

## *Before the Bronze Age*

As readers of our two previous volumes, *The City of Gold and Lepers* and *The Troglodytes of Mount Everest/The Giants of Black Lake*,<sup>1</sup> already know, there is virtually no biographical information about the writer who signed indifferently “Guy d’Armen,” “Francis Annemary,” and “Jacques Diamant” (as well as employing other *noms-de-plume*, but these three are the most frequent) a number of adventure novels and what turned out to be a huge number of short stories for a number of pulp magazines such as *L’Intrépide* and *Sciences et Voyages* published in France by the Offenstadt Brothers between 1899 and 1939.

Curiously, the character of “Francis Hardant” (in French “Ardan” and “Hardant” are phonetically indistinguishable) appears only in *City of Gold and Lepers* and a few short stories, and even there, his first name seems to vary a great deal. But d’Armen’s characters are all exactly the same: they are about 25, doctors or scientists of some kind, polymaths, explorers, adventurers, tall, blond, strong, brave and resourceful. They all have overbearing millionaire fathers driving them hard and absent mothers, and share the same colorful, megalomaniacal gallery of foes.

One might legitimately wonder why, instead of switching the names of his heroes, d’Armen did not reuse the same protagonist each time. Was it because the Offenstadts discouraged him from turning his stories into a single “series,” fearing that readers might not follow it, or was it because of the necessity dictated by the morals of the times to marry off the hero to the heroine at the end of each novel? We will never know for certain.

One of the things we did when we decided to translate *City of Gold and Lepers* for an American audience was to harmonize d’Armen’s works and use the name of “Francis Ardan” throughout, and skip the marriage at the end, while tightening a few other narrative loose threads. D’Armen wrote quickly, not rereading himself before going to press, was obligated to meet a certain quota of words per chapter (or story) and chapters per novels, and occasionally contradicted himself or digressed somewhat.

But beyond this simple work of editing, we could not help notice—as was the case when we pulled Doctor Omega out of French literary limbo—that young Doctor Ardan was altogether similar to another well-known character of American pulp fiction, in this case the ever popular Clark Savage, Jr., a.k.a. Doc Savage. Hence the notion that Francis Ardan’s globe-trotting exploits, which all take place in the 1920s, are, in reality, the secret exploits of a young Doc Savage, whose first recorded adventure, *The Man of Bronze*, takes place in 1931.

How does that notion withstand the scrutiny of further examination? As it happens, very well, as we shall now demonstrate in the following exercise in fictional biography, for which we are indebted to Rick Lai and Win Scott Eckert, the two most prominent experts on the life of Doc Savage.

According to all biographies, Clark “Doc” Savage Jr. was born on November 12, 1901, on the schooner *Orion* in a cove off the northern tip of Andros Island, Bahamas.

Doc’s father was Clark F. (for Francis) Savage Sr., an American industrialist, explorer and amateur archeologist. Some biographers have claimed that he, too, was a doctor, and a descendent from a proud British lineage from Yorkshire; others that he was a native-born American descended from Richard Henry Savage, who had served as a Rough Rider under Theodore Roosevelt and had fought Indians in the southwestern United States.

There is also some controversy about the identity of Doc’s mother. While some biographers believe her to be Arronaxe Larsen, a descendent of Wolf Larsen, Ned Land and Armand Chauvelin, investigations conducted in France by the undersigned have revealed that she might instead be Jacqueline

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<sup>1</sup> Black Coat Press ISBNs 978-1-932983-03-6 and 978-1-61227-483-6.

Ardan, the granddaughter of space pioneer Michel Ardan, heir of the proud lineage of Chevalier Ardent de Rougecogne, whose exploits were chronicled by the historian François Craenhals.

Under French Law, a child may be registered by and in the name of his mother if he/she was born out of wedlock or if the marriage was not registered with the French authorities. A French birth certificate listing the baby as “Francis Clarke [sic!] Michel Ardan” born of father [left blank] and Jacqueline Gwendoline Estelle Ardan was recently located in the archives of the Mairie d’Asnières, near Paris.

The final fate of Jacqueline Ardan is still controversial. According to some, she was killed in Siberia in the summer of 1908; others claimed she drowned in 1902.

In the early 1900s, a group of wealthy members of the notorious Gun Club, led by Hareton Ironcastle,<sup>2</sup> became concerned about the threat posed by the Black Coats and other crime syndicates. Clark Savage Sr.—who sometimes went by the alias of “Francis Ardan Sr.” to preserve his anonymity—was a member of this group. He proposed to train his son’s mind and body from an early age to give him great strength, endurance, a mastery of the martial arts and vast scientific knowledge in order to fight this threat. The Gun Club agreed to fund this training.

Ardan Sr. began recruiting scientists to oversee his son’s training. Unfortunately, in 1903, one of the men he hired was Dr. Howey, the leader of the gang of the Secret Raiders<sup>3</sup> and a high-ranking member of the Black Coats, also known as Dr. Erich Heinz Malbodius. However, his plan to kidnap young Francis and extort a fortune from his father failed. The consequence of that failure made the Kaiser’s Secret Service aware of the potential of the Ardan boy.<sup>4</sup>

Over the next decade, young Francis studied various disciplines with Sherlock Holmes, Arsène Lupin, Richard Wentworth, Dr. Thorndyke, Craig Kennedy, Kent Allard, Sexton Blake, Harry Houdini, and Tarzan.

In 1911, Ardan Sr. found a legendary Mayan “city of gold” in Central America and thus vastly increased his personal fortune.

In 1917, Francis enrolled at John Hopkins University as a medical student, but left soon after to fight in World War I. Upon his arrival in France, a friend of his father, the famous French explorer Léo Saint-Clair, a.k.a. The Nyctalope, introduced Francis to the *Société Secrète des Aventuriers*.<sup>5</sup>

Ardan then joined the Lafayette Escadrille and flew many missions, especially against the notorious Rittmeister Hans Von Hammer. In March 1918, with the help of Lord John Roxton, another friend of his father and a member of the London branch of the Gun Club, and his aunt, Pamela May Thibault (who had married his uncle Alex),<sup>6</sup> Francis managed to destroy a super-gun the Germans were using to threaten Paris.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See J.-H. Rosny’s *Hareton Ironcastle’s Amazing Adventure* [L’Étonnant Voyage de Hareton Ironcastle] (1922) included in *The Mysterious Force*, Black Coat Press, ISBN 978-1-935558-37-8.

<sup>3</sup> See Arthur Bernède & Louis Feuillade’s *THE RETURN OF JUDEX*, Black Coat Press, ISSN 978-1-61227-159-0.

<sup>4</sup> See Rick Lai’s “*The Midas Menace*” included in this volume.

<sup>5</sup> The *Société Secrète des Aventuriers* [Secret Society of Adventurers] is an exclusive French explorers club founded in 1657 by Hercule-Savinien Cyrano de Bergerac. Its prestigious roster of members has included at one time or another (in alphabetical order) Michel Ardan, Nestor Burma, Chantecoq, Robert Darvel, Sâr Dubnotal, Jérôme Fandor, Camille Flammarion, Rodolphe de Gerolstein, Antoine Gerpré, Hareton Ironcastle, Jean Kariven, Armand & Robert Lavarède, M. Lecoq, Dr. Abel Lenoir, Aurore Lescure, Arsène Lupin, Jacques Massé, Pierre de Mésange, Bob Morane, the Duc de Multipliandre, Cigale Mystère, Dr. Omega, Frédéric-Jean Orth, Rocambole, Joseph Rouletabille, Lord John Roxton, several Sainte-Claire/Saint-Clairs including Léo Saint-Clair, Hector Servadac, Jean-Pierre Severin, Jacques de Trémeuse, Jean-Louis de Venasque, Teddy Verano and others.

<sup>6</sup> Alex appeared in Kenneth Robeson’s *Brand of the Werewolf*; Pamela May Thibault, his wife, was also the aunt of Jean Thibault, the great French-Canadian secret agent codenamed “IXE-13” as well, on her mother’s side, Douglas Renfrew of the Royal Northwest Mountain Police. They were the parents of Francis’s cousin, Patricia, born in 1914.

<sup>7</sup> See John Peel’s “*The Biggest Guns*” included in this volume.

Alas, Francis was captured by the Germans and sent to the hellish internment camp of Loki where he met his future companions, Ham Brooks, Monk Mayfair, Renny Renwick, Johnny Littlejohn, and Long Tom Roberts. Thanks to their help, he managed to escape in July.<sup>8</sup>

On November 11, 1918, an Armistice was signed and the Great War was over.

According to some biographers, c. 1919-20, Francis went on an expedition with his father and Hareton Ironcastle to Maple White Land in Brazil. Others have claimed that during the same period, Francis, discovering evidence that his paternal grandfather, Stormalong Savage, was marooned on Skull Island, mounted an expedition with his father to rescue their lost relative.

Between 1919 and 1926, Francis managed to earn not one, but two medical degrees, the first from John Hopkins in the U.S., and the second from the Faculté de Médecine of Paris, where he was mentored by Dr. Jules de Grandin. This feat was achieved through the mechanism obtaining “equivalencies” between the two universities, as well as by Francis’ remarkable talent which enabled him to achieve in one year what took other students two, sometimes three, years.

During one his vacations in Southern France, Francis happened to release the legendary Rose Bruyère a.k.a. the Sleeping Beauty, who went on to become the celebrated French heroine known as the Phantom Angel and a later joined the *Société Secrète des Aventuriers*.<sup>9</sup>

During that period, Francis was often encouraged by his father and by Dr. de Grandin to take breaks and go on exploring journeys to remote locations. Some of his adventures were dutifully reported to, and consigned in, the Archives of the *Société Secrète des Aventuriers*, which have just started to be released to the world.

One of the most perilous missions undertaken at that time took place in the Summer of 1921 when Francis and his father were exploring the remotest regions of Upper Siam (now Thailand). There, they encountered a race of artificially-created green-skinned men, the “Jade Men”, who lived a reclusive existence in the mysterious underground city of Inramonda, ruled by His Eternal Wisdom, the Jade Lord. With the assistance of British Archeologist Archibald MacSlaine and his daughter Margaret, the two Ardans managed to defeat the immortal villain and destroy Inramonda, but not before more treasure came flowing into the family coffers.<sup>10</sup>

Towards the end of 1925, as Francis was about to present his graduate thesis at the Sorbonne, he teamed up with Dr. de Grandin to defeat a sinister plan by the Oriental mastermind known as the Yellow Shadow. During this adventure, his path crossed that of the French avenging crime-fighter known as Judex. Judex’s methods to rehabilitate criminals, as well as the colony set up for the same purpose on a Pacific island by fellow member of the *Société Secrète des Aventuriers*, Sâr Dubnotal, provided the inspiration for Francis’ Crime College which he was to implement in 1928.<sup>11</sup>

The following year, 1926, Francis took a few graduate courses in Wien in the Spring then completed his medical studies from both John Hopkins and the Faculté, thus earning the title of “doctor.” In the Summer, he embarked on a cruise around the world with his father, but instead was kidnapped by Captain Mendax, a science pirate who planned on ransoming him for \$100 million. Mendax had built a super-powered flying craft, *The Astaroth*, and operated from a secret base at the top of Mount Everest. Francis escaped with the aid of Milarepa, a Tibetan princess, and eventually returned to destroy Mendax’s base. The pirate was captured and executed by the British.<sup>12</sup>

A few months later, Francis returned to Central Asia and, in an underground city, renewed his acquaintance with the Comte de Bertheville, a.k.a. Kyzyl Kaya, the “Red Wizard”, a 250-year-old alchemist whom he had previously encountered in Mendax’s Citadel. Using scientific secrets from pre-cataclysmic races, Kyzyl Kaya had created giant spiders and other colossal creatures and planned to

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<sup>8</sup> See Philip José Farmer’s *Escape from Loki*.

<sup>9</sup> See Randy Lofficier’s “*The Reluctant Princess*” included in *The Troglodytes of Mount Everest/The Giants of Black Lake*, q.v.

<sup>10</sup> See *The Fall of Inramonda*, to be translated.

<sup>11</sup> See Vincent Jounieaux’s “*The Dreadful Conspiracy*” included in this volume.

<sup>12</sup> See *The Troglodytes of Mount Everest*, q.v.

conquer the world. Francis escaped and soon teamed up with Suleyma, a young Mongolian woman who had fled from an arranged marriage. They were eventually recaptured and turned into giants, but ultimately managed to defeat the Comte.<sup>13</sup>

In the Spring of 1927, Francis spent sometime in the UK<sup>14</sup> before launching himself into a new Tibetan adventure. This time, he met the diabolical Dr. Natas, master of the “City of Gold and Lepers”, who also entertained plans for world domination. With the able help of Louise Ducharme, Francis was able to defeat the evil mastermind and destroy his stronghold.<sup>15</sup>

The following year, in January 1928, at the behest of Ironcastle, Francis traveled to the Arctic and rescued fellow member of the *Société Secrète des Aventuriers* Jean-Louis de Vénasque from a strange and advanced race of reptilian humanoids. That journey, in turn, provided the inspiration to build for himself what he would call later his “Fortress of Solitude”.<sup>16</sup>

Later that year, while working on a scientific degree at the Collège de France, Francis was asked to investigate mysterious hurricanes that perturbed maritime traffic in the French Pacific. He was able to expose and defeat the science pirate Krakatax, master of Hurricane Island. During that adventure, Francis rescued the youngest daughter of American billionaire William Dorgan, Mabel Dorgan. He was ably assisted by an operative from the Continental Detective Agency who went by the alias of “John Flash.”<sup>17</sup>

Towards the end of 1929, Francis and Ironcastle teamed up again to thwart a scheme hatched by Queen Antinea and the villainous Harry Killer to use extraterrestrial vegetal life forms to take over the world.<sup>18</sup>

As the Archives of the *Société Secrète* for the years 1929 and 1930 are being released, more heretofore unknown adventures of Doctor Francis Ardan are coming to light. In addition to various exploits undertaken during his exploring journeys across the globe, we now know that Doc Ardan found a Lost City in Patagonia<sup>19</sup> and that, together with the South American adventuress Dolores Metaxas, he used the Ultra-Z rays technology he had just discovered to prevent the tyrant Demonio from taking over Venezuela.<sup>20</sup>

No doubt other similar exploits will be revealed in the course of time, based on the partial list of files reproduced here.

Jean-Marc Lofficier

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<sup>13</sup> See *The Giants of Black Lake*, q.v.

<sup>14</sup> See Philip José Farmer & Win Scott Eckert’s *The Evil in Pemberley House*.

<sup>15</sup> See *The City of Gold and Lepers*, q.v.

<sup>16</sup> See Jason Scott Aiken’s “*Ardan at the Pole*” included in this volume, and Charles Derennes’ *The People of the Pole*, Black Coat Press, ISBN 978-1-934543-39-9.

<sup>17</sup> See *The Hurricane Master*, to be translated.

<sup>18</sup> See Christopher Paul Carey & Win Scott Eckert’s “*Iron and Bronze*” included in this volume. Travis Hiltz’ story “*Family Reunion*” takes place simultaneously.

<sup>19</sup> See *The Secret of Frigidopolis*, to be translated.

<sup>20</sup> See *The Ultra-Z Rays*, to be translated.