

VAMIREH

A Romance of Primitive Times

I. The Bellicose Night

Twenty thousand years ago, the North Pole was orientated toward a star in Cygnus. On the plains of Europe the mammoth was about to become extinct, while the emigration of the large wild beasts toward the Land of Light and the northward flight of the reindeer were coming to an end. The aurochs, the urus and the red deer were grazing forests and savannahs. The colossal cave-bear had perished in the depths of its caverns a long time ago.

In those days, the men of Europe, the tall dolichocephali,¹ extended from the Baltic to the Mediterranean, from the West to the East. More reclusive cave-dwellers than their ancestors of the Solutrean Age, but still nomadic, their technology was already advanced and their art sensitive. Sketches traced with frail chisels, timidly but faithfully, were the brain's struggle toward dreams, against the brutality of appetites. Later, when the Asiatic invasion came, art died out and that charming employment was only recovered after a long interval.

In south-eastern Europe, in the season of renewal, with the night two-thirds gone, the voices of carnivorous beasts were resounding in the ash-gray light of a large valley. In the intervals of silence, a river sang the life of fluids, the euphony of waves; the alders and poplars replied in whispers and intermittent harmonies. The star Venus was rising in the east. The procession of the immortal constellations was visible between the vagabond clouds. Altair, Vega and the Plough were rotating around the pole star in Cygnus.

While ferocious or fearful life palpitated in the darkness, hurrying to the celebrations and battles of love or nourishment, a thinking mind joined in. On the bank of the river, on the edge of a solitary rock, a silhouette emerged from the Humans' cave. He stood there, still and attentive, sometimes looking up at the Star of the East. Some vague dream or inkling of astral esthetics preoccupied the watcher, less rare among these ancestors of Art than many historical populations. His veins throbbed with robust health; the nocturnal breeze charmed his face; he enjoyed the rumors and clams of virgin nature fearlessly, in the full consciousness of his strength.

Meanwhile, a delicate light appeared beneath the star Venus. The boomerang of the Moon appeared, its radiance expanding over the river and the trees, dappled with long shadows. Then the form of the tall hunter, his shoulders covered with an urus-pelt cloak, stood out more clearly. His pale face, painted with lines of red lead, was broad beneath his deep and combative skull. His horn-pointed spear hung obliquely from his back, and in his right hand he was holding a massive oak-wood club.

At the touch of the moonlight, the landscape seemed less grim. There were white wings fluttering among the poplars; paradisaical corners could be glimpsed on the plain; there was a visible general palpitation, a timid protest against the ferocities of darkness. Even the voices diminished, the battle raging less ardently in the nearby forest, where the wild beasts' appetites for sex and blood were satiated.

Weary of immobility, the man walked along the river at the lithe pace of a hunter. After 500 meters he stopped, poised, his spear held ready at head height.

An agile silhouette appeared at the edge of a grove of maples: a red deer with ten-point antlers. The hunter hesitated, but the tribe obviously had abundant provisions of meat, for, disdaining the pursuit, he watched the animal move away on its slender legs, with its head thrown back, the entirety of its beautiful body, designed for running, launched into the reddish gleam.

"Llô! Llô!" he said, not without sympathy. His instinct anticipated the approach of a predator, some powerful cat on the prowl. Indeed, half a minute later, a leopard emerged from behind the

¹ 19th century scientists attempting to classify different human types often made use of the "cephalic index," a number derived by dividing the maximum breadth of the cranium by its maximum length and multiplying by 100. A cephalic index below 80 was generally reckoned to signify "dolichocephaly," and one above 80 "brachycephaly," although there were variant schemes with additional subcategories.

troglydytes' rock, launching itself forward with lightning speed in immense bounds. The man got his spear and club ready then, attentively, sniffing the wind with his nerves in tumult. The leopard passed by like foam on the river, soon disappearing from sight. The hunter's delicate ears perceived its course over the soft earth for several minutes more. "Llô! Llô!" he repeated, slightly excited, striking an arrogantly challenging pose.

Minutes went by; the horns of the crescent moon were already clearer. Small creatures were brushing through the bushes on the river-bank; large frogs were croaking amid the water-plants. The man savored the simple sensuality of living beside the luxury of open waters, and the play of shadows and light; then he moved on again, his ears pricked, his eyes—accustomed to the semi-darkness—on the lookout for nocturnal ambushes. "Hoi?" he murmured, in an interrogative tone, as he took refuge in the shadow of a bush.

A noise of galloping hooves, vague at first, came closer and became more precise. The deer reappeared, moving just as rapidly, but less steadily, in its headlong flight. It was sweating, and its breath was too sonorous. Fifty paces behind was the leopard, untiring and full of grace, already victorious.

The astonished man, annoyed by the carnivore's rapid victory, felt an increasing desire to intervene, when something frightful occurred. In the distance, on the edge of the maples, in the full glare of the moonlight, a massive silhouette appeared—in which, from its 20 meter bound and its thick mane, the man recognized the almost-sovereign beast: a lion. The poor deer, mad with fright, made an abrupt and awkward detour, fell back, and suddenly found itself beneath the leopard's trenchant claws.

There was a brief, frantic struggle, and the dying deer made a choking sound. The leopard held itself rigid in alarm; the lion was approaching at a tranquil pace. Thirty paces away it came to a halt, with a growl, not yet crouching down. The quaternary leopard, large in stature, hesitated, furious about the effort made in vain considering the risk of battle—but the louder voice of the dominant beast reverberated through the valley, sounding the attack, and the leopard gave way, retreating without haste, with a mewl of rage and humiliation, its head stretched toward the tyrant. The other was already ripping up the deer, devouring huge chunks of the stolen prey, paying no heed to the vanquished animal—which continued its retreat, exploring the shadows with its emerald-gold eyes.

The man, rendered prudent by the proximity of the lion, hid himself scrupulously, but not fearfully, in his leafy retreat, ready for any adventure.

After a brief interval of furious consumption, the beast paused; anxiety and doubt appeared in its whole attitude: in the bristling of its mane, and its anguished wariness. Suddenly, as if convinced, it seized the deer firmly in its jaws, threw it over its shoulders and set off at a run. It had covered 400 meters when a monstrous beast emerged at almost the same spot where it had appeared itself shortly before. Intermediate in form and gait between a tiger and a lion, but more colossal, the sovereign of the forest and the savannah symbolized Force as it stood there in the vaporous gleam.

The man trembled, stirred to the utmost depths of his being.

After pausing under the ash-trees, the animal set off on the chase. It moved like a cyclone, covering the ground effortlessly, pursuing the fleeing lion westwards—while the leopard, having stopped, watched the scene. The two dwindling silhouettes vanished.

Again the man was thinking of quitting his retreat—for the leopard did not scare him—when things became complicated. The lion came back obliquely, having been forced to make a detour by some obstacle—a pool or a gully. The man laughed derisively, mocking the beast for not having calculated its flight better, and hid himself away again, for the colossal antagonists were heading almost straight for him. Slowed down by the detour and the deer's weight, however, the runaway was losing ground.

What should he do? The hunter inspected the surroundings; to reach one of the poplars he would have to run 200 meters; in any case, the *Felis spelaea*² could climb trees. As for the troglodytes' rock, that was ten times as far away. He decided to see what would happen.

² *Felis spelaea* was a fossil cat first identified by Georg Goldfuss in 1810. It was often called the "saber-toothed tiger" or the "cave lion" before paleontologists settled on "saber-toothed cat." It seems reasonable to maintain Rosny's slightly awkward but entirely typical preference for the Latin term here, although I have occasionally substituted common names for other Linnean terms in the interests of reader-friendliness (i.e. "cowries" for *Cypraea lucida* and "periwinkles" for *Littorina*) when the references are merely casual.

He did not have long to wait. Within two minutes, the wild beasts reached the vicinity of his hiding-place. There, seeing that flight was in vain, the lion dropped the deer and waited. There was a pause similar to the earlier one, when the leopard had held the prey. All around there was the silence of the annunciatory hour: the interval when nocturnal creatures were going to sleep and diurnal ones waking up to the light. There was a faint glimmer of light, on treetops bathed in pale wool, on clumps of grass trembling in every blade in the hesitant westerly breeze, and around the entire perimeter, there was the vague confused natural ambush composed of arborescent frontiers, straits and silky bands of sky. Up above were the stellar night-lights, the psalm of eternal life.

On a mound, the tall and dominating profile of the *Felis spelaea* was outlined by the moonlight, its mane swept back over a pelt speckled like a panther's, its brow flat and its jaws pre-eminent. Once king of Chellean Europe, the species was now in decline, reduced to narrow bands of territory. Lower down was the lion, its breath hoarse, its flanks in tumult and its heavy paw posed on the deer, hesitant before the colossus as the leopard had previously been in its own presence, with a phosphorescence of mingled fear and anger in its eyes. Lurking in the semi-darkness, already harmonized with the drama, was the man.

Releasing a muffled roar, the *spelaea* shook its mane and began to descend. The recoiling lion, its teeth bared, released its prey for two seconds; then, in despair, its pride injured, it came back with a roar more resounding than its adversary's, and set its paw back on the deer. That was the acceptance of the battle. In spite of its prodigious strength, the *spelaea* did not respond immediately. Pausing, drawn back, it examined the lion, estimating its strength and agility. The other, with the pride of its race, stood upright, head raised. There was a second roar from the aggressor, a resounding reply from the lion, and they found themselves a single bound apart.

"Llô! Llô!" whispered the man.

The *spelaea* crossed the intervening distance, its monstrous paw raised. It met its adversary's claws. For two seconds the red paw and the spotted claw confronted one another, in the final pause. Then the attack was launched, a confusion of jaws and manes, accompanied by raucous cries, while blood began to flow.

At first, the lion drew back under the formidable assault. Soon disengaged, it launched a flank attack with a sideways leap, and the battle became indecisive, the *spelaea's* speed nullified. Then there was the frenzy of living bodies, the quivering of giant muscles, the indecision of reckless—and thus ineffectual—forces, the bristling of manes in the moonlight, the unfolding of flesh like the palpitations of maritime waves, the foam of maws and the phosphorescence of wild eyes, the hoarse grunts like the sobbing of a storm in the oak-trees...

Finally, with a terrible blow, the lion was struck down, collapsing at full stretch; like lightning, the *spelaea* was upon it, slashing its belly open. It struggled, with frightful roars. It succeeded in disengaging itself again, its entrails hanging out and its mane red. Understanding the impossibility of retreat, and that the other would show it no mercy, it faced up to the adversary without hesitation, and re-engaged in combat so furiously that the *spelaea* could not get hold of it again for several minutes. The end was approaching, however; the vanquished creature's strength was decreasing rapidly. Seized again, and pinned against the ground, the lion's torture began as the stronger beast persisted. The lion's viscera were ripped out; its bones were broken between omnipotent fangs; its face was crushed and deformed...and its roars of agony echoed across the horizon, ever more raucous and weaker, soon dying away into sighs, coughs and a quiver of vertebrae. Finally, there was one last convulsion of the throat, a lamentable sigh—and the sovereign beast died.

At first, the *spelaea* persisted in rending the cadaver's still-vibrant flesh, in the voluptuousness of vengeance and the fear of a return to life. Finally, reassured, it cast the lion aside with a disdainful thrust, and roared its triumph and challenge at the shadows. Its shoulders and thorax were bleeding from large cuts.

The first light of dawn appeared, a filtration of quicksilver on the low horizon. The Moon's bow faded and became blurred. The *spelaea*, having licked its wounds, feeling hunger returning, launched itself upon the carcass of the deer. Weary, and too far away from its lair, it sought a retreat in which it could feast in the shade. The nearby bush in which the hunter was hiding attracted its gaze, and it started dragging its prey toward it.

Meanwhile, fascinated by the magnificence of the battle, the man was still contemplating the victor when he saw it coming toward him.

A breath of charnel terror and horripilation passed over him, without him losing his instinct for combat and calculation. He thought that, after such a battle, avid for rest and nourishment, the *spelaea* would doubtless pay no heed to his retreat. However, he could not be certain of that; he remembered tales told by old men late in the evening about the big cats' hatred of humans. Rare, and in continuing decline, they seemed to have an inkling of the role of primates in their extinction, and satisfied their confused resentment every time they encountered a solitary individual.

As these memories strayed through the watcher's mind, he wondered whether the shelter of the bushes or the bare savannah would be preferable if he were attacked. If the former nullified the speed of the beast, the latter made it easier to throw a spear and wield a club. There was no time for lengthy hesitation; the *spelaea* was already parting the foliage.

The man leapt sideways, his choice abruptly made. He emerged from the bushes by the easiest route, at right-angles to the gap through which the monster was entering. The rustle of the branches disturbed the *spelaea*, which moved around the edge. Seeing the human silhouette emerge, it roared. At this threat, with all thought of escape extinct, the hunter raised his spear, his muscles supple and docile, and took aim. The weapon quivered, and flew straight into the feline's throat.

"Ehô! Ehô!" cried the man, brandishing his long club in both hands. Then he stood still, solidly—a handsome human giant, a clear-sighted hero of the ages of strife.

The *spelaea* advanced, gathering itself, calculating its leap. With marvelous ease, the man moved aside, letting the monster pass by; then, just as it came back at an angle, his club descended like a mighty hammer and vertebrae cracked. A roar was cut short, and the fallen colossus abruptly became still—and the man repeated his victorious battle-cry: "Ehô! Ehô!" He maintained his defensive pose, however, fearful of a recovery, contemplating the beast with its open large yellow eyes, its half-meter-long claws, its giant muscles its gaping mouth full of the blood of the lion and the deer: that whole miraculous organism of war, with a pale belly beneath its yellow coat with black spots.

The *Felis spelaea* was quite dead, however; it would never make the darkness tremble again. The man felt a great sense of well-being in his breast: the swelling of an exceedingly pleasant pride; an enlargement of personality, of life, of self-confidence, which rendered him meditative and nervous before the luminous flowering of the dawn.

The first scarlet fanfares were rising over the horizon as the breeze increased. The small creatures of the daylight were opening their eyes one by one, the birds chirping their delight, turned towards the east with their little breasts swelling. In the fine mist, the river had a slightly dull tinplate appearance at first; then the splendor of the clouds plunged a shivering world of shapes and tints into the water. The tops of the tall poplars and the short grasses of the savannah trembled with the same ardor of life. Already the Sun had appeared above the distant forest; its rays poured over the valley, punctuated by the interminable shadows of slender trees.

The man extended his arms, in a confused religiosity with no precise object of worship, perceiving the force of the radiance, the eternity of the Sun, the ephemeral nature of his own being. Then he laughed, and repeated his triumphant cry: "Ehô! Ehô! Ehô!"

And the humans appeared at the mouth of the cavern.