

THE AGE OF LEAD

I. An Inconceivable Epidemic

It is irrefutable that the Gabon enjoys an elevated temperature, and it is no less certain that the days pass placidly there, exempt from the ridiculous trepidation of European life. Libreville, the colony's capital, is a delightful sea-port, with its picturesque aloe- and mangrove-wood huts, surrounded by gardens overflowing with abundant vegetation or dominated by cacti, lentisks, houseleeks and bocabungas. There are also sturdier edifices, built for the use of white men, but in the indigenous style; the bank is a beautiful building in pink brick, ornamented with genista bark, and the Lieutenant-Governor's palace a pretty tricolor house in peperino stone, aloe-wood branches and carob hearts.

Pasturelands extend around the city, which nourish numerous livestock—notably herds of buffalo whose steaks, braised with Congo onions, provide feasts for travelers. Eucalyptus and coconut woods punctuate the grasslands, where cockatoos, garden warblers and marmosets frolic.¹ Rattlesnakes and shrews swarm in the long grass.

The native villagers are gentle and cheerful by nature, shiny black in color; they are no more cannibals than the permanent secretary of the Académie Française. Everything in this blissful place seems, therefore, to respire the sweetness of life; and everything there was, indeed, respiring when, at 5:45 p.m. on March 21, 19-- , a strange combination of circumstances contrived to disturb the legitimate quietude of M. Parmesif, the colony's Lieutenant-Governor.

Under the veranda with blue-paned bay windows, judiciously opening on to the cool shade of the garden, the Lieutenant-Governor and his faithful secretary, the elegant Monsieur Saumaître, both clad in white linen suits, were slowly drinking exquisite iced lemonade through straws. Between suctions, they were smoking odorous cigars, and whether they were sucking or puffing to the sway of their rocking-chairs, the mute and blissful gentlemen were not thinking about anything at all.

Their thought-free silence was suddenly torn apart by cries, sobs and an eruption of howls from Mademoiselle Lotte Parmesif, aged seven. The little girl was holding a bizarre package: a sort of ball of flaccid flesh, which she threw on to the table bearing the lemonade. The ball unwound; paws and a head emerged, and a frightful, unidentifiable little creature began bounding around the room. Meanwhile, Lotte curled up, weeping in her father's arms, and moaned: "Adolphe! Something's wrong with Adolphe, Papa!"

The Lieutenant-Governor then recognized the bounding animal as young Adolphe, the child's pet capuchin monkey. "Catch him! Catch him, Saumaître!"

The elegant secretary bounded in pursuit of the minuscule quadrumane, and collected it from the wardrobe, using a monocle as bait. "Why, what's wrong with the monkey?" he asked in his turn, while the trembling animal rolled its frightened eyes.

"Something that's causing him to lose his hair," declared Parmesif—and he pulled out a few tufts that were still clinging to Adolphe's thigh, as easily as one removes the leaves from an overcooked artichoke. The capuchin monkey offered no resistance, nor did it cry; it did not seem to feel any pain; it limited itself to shivering, while stupidly clacking its jaws. Lotte began to cry again.

"Come on, calm down," her father said. "If Adolphe's ill, we'll look after him."

As he dried the child's tears, Madame Parmesif came in like a gust of wind. She was a handsome plump lady, with thick blonde hair and a little make-up on her eyebrows and a face, dressed in a jonquil kimono. She was followed by a mournful dog. She seemed very excited. "Gustave!" she said, violently. "Take a look at Top!"

Monsieur Parmesif observed that his wife's spaniel was losing its hair as copiously as his daughter's capuchin monkey.

¹ Falk's natural history is blithely askew; several of the species he mentions in this chapter are not native to Central Africa. The most obvious sore thumbs are marmosets (*ouistitis* in French) and the capuchin monkey (*sapajou* in French), which are only found in South America, but his entire approach is cavalier.

“Yes,” Madame Parmesif went on, “Top and Adolphe! Can you explain it?”

“Some kind of contagious alopecia,” he suggested.

He had scarcely made this remark when an even stranger phenomenon renewed his amazement. A bird had just fallen through an open window in the glazed ceiling; its wings could no longer sustain it, because it was very nearly de-feathered. Almost at the same time, Sokota, the Congolese servant, came on to the veranda; she was crying, and carrying a cage containing what was surely the most ridiculous parrot in the world.

Kiko had ceased to be the splendid multicolored macaw of the front steps; nothing more remained to him but a row of colored feathers on his head and rump—with the result that, with his round eyes, his brick-red skin, the row of feathers on his head and his guttural squawks, he resembled a grotesque and tiny caricature of a naked Redskin on the warpath.

Young Lotte howled even more loudly.

“Come on, Sokota!” said Monsieur Parmesif, impatiently. “Take the child away—we have to talk.”

“The post, Monsieur le Lieutenant-Gouverneur.”

“Thanks, Saumaître...why...well...that’s odd! And this letter too...and this....read this, Saumaître...”

The handsome Madame Parmesif and the impeccable Saumaître seized the papers that the Lieutenant-Governor’s feverish hand was holding out to them, and it was their turn to utter an arpeggio of exclamations.

This resulted from the correspondence from Libreville and its surroundings, which revealed that all the animals on the land and in the air were losing their fur and feathers, at variable speeds but to a similar degree—that of total deprivation. For no apparent reason, the cattle, sheep, horses, dogs, cats, pigs and rabbits on the farms, all the poultry in the chicken-runs, the animals living in luxury in the houses and the wild animals in the woods, were being visibly transformed into supernudities—if one might put it thus—as wretched as they were baroque.

With his thumb on his forehead, Parmesif reflected. Violently, he cried: “Good God! What’s all this about? A veritable conspiracy of beasts. Here, where we’re so tranquil! We must mount an investigation, demand reports, and produce them. What do you think of this business, Saumaître?”

The perfect secretary replied, deferentially: “It seems to require attention.”

“Come in!” shouted Parmesif.

A black manservant came in, with several telegrams in his hand. The Lieutenant-Governor opened them anxiously. He read aloud:

“From Najalé: *Maritime Commissioner to Lieutenant-Governor. Conspicuous rain of bird feathers on coast. Please telephone instructions.*

“From the Administration at Nyanga: *Administrative livestock herds victim general alopecia. Please send official veterinarian urgently.*

“From Mayouniba: *Rubber plantations in danger. General shriveling of district vegetation. Awaiting orders.*

“From Lastourville: *Epidemic in park. Ostriches de-plumed. Telegraph advice.*

“And from the plantations of Franceville: *Banana-trees suffering. Coconut-palms dying. Send help urgently.*”

The pale Madame Parmesif said: “The coconut-palms? The banana-trees? Oh!”

“Yes,” said her husband, whose face was crimson. “The plants are joining in now. Damn it, Saumaître, what does it all mean?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

Behind the door, however, loud voices were raised. Two black men were arguing bitterly.

“No see Massa Tenant-gov’nor!” declare the butler.

“Me haf talk him urgent!” protested another voice, which Parmesif recognized as that of one of his old farmers.”

A white-haired native came in, with his peaked straw hat in his hands. He was dressed up, wearing a blue jacket, khaki trousers, and a red cretonne cravat; yellow gloves compensated for the grey nudity of his feet. There was a shiny watch-chain in his waistcoat, but no watch. Without any preamble, he began: “Mass gov’nor, you cattle is losing dey skin.”

“Their skin? Jibber-jabber! Their hair, you mean?”

“No, no. Dey hair already gone. Now dey skin is fallin...like dis.” And the old man demonstrated by detaching a long strip of epidermis from his arm.

“Oh! What! Saumaître, telephone Monsieur Réminiscent—tell him to come and see me immediately.”

“Very well.”

While his secretary strode stiffly to the telephone, Parmesif set his elbows on the balcony of the veranda. He could see his daughter and her companion immobile in the garden, contemplating the ground as if petrified. Their attitude alarmed him, but his alarm increased while he mechanically directed a circular glance outside.

He called his wife. “Come and look at this, dear!”

Madame Parmesif hurried to his side.

“Look at the trees,” he continued. “Look! Our beautiful magnolia: don’t the leaves seem to you to have dried up, as if they’d been burned?”

“Yes,” she said, in a choked voice. “Neither its leaves, not those of the other trees, have their natural tint any longer. One might think that they were dying, that they were shriveling up fatally. Oh, my dear, extraordinary things are happening around us. And what’s the matter with Lotte and Sokota?”

She called to her daughter. The child raised her head and threw herself upon the bosom of the old black woman, tearfully. She was clutching a handful of dry grass. Very anxiously, Madame Parmesif said: “Come here right away!”

They hurried over, and little Lotte, her face flooded with tears, held out a bunch of yellowed flowers to her mother.

“Look what’s become of them, Mama!”

Indeed, the flowers, which had been alive, colorful and odorous a day earlier—even an hour earlier—were no longer anything but specters of their former selves, devoid of brightness or perfume.

“Is like dat ever’where, de flow,” said Sokota. “Is all sick, gwin to die.”

“Gustave, Gustave—I’m frightened!”

Parmesif gestured to his wife to shut up, for their daughter was looking at them in terror. He promised the child a large coconut, and she left, consoled. Left alone with Madame Parmesif, he said: “Do you want to drive the child out of her mind?”

“I’m terrified myself,” she replied.

In an agitated voice, he went on: “Calm down. All these fantastic phenomena must have a causal explanation. Anyway, here’s the vet.”

II. *Réminiscent's* Diagnosis

The official veterinarian, Monsieur *Réminiscent*, arrived at a trot, sweating and out of breath. He was the Lieutenant-Governor's neighbor, and while bending down to kiss Madame *Parnesif's* sadly-extended hand, he explained that he had escaped between two consultations. He was a short stout man with a black goatee and a ruddy and acne-ridden complexion, obviously a drinker. A fan woven from little wrinkles spread out from each of his little eyes; he rolled his *rs* as if he were pulverizing bricks.

"Excuse me," he said, "for only staying a moment. My office has been invaded. Apart from my assistant, my wife and my three daughters, I have my niece, Aunt *Anaïs* and the son of the fruiterer who works in my office pounding pomades and mixing distempers..."

"Well, in a word, Monsieur *Réminiscent*, can you explain to us...are we dealing with an epidemic?"

"Not exactly—an epizootic disease."

"All right. Do you know that it extends much further than you think? I have reports, letters and telegrams here; it's affecting almost the whole colony."

"No!"

"It's therefore necessary to take immediate measures—but in order to take them, we need to know the cause..."

"I've found it."

"Oh, do tell us!" begged Madame *Parnesif*.

"Well, here it is: the skin of the infected animals is falling off in strips and sheets; it's a progressive desquamation, in consequence of a sort of molting."

"What?"

"Well, we're in serpent territory. Large and small, they're abundant in the country, and even in the city. No longer ago than yesterday, I found a grass snake asleep on my doormat. Now, we're in the season when snakes shed their skin; that molting has become contagious, that's all."

A silence veiled by amazement greeted this revelation. The audience reflected. Monsieur *Saumaître*, with a great deal of courteous reverence, objected: "It would be the first time..."

"Perhaps—but in matters of science, it's necessary not to despair of anything. This epizootic disease leads me to infer that molting, in snakes, is microbial in origin—and the molt microbe has just turned noxious. Some animals must have consumed shreds of snakeskin left in corners. They've molted in their turn. Others have eaten their skin—or even absorbed contaminated pellicles without eating them, via the dust in the air or in some other way.

"You're not unaware that, for example, scarlet fever is contagious in humans during the season of desquamation. The molt is evidently an analogous sort of fever, for it's accompanied in animals, to begin with, by an elevation of temperature and a congestion of the pharynx. It only remains to identify the molt microbe, for which I have already reserved a name: *Bacillus reminiscens*. Now, this infinitely small organism has revealed itself to be all the more virulent in taking effect for the first time. That's the cause of the lightning spread of the epizootic condition. I've made up lotions and unguents: makeshift therapies. What we need is a serum, then a prophylactic vaccine. We shall find them. It's an important matter." And he clicked his heels joyfully.

"But what about the birds?" said Madame *Parnesif*.

"Birds scavenge, pecking the ground. Besides, don't forget that some birds also molt."

"They lose their feathers, not their skin!"

"A difference of degree, a question of more or less. Here's something that will convince you. I've made use of the experimental method, highly recommended in science. I took two canaries; to one, I gave snakeskin, via the beak; to the other, nothing. The experimental canary lost its feathers and its skin twice as fast as the control canary. It's peremptory. Have you any sick animals here?"

"First of all, there's poor *Top* here," sighed Madame *Parnesif*. "Look, he's almost hairless..."

"Indeed. It's not pretty. And his skin is starting to come away too. Perfect. Same treatment as the comrades: applications of my lotion, *reminiscine*. For the larger animals, Monsieur le Gouverneur, use a brush to wash them with *reminiscol*, my liniment. You can obtain these products from me."

"No internal remedy?"

“A little later, a few good purges, Monsieur le Gouverneur. Would you excuse me, Madame? I have to attend to my fellow citizens.”

“Just a moment. What about the plants? How do you explain their withering?”

“That’s not within my competence—you’ll have to ask a botanist. Personally, I think it might be due to the depredations of an insect analogous to *Phylloxera*, which I’m not qualified to discover. On which note...”

He bade farewell.

“Shall we have the pleasure of seeing you this evening?” asked Madame Parmesif.

“I shall try to escape briefly, my dear Madame. No one has been talking about anything but your reception for a week. I shall try to put in an appearance.”

“Alas,” she said, plaintively, “I fear that these events do not bode well.”

“So far as I’m concerned, I don’t deplore them,” the veterinarian replied. “Be tranquil, dear Madame. Your *soirée* will be brilliant.”

The general opinion, after his departure, was that Monsieur Réminiscent was becoming unbearable, but that one had to smile at him, since he had suddenly become the arbiter of destiny in Libreville and its surrounds.