

Chapter One

THE GULF

“A true mirror! If it were frozen, it would be a fine skating-rink. Too bad the weather isn’t icy! But no!”

Leaning over the sea, pronouncing those words with a hint of regret, the individual translating his impressions of the voyage thus far in a loud voice mopped his brow,

The cosmopolitan group surrounding him nodded assent

A cosmopolitan group, we said. It was, in fact, composed of a young Chinese woman, a singular African and a gracious specimen of the white race.

The Chinese woman was named Mandarinette. We shall soon specify the bizarre circumstances in which she had been introduced into the society.

The African was called Julep; his body, once uniformly black, like that of an honest descendant of Ham, presented strange variations which made his skin a color chart of all hues. He owed that eccentric envelope not to superficial dyes but simply to experiments in skin discoloration carried out on him by his master, the greatest scientist of the epoch. Let us note in addition that Julep was as proud as can be of his polychromy.

The young white woman responded to the casual nickname of Turlurette. She had a piquant physiognomy, in the middle of which projected the amusingly turned-up little nose of an authentic Parisienne. By that token she proved herself to be a compatriot of the speaker who would have preferred the temperature to be a little less high.

In addition, as a promise of marriage had been made between Mademoiselle Turlurette and Monsieur Victor Laridon, the advocate of coolness, no one contested that the couple must be very well matched.

All of them, on that sultry May afternoon, were leaning over the side of the yacht *La Stella*, whose prow was cleaving through the mirror of the Indian Ocean at a rapid speed.

What was the vessel’s destination? Why had equipment and provisions sufficient for a distant expedition been stowed in its holds? That was the secret of the owners of the yacht, two young people, also fiancés, who were on the bridge chatting in low voices not far from the group formed by the quartet that we have just described.

Next to them were agitating two delightful little papillon dogs, Pipigg and Kukuss.

To tell the truth, neither Cyprienne Oronius nor Jean Chapuis, her associate and fiancé, could have explained in a satisfactory fashion the mysterious conditions in which *La Stella* was navigating.

Every morning and every evening the route was indicated by them to the captain, but with regard to the next day’s, they would only have been able to respond with sincerity that they had no knowledge of it. What, then, inspired them? By what means did that indication reach them? The ship’s telegraphist swore to his great gods that it was not, at any rate, via the wireless. But, the crew being royally paid, no one worried or protested and the vessel pursued its route placidly, guided by the mysterious will.

What the young couple would have been able to respond to those astonished by that cruise, so contrary to custom, was that they were obeying an imperious sentiment. For them, the bizarre voyage that was drawing them toward the unknown was a duty.

We shall have occasion before long to clarify that mystery and to reveal the powerful reasons that had impelled the future household to embark with the unique escort of the mechanic Laridon, Master Julep and Cyprienne Oronius’ two chambermaids. For the moment, let us only specify that the daughter of the greatest scientist of the twenty-first century—the illustrious Oronius, who had disappeared in a catastrophe that had nearly annihilated Paris and had turned the heights of Belleville into the crater of a volcano—was a young woman of rare beauty.

That beauty, which had not yet attained its full bloom, made Cyprienne Oronius’ nineteen years a veritable enchantment. Tall, slim and svelte, with serpentine contours that the light fabric of her fashionable tunic allowed to be divined, she combined all the elegances of a virgin and all the seductions

of a woman. Above a high forehead, as that of a person given to study ought to be, was a rich efflorescence of golden threads, which streamed over the whiteness of her neck and her blonde shoulders. She had breeding, and eyes of an ultramarine blue, which knew how to smile and command, and must have cast trouble into the hearts of all those on which they fixed.

Jean Chapuis, her fiancé, a young engineer of great merit, was twenty-eight, also handsome, with an energetic and masculine beauty, truly worthy of being associated with Cyprienne. Besides which, in addition to the bonds of the heart, were those two elite individuals not attached to one another by an anguishing and tragic past? Had they not undergone, in the company of their faithful companions Laridon and the soubrette Turlurette, the most extraordinary adventures? Was not the presence in their company of the young Chinese woman Mandarinette a kind of living souvenir of that?

Days of living together had brought people closer and created indissoluble bonds by teaching them to know one another and esteem one another. Jean Chapuis and Cyprienne had been able to measure the devotion of Laridon and Turlurette, and they were not unaware that, in their example, Mandarinette rivaled Master Julep in zeal.

Laridon, in particular, claimed in all circumstances, in tirades somewhat excessively ornamented with argot, that he was ready to throw himself into fire for his employers. An empty boast? Well, no. Was he not in the process of proving that that was not a simple metaphor, since, for love of them, he was presently exposing himself to a tropical sun with which he was *fed up*, to use his own picturesque expression. Loquacity not being his least fault, he could not help cursing and evoking the coolness of skating-rinks.

Fundamentally, and in spite of the unknown toward which he knew he was being borne by the ship's course, he was not far from finding the crossing too calm and almost monotonous.

"Nix on adventures!" he sighed, leaning over the oil-smooth sea whose surface reflected his sympathetic features ironically. "I miss them. That's what comes of bad habits! We've seen so many that I can no longer tolerate homely life. You can laugh, dainty Turlurette, but that's the way it is. I'm intoxicated, as they say. I need my little dose of local upheaval... even of catastrophic novelties."

As his audience protested, sketching objections, he continued in a conciliatory tone: "In sum, anyway, something to shake things up and permit me to exhibit my modest talents. I like to earn the pills I swallow, I do!"

By the word "pills" the worthy mechanic meant the alimentary concentrates that had replaced for humans the indigestible nutriments of olden days.

It is always temeritous to challenge fate. Victor Laridon was about to make an immediate experiment.

The sea, so calm and thus far of a truly exemplary docility, suddenly became agitated, swelling and lifting the yacht to the summit of a gigantic mountain of water.

Turlurette and Mandarinette uttered cries of fright, and Julep's wide eyes started rolling fearfully, white in their dark orbits.

The intrepid Laridon welcomed that manifestation by clapping his hands. "Nice!" he cried. "Here comes a roller-coaster. We're going for a ride. Hold on tight, Turlurette!" And he put his arm round the young woman's waist, while the negro and the Chinese woman, obedient to a sudden inspiration, drew closer together.

At the same time, Cyprienne and Jean Chapuis exchanged glances.

"That phenomenon?" murmured the engineer.

"Can it be the expected summons?"

The young woman did not have time to say anymore. A formidable vortex suddenly and silently rose up from the ocean depths.

In itself and in that region, the phenomenon was not surprising, for the Indian Ocean, with its monsoons, accompanied by periodic cyclones and whirlwinds, has a very bad reputation; mariners distrust its treacheries, with good reason. But the brutal and entirely spontaneous fashion in which the sea had just become irritated and tossed the ship on its undulating surface was nevertheless disquieting, and presented a troubling, almost supernatural character.

Certainly, the engineer Jean Chapuis could not be unaware of the existence of submarine volcanoes, certain eruptions of which are no less terrible than those of their cousins on the surface; he also knew that the convulsions of the terrestrial crust, in certain parts covered by water, can give birth to frightful tidal waves. He had heard mention via Oronius of the one that had been provoked in the Sunda archipelago two centuries before by the terrible explosion of Krakatoa.

The one produced as the yacht was passing, however, surpassed in violence and rapidity all those of which human memory had been able to preserve the memory. At the same time as a column of water, caught by the tornado, rose up in a spiral all the way to the clouds, the basal layer of which was stretched by suction as if to join it, the Ocean seemed to open up. And it did in fact, open up, in the fashion of a gigantic whirlpool, hollowing out its funnel as the Red Sea had once hollowed out in order to permit the passage of the Hebrews.

The mass of water drawn back into high walls opened to such a depth that the rocky bed became perceptible.

“Land ho!” the joker Laridon tried to cry—but his voice caught in his throat. The situation immediately became grave enough to take away any desire to joke.

Balanced on the crest of the gigantic wave that had lifted it up, *La Stella* was suddenly projected down the liquid slope and slid toward the bottom of the gulf with a prodigious velocity, which cut off the respiration of the passengers clinging to the bulwarks and the rigging.

The fall was rapid and brief, scarcely lasting a few seconds. Everyone—owners, mariners, passengers and servants—hardly had time to exchange terrified glances. Then Cyprienne, very pale, felt her hands, disobedient to her will, become detached from the rail to which, instinctively, they had clung hard.

“Jean!” she screamed, bewildered by an inexpressible anguish.

The engineer’s right arm was already around her waist. Was he trying to retain Cyprienne or did he want to follow her? Was he too yielding to the strange force that was snatching the young woman away from her support?

Together, the fiancés lost their balance, were thrown overboard, and disappeared into the turbulent water.

And it was at that moment that the prodigy was produced that marked the beginning of this unforgettable adventure.

Afterwards, Jean Chapuis, was unable to specify the fashion in which it happened; he saw nothing, or almost nothing, of the fall into the abyss; he scarcely retained the memory of a long slide along a wall of water, a vertiginous glissade that obliged him to close his eyes, like Cyprienne, only to open them again when the fall stopped and he felt firm ground beneath his feet.

Astonished to be still alive, he opened his eyes. Then he was able to observe, not without amazement, that he had arrived, safe and sound, at the bottom of the gulf, still holding tight against him the friend of his heart, similarly unhurt. He paraded a bewildered gaze around him, unable to understand how he could have survived that formidable fall, and why the gulf had not yet closed again to engulf them.

“It’s a miracle, Jean,” sighed Cyprienne’s voice, close by.

“Name of a sugar-plum, talk about a toboggan ride!” riposted another voice, that one no more emotional than if it were a matter of a fairground attraction.

Mechanically, the engineer turned his head, and his amazement increased as he discovered his mechanic, Julep and the two soubrettes a few paces away, projected out of the ship like him and reposing, bewildered, on the damp sand of the sea-bed. Shaking himself like a barbet, Laridon had lost none of his verve.

The yacht, carried away by another current, had disappeared at the top of the liquid mountain; but it was to be presumed that it had not escaped unscathed from the adventure, and that it had been smashed or disemboweled, for a multitude of pieces of wreckage launched over the liquid slope, were reaching the bottom of the abyss in their turn.

The evidence of the catastrophe that must have annihilated their ship scarcely struck the escapees; the sentiment of the danger suspended over their heads took possession of all their faculties.

In fact, could they be under any illusion? Inexplicably opened, the damp gulf was about to close again. The ocean bed would be their tomb. It was only a question of seconds. No rescue was possible; no hope was permitted by the situation, which had no other issue but death.

Yes, it was death, terrifying death under the shroud of the ocean. Would it not have been better to have shared the fate of the crew of the yacht, who must at least have been spared the throes of agony?

The temporary escapees scarcely had the leisure to ask themselves that question. They did not even think of communicating their impressions to one another—but their gazes spoke for them. Horrified, they contemplated the strange décor that surrounded them: the ground that the unprecedented cataclysm revealed to their eyes.

How long did they stare at that hallucinatory spectacle? It was doubtless only a few seconds, for the liquid mass looming up like a rearing horse and oscillating, as if it were struggling against an invisible force opposed to its fall, could not leave the gulf whose secret it had betrayed open for long—but there are seconds that seem to last for centuries; the ones lived by the castaways on the ocean bed in that tragic circumstance were certainly among them. The thoughts must have been upset in their heads with a chaotic precipitation, which multiplied tenfold the consciousness of the immensity of the peril to which they seemed consecrated.

Fallen to the bottom of that well, which was about to be filled in by the mass of the momentarily-parted waters, how could they retain the hope of ever returning to the surface? How could they admit the possibility of being spared for a second time? Some miracles are not renewable, and it was surely one of those that had kept the alive in the course of the frightful descent.

Wanting to be united in death as they had wished to be for life, Jean and Cyprienne, clinging to one another, their fingers enlaced, awaited the fatal second.

But now, suddenly, they felt themselves seized and dragged away, while Laridon's voice resounded, troubling the solemn silence.

"Don't stay there, Boss! Nor you, Mamzelle Cyprienne! Necessary not to wait for the shower if one can do otherwise. Nothing says that the hour to kick the bucket is about to sound... there's a shelter! Look!"

And the astonishing Parisian, who prided himself on never having his eyes in his pocket, designated, a few paces away from the group, a hole in the rock, toward which his gaze had been invincibly attracted. Chance? The mysterious intervention of an occult protection? They would not take long to find out.

The hole gaping in the midst of a chaos of rock, probably upset by the seismic shock that had lifted up the submarine depths, appeared to plunge obliquely into the ground.

Jean Chapuis did not have time to smile at Laridon's naivety. Nor did he have time to say: "What's the point? Do you imagine that the closing ocean won't come to reoccupy that tiny space and drown us in the depths of your pretended refuge? There's no hiding-place from the death that is lying in wait for us."

No, he did not have time to express that thought. Suddenly sharing the mechanic's hope, Cyprienne shoved her fiancé into the opening; and they all followed, while Laridon repeated, with a slight tremor of emotion in his voice: "What are we risking? Necessary to try! If you knew, M'sieur Jean, what I seemed to see! It's enough to make me wonder whether I'm not in the process of going loopy!"

A terrible rumble covered his voice. Joining up and collapsing upon one another, the masses of water drawn up facing one another fell back into the well that they had hollowed out, and filled it in.

Having opened momentarily, the ocean closed again over its inviolable empire.