

## Chapter One A FANTASTIC AUCTION

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, as no one is unaware—but we shall permit ourselves to repeat in case anyone has forgotten—that the Yokohama-Tokyo agglomeration had become one of the most modern capitals in the world. Its importance and the development it had undergone had not only come from the rank occupied by Japan in the Asiatic world—and it was the first rank, since the former Mikado now bore the title of President of the United States of Asia—but also from the fact that the powerful republic, after having resuscitated and galvanized their people, marched at the head of Civilization.

As much as Paris or London, more than Rio de Janeiro or New York, Yokohama was, therefore, a cosmopolitan city. That is to say that the slightest event there attracted a variegated crowd, including as many Europeans as Asians, not to mention Americans, Australians, Middle-Easterners and Africans. Such was the one that was pressing on a certain afternoon in the most spacious of the halls at the Auction Rooms. The vast proportions of the hall had determined that choice, and it was explained not only by the enormous influx of the public but also because of the dimensions of the object that was about to confront the barrage of bids.

About a dozen meters long and two wide, with an equal height, a kind of fossilized monster was extended in a box raised up of three steps in the middle of the curious crowd.

To judge by the size of the beams and iron girders with which the floor had had to be reinforced, the weight of the petrified monster must have been considerable. Centuries, it was supposed, had covered a brilliant metallic carapace. The best-informed people affirmed that it must be gold—a metal depreciated since the day when the discovery of the formidable deposit of Fuji-Yama had inundated the world with it, and governments had been obliged to provide a replacement in the capacity of a monetary standard.

As for the animal contained in that envelope, opinions were divided; there was talk of a dragon, a brontosaurus, an ichthyosaurus, an iguanodon, and the entire prehistoric menagerie; for there was unanimity in granting the antiquity of the find.

The circumstances in which it had been brought to light pleaded in favor of that thesis, it is true. It was in the course of excavations made in the location of the sacred volcano, Fuji-Yama, recently disappeared into the entrails of the ground during a sudden earthquake that had shaken all of Japan. Such a formidable convulsion of the terrestrial crust could only have brought to the surface a fossil previously buried in the deepest geodesic layers. It was deduced that it dated from the earliest eras of the world, from the secondary period.

In the epoch when it had been discovered, a few months before, no one had talked about it, although it might have revolutionized the paleontological world. That was because the metalized beast had been sold immediately to an old collector. The latter, very jealous of his treasures, had carefully refrained from spreading the news of his acquisition. Having had the fossil introduced surreptitiously into his private museum, he spent his days and nights in contemplation before the monumental relic.

But the collector had just died and his heirs, naturally wanting to get the maximum advantage out of the curiosities he had pleased himself assembling, had, by contrast, trumpeted the merits of that unique item to the four corners of the world. That explained the influx of the curious and collectors who were crowded in the vast dales hall. There was the usual rabble of intermediaries there, brokers come from all parts of the world, including representatives of merchants from Greece, Persia, China and Armenia. They had come for the golden fossil, a veritable museum piece, each one hoping to acquire it cheaply and hoping to resell it at a fabulous price.

At one end of the long rank of rattan armchairs reserved for serious buyers, an old man appeared to be somnolent. He was evidently not a professional; nor did his sordid appearance announce a rich amateur. His highly-colored complexion and his skeletal thinness betrayed an ascetic devotee from India, probably belonging to the sect of Banians, or the ancient caste of fakirs.

At first, that individual appeared to be uninterested in the bids, like everything that was happening around him, but when the flood of fossil-collectors was reduced and there were only half a dozen serious bidders left, the venerable old man awoke, as if by magic.

“Where are we?” he asked his neighbor.

The latter replied: “The little Persian has just bid nine thousand Orons; the big Armenian has bid ten. That’s dear!”

“Dear?” repeated the Banian. “Listen.” And in a calm voice he bid: “A hundred thousand Orons.”

That formidable bid astounded the competitors and the entire audience. The Oron, thus named as an abridgement of the name of the scientist Oronius, who had discovered the metal entering its composition, had replaced the ancient pound sterling and dollar, and represented nearly fifty francs in old money. It was, therefore, a bid of fifty millions that had been made by the old man who looked like a beggar.

Who was he? On whose behalf was he acting?

Certainly, it was necessary to have a serious desire to possess the golden fossil to offer such a disproportionate price. Gold, as we have said, was a depreciated metal.

Amazed, the other bidders fell silent. They were vanquished; and the traditional ivory gavel was lowering when a thunderous voice filled the hall.

“Two hundred thousand Orons!” clamored that voice. “Make your maximum bids, Gentlemen; you’re wasting your time. I’m ready to double any price that is offered.”

The members of the audience looked at one another in astonishment. What was the first *coup de théâtre* compared with the second? Furthermore, that new movement of stupor was not only caused by the crazy bid, but also by the fact that the thunderous voice had not emerged from the throat of any of the people in the hall. It came from outside, even from a distant place. After having looked at one another, the audience members were obliged to recognize that, not without a certain frisson.

Only the old fakir gave no sign of astonishment or alarm. Nevertheless, his pupils, dull until then, began to shine with a singular gleam.

“Who made that bid?” he asked, in a calm voice.

The question was sensible; the auctioneer hastened to repeat it, quavering slightly because he was experiencing, like the entourage, a comprehensible emotion. “Who bid?” he shouted.

Then, in the midst of a profound silence, the voice of the invisible bidder uttered the single word: “Oronius!”

The illustrious scientist, whose adventures we have undertaken to report, was not a man for fantasies or caprices. What could a man who had disposed the treasures of science to humankind and put the subjugated forces of Nature at the service of his contemporaries want with the singular fossil?

He was in Paris with his daughter Cyprienne, a gracious blonde twenty years-old, and his future son-in-law, who was also his pupil, the engineer Jean Chapuis. In their company, and that of his devoted servants—the mechanic Victor Laridon, his polychromatic African servant, Master Julep, the alert soubrette Turlurette, the young Chinese woman Mandarinette, and the little dogs Pipigg and Kukuss—the Master had every reason to want to live tranquilly.

An intraglobetrotter, he scarcely talked about the fantastic excursion that had brought him to traverse the terrestrial sphere completely, incessantly menaced by the hatred of his rival Otto Hantzen, a rogue scientist, linked to the powers of evil represented by the mysterious Hindu Princess Yogha.

From the frightful struggle that had unfurled in the endothermic air-pockets, Oronius and his companions had come back alone. Their enemies had found their tomb therein.

After such a sequence of cyclopean enterprises, desperate struggles against inexorable adversaries and revolts of nature, always disposed to annihilate her excessively audacious violators, did the Master not hope for repose? His work was summoning him! Furthermore, the Palace-Laboratory that his fellow citizens had just rebuilt for him to replace his Magical Villa, destroyed by Hantzen’s hatred, now had a new guest whom Oronius wanted to study: a specimen of a subterranean branch of the human race. Brought back from the strange expedition at the Earth’s core, that creature answered to the name of Tai.

He had rendered appreciable services during the sojourn in the darkness, and he was particularly attached to Cyprienne and Jean Chapuis.

Once again, in such circumstances, how could Oronius be interested in the fossil discovered in the home of the Japanese antiquarian bonze?

It was because, like all the scientists in the world, he had received the following missive from the collector's heirs.

*Illustrious Master,*

*We have the privilege of notifying you of the imminent passage through the Auction Rooms of Yokohama of a unique museum piece. It is a fossil, certainly prehistoric, which the millennia have covered with a carapace of gold. It comes from excavations effectuated on the location of Fuji-Yama. A photograph is enclosed of the monster, which constitutes an inestimable treasure for an enlightened collector.*

The reading of that prospectus and the sight of the photograph had made Oronius jump.

"But that's it!" he had cried. "That's the *Snaky*, which served as a coffin for Hantzen, Yogha and their damned souls. I understand now why our worthy Victor searched for it in vain. The poor fellow arrived like the carabinieri of old; the famous serpent had already been picked up and hidden by that Japanese collector."

His daughter and his future son-in-law had approached to listen. Laridon, Julep and the soubrettes also lent an ear. They all seemed singularly impressed. Was that not natural? The mere words Hantzen, Yogha and *Snaky* reminded them of so many cruel moments! The coffin that had reappeared in the light of day, which contained the bodies of their enemies, could not leave them indifferent.

"Certainly, that evil box cannot be anything but an ossuary," Oronius reflected, in a low voice, "and yet, the simple name of golden fossil rings in our ears like a threat. It's up to us to appoint ourselves its guardians. I shall buy the supposed fossilized animal."

"You might not be the only bidder," suggested Jean Chapuis.

"Bah! The other competitors won't have reasons as powerful as mine for wanting to acquire it. It'll be sufficient for us to pay the price."

"Who will you send to Japan?"

"Send someone out there? Why? Do I not have the means of seeing and hearing what is happening at the auction without leaving my laboratory? Do I not have the Oroniphone and the Cyclopean Eye?"

Thanks to those marvelous instruments, which gave the human voice and gaze an almost unlimited range, Oronius had, in fact, been able to follow the conversations and various incidents in the Auction Rooms of Yokohama.

Contrary to his expectation, he found facing him a particularly serious competitor in the person of the old fakir. The formidable bid launched by the latter had opened his eyes. So, comprehending the necessity of discouraging such an adversary immediately, he had launched simultaneously the doubled bid and the challenge that must have stupefied the audience.

In the hall of the Auction Rooms of Yokohama, the fakir had stood up. He did not seem disposed to abandon the contest. On the contrary, one might have thought that the name of Oronius was a stimulant for him. Did he have unlimited resources at his disposal, then? If so, who could have furnished him with such treasures?

"It's not enough to bid," he sniggered. "It's necessary to prove one's solvency. In sum, you've only heard an offer made by a voice affirming that it is that of Oronius. What guarantees the authenticity of that voice? Is it not that of a practical joker? For myself, I'm ready to pay cash, and I have the proof of it. Demand that your Oronius show his Orons! Here, look, is the price offered, in diamonds."

He took from beneath his garments a rather voluminous metal box, and opened it.

Everyone advanced his head, and had to recoil in tumult, for at the moment when the aged ascetic was about to plunge his hand into the box in order to exhibit the announced jewels, a luminous ray seemed to spring from the ground and strike the coffer.

With a cry of pain, the fakir immediately let go and started to shake his hands as if he had been atrociously burned. The box had turned very red, and a thick smoke emerged from it. When it had dissipated, everyone could see that the coffer was empty.

Brought by the oroniphone, a sarcastic snigger resounded.

“That’s truly fine money. Where did you acquire that talent for fabricating fake diamonds? Unfortunately for you, they couldn’t resist the action of my Z-rays, which volatilized the substances of which you composed them. You’re only an old thief. Withdraw quickly if you don’t want me to clarify the reasons for your intervention. Of what interest to you are the contents of the golden fossil?”

The curiosity with which Oronius threatened him probably importuned the old fakir, because he drew away immediately.

“I’m abandoning the game,” he muttered, with a visible chagrin. “Sell the object. But let the buyer beware. This Yoghi doesn’t only manufacture fake diamonds. He possesses a more genuine power, which those who attempt to take away the golden serpent will test at their expense. It isn’t in the hands of Oronius yet, and I doubt that it will ever reach him.”