reaching for the sky. I pointed it out to Jules, who smiled.

We walked toward the three workers, but an attractive, young woman appeared in a doorway and spoke to them in the local dialect. They promptly walked away and disappeared amongst the buildings.

She now advanced toward us. She was dressed simply and appeared to be about 25 years old. She spoke to us in perfect French: “Good afternoon, gentlemen, may I help you?”

Jules studied her for a second, then removed his hat and bowed in a formal manner: “Good afternoon, Madame. My name is Jules de Grandin and I’m honored to make your acquaintance. I’m here to research a cave that is said to be in the vicinity of your town. A cave decorated with magnificent prehistoric art, especially pictures of giant bears. With whom might we speak concerning this matter?”

I also was studying the woman’s face closely and noticed a slight tremor when Jules mentioned the cave. I had been reading about caves in the region but nothing I had seen mentioned a cave near Raynat.

She responded: “I’m afraid, Monsieur, that you have traveled here in vain, for the entrance to that cave has been blocked by rocks for many generations. But there are other caves in these mountains which might be of interest to you.”

Jules reiterated: “I’m particularly interested in the ancient depictions of the cave bear and all the myths about this creature that are indigenous to this region. No other town in this area can boast such record.”

But she responded with excessive emphasis: “I beg your pardon, Monsieur, but 40 miles from here, there is a village that is famous for its celebrations of the bears that live in the mountains. I can tell you how to get there, if you’d like.”

Jules responded: “I’m sorry that I wasn’t clearer. I’m not interested in mere mountain bears, but in the bear-god itself, Artahe.”

Upon hearing that name, the woman paled. After a moment of hesitation, she said: “Where did you hear this? How do you know his name?” She was visibly shaken.

Jules assured her: “I’ve been studying Artahe for many years. His worship in this region is well-documented among those who care to research such things.” He paused, then silently indicated the pole being erected on the town square.

She replied: “This is the day of the equinox of the spring of 1932. This is the day when Artahe shall awaken after many years of hibernation. Because He is no ordinary bear, His cycle is unique and a cause for celebration. Have you come to take part in this? Are you worshippers of Artahe?”

Jules looked at her with new understanding and asked: “May I ask who might you be?”

“I am Berthe. I am the High Priestess of Artahe. What about you?”

He replied: “I am Doctor Jules de Grandin, author of *Accelerated Evolution*, and this is my associate, Dr. Trowbridge.” After a pause of silent acknowledgement, during which I saw her nervousness turn into pride, he continued: “I think we have a lot to talk about. Is there somewhere else where we might be more comfortable?”

I, for one, was not relieved. I had followed Professor de Grandin into combat with ghosts, poltergeists and monsters before, but we had never battled a god—let alone a god that could manifest as a giant prehistoric bear.

She replied: “Wait here,” and disappeared into a doorway. A minute later, she reappeared holding a small box. She said: “Since you already seem to know so much, I shall take you to the temple—the cave you spoke of.”

We followed her through the town, across a field and into the woods that led to the mountains. I silently thanked my friend for advising me to wear boots. Not a word was exchanged during the trek.

We arrived at the entrance to a large cave. There was no rock fall blocking it. Berthe took a small lamp from her box and lit it. She entered the cave and silently signaled us to follow. She moved quickly and was soon out of sight, but we were able to see the glow from her lamp.

When we caught up with her, she was in a large natural chamber that was lit by torches affixed to the walls and decorated with an amazing array of ancient paintings. Berthe walked around it, lighting the torches.

“*Pardieu!*” gasped Jules at the sight of the ancient paintings. Both their quantity and quality were dazzling. The details and size of the images were transfixing. And almost every image was that of a bear.

“Trowbridge, my old friend, this is truly extraordinary. Here we see evidence of the manifestations and rituals of the worship of the bear-god Artahe stretching back perhaps 20,000 years. A prehistoric deity still alive today, substantially unchanged. What an extraordinary discovery!

Berthe agreed: “Yes, Doctor, these are the symbols of the love and devotion of many generations of my people for our Lord, Artahe.”

We slowly walked around the cave, admiring the paintings. Finally, we returned to the center, where we found Berthe standing beside a thick column carved out of stone that protruded from the floor of the cave. The sides of that makeshift altar were decorated with detailed carvings of bears.

Berthe continued: "Artahe has been our Lord from time immemorial. Occasionally, his worship has stretched beyond this region, but when foreigners sought to eradicate it, Artahe has always retreated to this cave, to this village, where He knew the faithful would give Him sanctuary."

Jules said: "Yes, I have read chronicles of Roman armies who fought his worshippers near here, of Christian royalty that hunted him, and of a high priestess of his who was imprisoned in a castle nearby."

Berthe responded: "You are remarkably well-informed, Monsieur." Then, she added: "Perhaps too much so."

I felt the threat in her words but Jules did not seem to notice it. Excusing himself with a smile, he quickly returned to the paintings and examined them in great detail, one after the other, while taking notes in a small notebook.

"*Par la barbe de mes aieux,*" he suddenly exclaimed. Jules turned toward me and I could see that his eyes were glowing with excitement. "Doctor Trowbridge, *mon ami*, we have arrived at a most propitious time!"

He approached Berthe and inquired: "Tonight is the great feast commemorating the end of Artahe's hibernation, is it not? I hope you will allow us to participate?"

The young woman hesitated. She stared intently at Jules, then past him at the altar. I sensed that she was probing him for truth.

Finally, she consented: "I would be honored to accept you as new worshippers of Artahe, Doctor de Grandin, Doctor Trowbridge. Now, I must go to continue preparations for this evening, but you may stay here if you'd like, to experience and feel the spiritual power of this place, of Artahe's home."

After a series of quick instructions on how to leave the cave, and a brief nod, she departed. I watched the glow of her lamp disappear down the tunnels. I then turned to Jules and whispered: "Do you think that she believes that we are followers of Artahe?"

Jules hesitated. He was deep in thought. Finally, he answered: "I don't know what she believes. But I don't think we have a choice. I was lucky with my calculations about the timing of this ceremony—I think that impressed her. This is actually quite a unique time in the cycles of the worship of Artahe."

I asked: "What do you mean?"

He answered: "Worship is a cyclical phenomenon, like seasons, but over a much longer period of time. This ceremony is the high-point of one such cycle. Worshippers look forward to it because it brings them a unique opportunity to commune with their god. It is a true experience..."

His words provoked some anxiety. "What kind of an experience?" I asked.

But Jules was already poring back over the cave paintings and was lost in his private thoughts. He did mutter: "That's what we're here to find out," which hardly reassured me.

After another hour, I suggested that we return to the village before nightfall. He agreed and we left the cave, thanks to Berthe's instructions.

We entered Raynat and noticed a distinct guttural sound that seemed to grow by the minute and fill the air all around us. We hurried toward the town square where we had left our car.

But when we got there, we froze in wonder and fear. Jules exclaimed: "*Nom d'une pipe!*" The square was filled with bears circling the pole the men had erected earlier, and which was now decorated with huge flower garlands. There may have been about 50 bears and most of them were walking upright. The windows in the buildings surrounding the square were filled with people watching and cheering. I noticed that our car was gone. Jules speculated that the villagers must have taken it away. He asked me to make sure my gun was ready. I checked it but kept it hidden in my pocket.

I then noticed that Berthe was dancing among the bears, touching each one affectionately, but firmly. She was also looking around her. My guess was that she was checking to make sure everything was in place for the ceremonies. At one point, her eyes met ours and she seemed to hesitate, but then continued with the dancing. She gave us no public acknowledgement. My hand tightened on my gun.

After going a few times around the pole, and probably touching every bear in the square, Berthe stopped dancing. She stood there, with her eyes closed and her hands raised toward the sky. She began chanting a long prayer in a language I did not recognize. Many of the spectators joined in.

The chanting grew louder and louder, and more passionate. Energy crackled in the air. Many of the villagers stepped onto the square and began dancing among the bears. It was a truly amazing sight—bears and humans dancing together—and the chanting combined with the roar of the bears was deafening and very strange.

Suddenly, the crowd of beasts and humans shuddered and parted. A huge figure entered the square. When it stood up, I could see that it was a giant bear, much bigger than any of the others. Its face was

beautiful, full of pride and intelligence. Its fur was black and shone with light. I looked at Jules. He seemed almost hypnotized by the sight of the bear-god, Artahe.

I asked him: "Are we in danger?"

Jules quietly responded: "Wait for my command."

The huge bear made its way through the crowd towards Berthe. All the humans and the bears looked at him in awe. I noticed that all the faces, of men and beasts alike, were filled with joy as they gazed upon their god.

The bear was moving slow and upright. When he (for I now thought of him as a person, not an animal) reached Berthe, he put his huge front paws delicately on her shoulders. She glowed with excitement and anticipation. I could not discern any outward communications between them. She suddenly turned and walked toward us.

She walked up to us, with Artahe looming in the background. She said: "Would you like to join us now, so that I might present you to your new god and He might accept you? And to be greeted and accepted by the community that worships Him?"

Jules hesitated briefly, then bowed deeply. He whispered to me: "I fear she might want to sacrifice us to her god. Wait here for my signal."

He then went with her. She escorted him into the crowd and he vanished from sight. I was very afraid and held tightly to my handgun hidden in my pocket. Only Artahe's massive form loomed over all.

I grew very concerned about my friend. I had no idea what was going on. With great difficulty, I restrained myself from either running away, or running into the crowd, shooting wildly.

But eventually, the crowd parted and Berthe and Jules emerged. I noticed that his clothes were torn. A look of great triumph was on Berthe's face. Jules looked very grim and seemed injured.

Suddenly, he broke from the crowd, ran towards me, shouting: "Trowbridge, kill her! She's the monster! Kill that woman!"

I pulled my gun and aimed at Berthe, but she turned towards me, without fear. The look of triumph and strength on her face somehow made me question my friend's instructions. I suddenly hesitated to kill someone whom I did not know. Why was she a monster, instead of some harmless, religious lunatic?

But Jules kept screaming: "Shoot, Trowbridge! She is the monster! Kill her now while you can!"

But her steady gaze met mine and now I began to cringe at the notion of killing such a beautiful young woman. I looked at Jules to see why he had not fired, and realized that in the tussle that had torn his clothes, he must have lost his own gun.

When I finally gained enough resolve to pull the trigger, Artahe stepped in between Berthe and I, and I ended up firing my rounds into his massive form. I could see that my bullets made no impact in that mountain of fur and muscle, and he continued to slowly advance toward me.

Suddenly, chaos broke loose.

It was then that I noticed that the crowd was now surrounded by uniformed men on horseback who had also begun to shoot. I recognized them to be military cavalry.

The people ran away or tried to; the bears fiercely attacked men and horses indiscriminately. The square ran red with blood. The screams of pain, the roars of rage mixed with the sounds of the guns firing. Just ahead of us, a lieutenant appeared with an extra horse. He yelled at us to get on it. I pulled Jules up and we caught hold of the horse. As we both got on it, the Lieutenant yelled, before riding back into battle: "Hurry up! Get out of here! There's too many of them!" His horse was wild-eyed with terror and I could see that the officer was also panicked.

I, too, was very worried. Jules was obviously injured, and we only had one horse. We did not have time to search for our car. We quickly rode away in the direction of Campagne- sur-Ayroule. Luckily, we came across a riderless horse and managed to catch it. The two of us then took off at top speed away from Raynat.

Once we had put some distance between ourselves and that accursed village, we slowed down. I briefly examined Jules and saw that his injuries were relatively superficial, although quite numerous.

Once we arrived in Campagne-sur-Ayroule, my friend refused to go to the hospital or even back to our hotel, but instead headed straight to the police station. There, he asked for a bottle of Cognac. The officer on duty saw from our conditions that something serious was occurring. He immediately went to get his Captain. as well as the liqueur.

Jules drank the Cognac in huge gulps while talking to the Chief of Police: "Captain, Raynat is out-of-control. You must destroy the village, and especially the woman, Berthe."

The Captain demanded further explanation.

Jules responded: “I came here on special assignment from the Interior Minister to report on a bizarre religious cult in Raynat, responsible for many unexplained disappearances in the area, I believe. Upon talking with the cult’s high priestess and attending their pagan ceremony, I have only one recommendation: burn the village down, and arrest and disperse its citizens. And by all means possible, arrest and execute the high priestess, a woman named Berthe. She is a monster.”

The Chief of Police took Jules very seriously. “I understand. I shall consult at once with my superiors. If you’d care to stay in town for a few days...”

After we left the police station, I asked Jules the question that had been burning on my mind for hours: “What happened in the square when you went over to Artahe with Berthe?”

Jules did not answer. Instead, he said: “It’s now up to the police, or the government... We’re not waiting here. We’ve done our job. We’ll leave immediately.”

I repeated my question with more emphasis: “Jules! What happened there?”

Jules turned to face me directly: “I was right. She was planning to offer us to Artahe as human sacrifices. But first, and worse, her true goal was to copulate with her god and have him father a child—to create a new god!”