

Albert Robida: *The Monkey King*

*I. How Saturnin Farandoul,
aged four months and seven days,
embarked upon a career of adventure.
His adoptive family take him for an incompetent monkey.*

In the mid-Pacific region of the 10th north parallel and 150 degrees of western longitude—which is almost the same as that of the Polynesian isles of Pomotou¹—the great Ocean, so fecund and so tempestuous, belied its name even more than usual on that day. In the utterly disordered sky, masses of purplish-black cloud streamed from the distant horizon at an incalculably rapid rate of knots. The waves climbed to heights unknown in our paltry European seas. Howling and roaring, they hurled themselves one after another and one upon another, as if the furious sea were mounting an attack, which burst forth in frightful waterspouts, under whose weight the highest waves loudly collapsed in whirlwinds of foam.

A few fragments of the masts and timbers of ships and barrels, floating here and there, indicated that the god of storms would not be returning to his deep caverns with an empty bag, alas. Amid the debris, however, one peculiar item of wreckage was discernible, sometimes thrust up to the crests of the waves and sometimes disappearing in the hollow valleys between the monstrous billows.

This wreck was a cradle, and the cradle in question contained an infant, well-swathed and well-secured. The child was sleeping like a log, apparently finding no difference between the rocking effect of the Ocean and that employed by his nurse.

Hours had passed. Miraculously, the cradle had not sunk; the ocean continued to swing it to and fro. The storm had calmed down; the sky, clearing little by little, allowed a long line of rocks to become visible upon the horizon. The frail craft, evidently carried by a current, was steering towards an unexpected port!

Little by little, the coast became more visible, its sheltering cliffs cut through by little creeks calmly stirred by the waves. In order to get that far, though, it was necessary to pass through a chain of coral reefs, on which the waves broke into cascades of foam, without the little vessel breaking up.

In the end, the cradle came through and ran aground, still accompanied by fragments of mast. One last roller carried it up the beach and left it behind on the dry sand—and the brat, abruptly awoken by the cessation of movement, cried out for the first time with all his might.

It was evening. The Sun, which had not appeared all day, finally showed through, and, having arrived at the end of its course, proceeded to extinguish its last fierce orange rays in the waves of the open sea. To take advantage of this hour of delicious calm after a stormy day, and also to take a little exercise after the evening meal, an honorable family of monkeys was taking a walk on the damp beach, admiring the splendors of the setting Sun.²

¹ Pomotou is an alternative name for the Tuamotu Archipelago, a group of islands south of the Marquesas which became a French Protectorate. Their longitude extends from about 140 degrees west to 150 degrees west (Robida was presumably using Paris as a baseline rather than Greenwich, but it makes little difference). Tuamotu lies about 15 degrees south of the equator; 10 degrees north, where Robida locates his castaway, is in the middle of a vast tract of open sea.

² Robida's illustrations depict these creatures with the long prehensile tails typical of New World monkeys, and it soon transpires within the text that their possession of such tails is crucial to the development of the story. I have therefore thought it appropriate to translate *singes* as "monkeys" rather than "apes." Robida's knowledge of primate taxonomy is, however, understandably primitive; a subsequent passage is insistent that the reader is being introduced to "a family of orang-outangs," and another declares that their species is intermediate between orang-utans and chimpanzees. I have retained these terms within my translation even though they make no sense in the context of modern primatology (neither of the species cited is equipped with a tail).

The entire natural world seemed to be their personal domain. They were enjoying an admirable view with a tranquil proprietary right that no anxiety could trouble. All the beauties of the tropics were displayed there, as if in a magical frame: all the glorious flowers that the equatorial Sun could bring into bloom, marvelous plants, giant trees and interlacing lianas by the thousand.

Four little monkeys of various heights gambled on the grass, swinging from descending lianas as they went past, and chasing one another around the coconut palms under the protective eyes of their father and mother. The latter were more serious individuals, content to mark their joy at the good weather's return by quietly shaking their hindquarters with perfect panache. The mother, a lovely she-monkey with an elegant figure and a graceful demeanor, carried in her arms a fifth offspring, which she suckled as she walked, with a candor and a dignified serenity that would have tempted the chisel of a Praxiteles.³

Suddenly, their tranquillity was disturbed. The father, at the sight of an object extended on the beach, turned two or three somersaults—a gesture which, among the monkeys, signifies the most colossal astonishment. Without ceasing to nurse her infant, the mother and the four little monkeys likewise turned half a dozen simultaneous somersaults before coming to rest on all fours. The reason for their alarm was that the object perceived by the monkeys was stirring and struggling, desperately twirling its arms and legs, as a crab does when one plays the practical joke of setting it down on its back.

It was our recent acquaintance, the young and charming castaway who, having been awakened by the landing, was giving vent to unfathomable feelings. Papa Orang-utan—for it is a family of orang-utans that we are introducing to our readers—made a cautious tour of the disquieting object before allowing his family to approach it. Having judged it unlikely to be dangerous, he signaled to the mother with a reassuring gesture and showed her the cradle, scratching his nose in a puzzled manner.

What could the unknown animal be which the sea had brought and cast up on the beach? That was what the reunited family were asking themselves as they encircled the cradle to discuss the matter. The little ones, full of surprise, had no idea at all, but sought to read the results of their parents' reflections in their faces.

Eventually, the father, taking every possible precaution to avoid being bitten, delicately picked up the little castaway, who was still gesticulating wildly. He plucked the child out of the cradle by one leg and passed him to the she-monkey—who looked at him for a long time, placing him beside her last-born for comparison, reflected carefully, and showed by a few significant shakes of the head that she considered this new species of monkey greatly inferior in physical beauty to the family of oranges.

The little castaway continued crying, despite the antics of the young monkeys, who were fully reassured by now and wanted to welcome this new comrade into their company. The she-monkey understood the reason for these cries. Passing her nursling to the father, she took hold of the infant's head and generously offered her maternal bounty to the child.

What joy for the little castaway! For many hours he had wandered without nourishment on the crests of the waves, tormented by a hunger he could at last appease! He drank so much that, having suddenly become comfortable again, he ended up falling asleep on the breast of his exotic nurse.

Meanwhile, the little monkeys had been rummaging around in the cradle, to make sure that it did not contain a second example of this peculiar species. They had found nothing there but a kind of bag sealed by a leather thong. This bag intrigued them enormously at first sight, but their perplexity was even further

At the time the story was written, the orang-utan was still a semi-legendary creature in Europe, whose reputation was partly based on unreliable traveler's tales and partly on the equally-unreliable ruminations of early evolutionist anthropologists, who had not yet reached agreement as to how many species of human beings there were, or how the concept of species related to that of race, or whether—and, if so, where—orang-utans and other great apes ought to figure in this classification. Such issues had been even less clear at the time when Léon Gozlan wrote *Les émotions de Polydore Marasquin*, which is obviously one of the key sources of Robida's inspiration. In that novel, Gozlan deliberately confuses distinctions between men and monkeys, which had already been considerably clarified by the advent of evolutionary theory, for satirical purposes.

As a postscript to this point, I have translated *guenon* as “she-monkey” because that is clearly what Robida means by it; he is not implying that Farandoul's adoptive parents belong to one of the species that the English language now terms *guenons*.

³ Praxiteles, a famous Athenian sculptor active in the 4th century B.C., was reputedly responsible for several fine statues held in the Louvre and familiar to all cultured Parisians.

increased by the sight of the piece of paper that the eldest of the little monkeys took from it. They turned it over and over without result, then passed it to their father in the hope that he might explain it. After examining it for a quarter of an hour, he too could make nothing of the bizarre symbols with which it was covered.

The thing was very simple, though; let us admit right away that the bag found in the cradle was a tobacco-pouch—probably the paternal tobacco-pouch, which the unhappy parents had confided to the hazards of the tempest along with their child, at the moment when their ship sank. As for the paper covered with hieroglyphs that had so intrigued the naïve orangs, it will clarify for us the status of the young castaway, for it was nothing other than his duly-registered birth certificate.

The infant's name was Fortuné-Gracieux-Saturnin Farandoul.⁴ The names of the parents and witnesses are irrelevant to our story, so we shall pass over them in silence, but we must cite two further items of information revealed by this document: firstly, that Saturnin Farandoul was a French citizen; and secondly, that he was aged only four months and seven days. Thus did the youngster make his debut in his career as a castaway.

After mature reflection, Papa Orang-utan evidently came to a decision in the matter of the newly-discovered infant. He made a gesture signifying that five might just as well be six, and got up. The child was adopted; the family, thus augmented, ambled back along the path to their abode. It was a good night for all concerned. The Moon illuminated the tranquil sleep of our hero in the bosom of his adopted family, in the deep forest. The Sun rose to find Farandoul perfectly comfortable in his new social estate, and his adoptive parents quite content with their lucky find.

In her hut, made of branches covered with large banana leaves, the good she-monkey studied her nursling while he feasted greedily upon the banquet offered to his lips by beneficent Nature. In addition to the little monkeys, fascinated by the appearance of their new companion, there was a large crowd in the hut, dominated by she-monkeys.

What astonishment there was on every face! With what curiosity they followed the least movement of little Farandoul! At first, the young she-monkeys could not suppress a thrill of fear when the nursing mother jokingly extended the infant towards them, but the gentleness of Farandoul won every one of their hearts, and the entire audience was soon competing for the privilege of petting him. The hut never emptied; male and female monkeys came from the neighboring forests carrying gifts of fruit and coconuts, which Farandoul pushed away with his hands and feet in order to thrust himself back upon the quasi-maternal breast.

⁴ Many of the names improvised by Robida for French characters involve humorous misappropriations of common French words, most of which are too obvious, even to an English reader, to require annotation. The hero's name is more complex. *Farandoula* is an Occitan word (Occitan being the ancient language of Provence—the *Langue d'Oc*) referring to a lively kind of dance, known in both French and English as a *farandole*. The first two elements of the Christian name, which declare him to be fortunate and gracious, are unsurprising, but coupling them with Saturnin sets a puzzle before the reader.

The French adjective *saturnien*, derived from the planet, has the same metaphorical meaning (gloomy) as the English saturnine, but Saturnin Farandoul is by no means gloomy, and *saturnin* has a different meaning: pertaining to [the metal] lead. It is not impossible that Robida had the geological *Période Saturnienne* in mind when he coined his globe-trotting hero's name, that being the era in which the continents acquired their modern form. It is far more probable, however, that he really does mean to imply "pertaining to lead," lead being the material from which bullets are made. Robida—whose *La guerre au Vingtième Siècle* consists of a spectacular series of illustrations representing the technological transformation of warfare as a gaudily sarcastic black comedy—was a pacifist darkly fascinated by the mechanization of mass murder, and was thus obliged to regard Saturnin Farandoul's eventual influence on the population of the idyllic Isle of Monkeys (which, as the text observes, is still in its Golden Age at this point in the story) as problematic, if not actively evil. Farandoul's conversion of the peaceful monkeys into an army of conquest surely qualifies as a metaphorical *malaise saturnin* (lead poisoning).

Despite his frivolous tone, Robida clearly intends to imply that Saturnin Farandoul is somewhat symbolic of his entire race, whose pretension to be humane rather than merely human is not to be taken too seriously. The implication of the story, although the author refrains from spelling it out as an explicit moral, is, in effect, that man is merely a "monkey king," so corrupted and perverted by civilization that he has contrived to forget that at bottom (so to speak) he is merely an incompetent example of primatekind.

Outside, Farandoul's foster-father, surrounded by old white-bearded orangs, seemed to be telling the story of his discovery. Perhaps he was giving his report to the authorities; in any case, he saw by their benevolent gestures that the elders approved of his conduct and appeared well pleased with him. Little by little, the fuss caused by the new arrival died down, and life resumed its ordinary course.

If Farandoul had been older, he would have been able to marvel at the patriarchal existence led by the monkeys. Indeed, the happy population of that fortunate isle, lost in the vastness of the Pacific far distant from the customary shipping routes, was still in the Golden Age! The island was extraordinarily fertile. All the fruits of the Earth grew in abundance, lavishly distributed without the least requirement for cultivation. No fearsome wild beasts infested the forests, where even the most inoffensive creatures lived in total security.

The simian race was the summit of the evolutionary scale, dominating by its intelligence the entire natural order of the island. Man was unknown there, never having repressed it with his barbarity or perverted it with his example—as he has those fallen races of monkeys, condemned to ignominy, which will vegetate forever in the lands inhabited by humans, unless some monkey of genius arrives one day to effect their return to the purer life of ancient times, in some wilderness inaccessible to humankind.

These monkeys belonged to a race intermediate between the Orang-utans and Chimpanzees. Aggregated in tribes, whose villages were composed of about 50 huts made of small branches, they lived quite happily. Each family enjoyed the most complete individual liberty, and where matters of communal interest were concerned they looked to the elders, who often came together in council at the foot of a giant eucalyptus, in the branches of which the young ones frolicked without taking part in the discussions.

It must be said that everyone was full of respect for these worthy ancients, and that the smart young monkeys would never allow themselves to jump on their backs or to grab their tails in passing, without previous authorization.

Farandoul spent a year with the family. He rolled in the grass with his foster-brothers; he played all the exciting games with them that young monkeys play. To the great astonishment of his parents, however, he remained remarkably inept in leaping about, and adamantly refused to climb coconut palms.

Such timidity in a healthy youth of 18 months worried the gallant monkeys exceedingly. Although his brothers set him an excellent example by means of the most audacious ascensions and aerial somersaults, Farandoul never got the hang of gymnastics. As he grew apace into a sturdy little chap, the anxiety of his parents increased. It became a veritable anguish as they saw that he was quite incapable of following them when the family went off on expeditions in search of amusement, hurling themselves about in the crowns of tall trees and forming troupes of acrobats to swing on the natural see-saws generously provided by the coconut palms. Farandoul's brothers made as many footholds as possible for him and ran away into the trees in order to invite him to climb after them, but he stayed on his feet, astonished and angry because he was unable to do as they did.

Farandoul's foster-mother, who loved him at least as much as her other children, and perhaps a little more—for he was undoubtedly the weakest—did not know what to do to develop the gymnastic talent that must, she believed, exist in him as in every other monkey. Sometimes, while suspended by the tail from the lower branches of a tree, she would throw herself into space and swing there, calling to Saturnin with little reproachful cries; on other occasions, she turned a thousand somersaults, walked on her hands, made him climb up on her back, and clambered up into the branches with him—but in the former instances, Saturnin Farandoul stayed down below, deaf to her appeals, and in the latter, he clung fearfully to his mother's fur, refusing to let go. What a torment he was to those brave orangs!

Soon, this preoccupation became perpetual, a constant worry. Farandoul continued to grow without becoming any more agile. His foster-father—who, since his lucky find, had become one of the most respected monkeys on the island—held frequent consultations with the elders: the venerable monkeys who, as we have said, held their assemblies under the largest eucalyptus in the village. It was obvious that Saturnin Farandoul was the subject of these conversations. These monkeys occasionally summoned him, placed his hand on his head, looked at him intently, made him walk and run, consulted one another, scratched themselves, shook their heads, and finally confessed that they did not understand it at all.

One day, the astonished Farandoul saw his father come back from a longer-than-usual trip with a very old monkey whom he did not recognize. He was wrinkled and bent over, with a great white beard framing his majestic face and bald patches in his coat of long white hair. This ancient, who might easily have been a hundred years old, came from a distant part of the island to which Farandoul's foster-father had gone in order to consult him. He obviously enjoyed a great reputation for wisdom, because all the monkeys in the

vicinity hurried forth in a crowd, with lavish gestures of respect, eager to assist him in his tottering walk, while the she-monkeys showed him off to their children from a distance.

Having been greeted by the elders at the entrance to the village, the old monkey sat down at the foot of the eucalyptus, in the middle of the greatest gathering of monkeys that Farandoul had ever seen. Saturnin Farandoul seemed, along with the old monkey, to be the object of everyone's attention. His foster-father came to look for him among the urchins with whom he was rolling in the grass, in order to bring him to the ancient, who considered him carefully from every angle.

The old monkey sat the child on his knee, then stood him up again and flexed all the joints of his arms and legs. All of them were working perfectly, which seemed to amaze the old fellow. He began again, with the same result; seeing this, he plunged into a long meditation from which he roused himself only to recommence his examination. Then he struck his forehead, as if he were proclaiming to himself some triumphant Eureka, and called for one of Farandoul's young brothers. He placed the two of them side by side, with their backs to the crowd. By this means, he showed that the hindquarters of the little monkey were equipped with a magnificent caudal appendage: a flamboyant device, perfectly designed for aerial gymnastics—a fifth hand which wonderful Nature had generously granted to the species—of which poor Farandoul could not display the slightest indication.

They all lifted their hands to the heavens then. The most distant, who were unable to see anything, drew closer, clamoring to know the reason for this exclamatory gesture. The tribal elders restored order, debating with the most astounded by means of grandiose gestures. In the end, all the monkeys formed a procession to file past little Farandoul—or, rather, behind him—pausing one by one to examine him and to take stock of Nature's fatal forgetfulness.

A few passed comment, seemingly inquiring as to whether the condition was incurable. The old white monkey's response was to make them see that that one could not reasonably found the least hope on the slightest of appearances. However, at an order which he gave after further reflection, several monkeys took themselves off into the rocks while the assembly waited anxiously.

After a few minutes, they came back bearing bundles of herbs, which were heaped up between two stones, along with large slugs and snails. An uncommonly dexterous she-monkey made a compress out of it, and pressed it forcefully upon the deficient part of the stupefied Farandoul's body. Despite his cries of rage, the compress was so firmly attached that the poor little chap, so cruelly afflicted, was no longer able to lie down in comfort.

A light snack was prepared for the venerable monkey, who took nothing but half a dozen coconuts. After an hour's rest in the shade of the eucalyptus, during which he offered a few more items of advice on the teething troubles of little monkeys, the old fellow went back with Farandoul's foster-father to the path that led to his hermitage. They separated there and returned to their usual dwellings.

For the first time, Farandoul went in search of solitude, walking alone on the beach, still wearing his compress, which continued to cause him considerable distress.

The medication having brought about no alteration in the state of things, the compress was not renewed after eight hours. The poor she-monkey who was Saturnin Farandoul's adoptive mother tried again, in secret, to rub him with an unguent given to her by some of her cronies, but that remedy worked no better.

The months and the seasons flew past, and the inferiority of Saturnin Farandoul was further accentuated. He was a tall, strong and well-set lad, lithe and agile, skilful in all his bodily exercises, who could easily have got the better of four boys of his own age—but by comparison with his foster-brothers, these advantages amounted to nothing. Farandoul had to admit that he was beaten.

Sometimes, his brothers would lie in wait for him while he walked, hidden in the trees. At the moment when poor Saturnin Farandoul passed by, sucking on a sugar cane without an evil thought in his head, the playful band would form a chain, the strongest of them suspended by the tail from some high branch and the others clinging to one another, as the last in line seized Farandoul under the arms without warning and drew him upwards. They would swing him in the air then, without a care for the kicks that he distributed so liberally, until the entire troop allowed themselves to fall upon the grass.

Little by little, though, these games petered out. In growing older, his brothers came to understand that it was unkind to abuse their physical advantages and to remind their young brother continually of his inferiority. To the contrary, they took it upon themselves to help him forget, taking every precaution, and by means of conventional fraternal attentions. It was too late, though! Farandoul's intelligence understood the reason for this consideration, and it served only to increase his humiliation. Besides, as he saw very

clearly, the entire tribe regarded him with an offensive attitude of commiseration. Pity was all too evident in every eye.

The good she-monkey who was his adoptive mother loved him even more tenderly, because she believed that he was destined for an unhappy and probably solitary life. With the future in mind, she began to worry a great deal about her son's prospects. Would he ever find a mate? How would he be received by the young she-monkeys of the village, when he began to think about them? And if his heart spoke, how painful it would be for him if his beloved refused his hand, and if he subsequently saw her in another's arms! What misery awaited him! What dramas, perhaps...

All these considerations saddened the hearts of Saturnin Farandoul's parents. Nor were the brains of the brave monkeys the only ones haunted by such anxieties; Farandoul was troubled too. Indeed, Farandoul had seen how different he was from his brothers and the other young monkeys of the tribe. He had given himself a crick in the neck staring at his reflection in the clear water of a spring, but he had seen nothing to authorize the least hope that he might one day possess the same triumphant appendage as those he truly believed to be his blood-brothers.

Poor Saturnin Farandoul believed himself irredeemably deformed. From the day of that discovery he dreamed of running away, exiling himself far from those he loved, in order to hide his sorrow and humiliation. For weeks and months he wandered the island's beaches in the vague hope of finding some means of putting this plan into operation.

Eventually, on the day after a tropical storm, he found a huge coconut-palm uprooted, lying on the shore—the means was found! Early the following day, having embraced the good monkey and the gentle she-monkey who had treated him with such affection for years, Saturnin Farandoul went with his five brothers to the beach where the coconut-palm rested. As if it were a game, he bid them push the tree-trunk to the water.

When the moment of embarkation drew near, the resolute Farandoul embraced his brothers tenderly but rapidly, and leapt on to the coconut palm as it floated parallel to the shore. The five brothers let loose five cries of horror, and lifted five pairs of arms despairingly into the air. The poor monkeys understood that he was already too far away to be recaptured. While they ran like maniacs along the shore, other monkeys hurried in response to their cries.

Farandoul, profoundly moved by their distress, recognized his parents, but turned his head and his weeping eyes towards the open sea. He used a branch to steer the coconut-palm adroitly through the reefs, and passed through the barrier without capsizing. The cries of the poor monkeys had scarcely faded away when the leaves of the palm tree caught the strengthening breeze and it was carried out to sea.

Some hours later, the isle of monkeys had disappeared and the coconut-palm was cruising the Pacific Ocean. Saturnin Farandoul, tranquilly seated at the junction of two branches, felt an excitement growing within him as the instincts of a navigator awoke.

His resources consisted of several scores of coconuts still suspended from the tree. The Sun directed its rays upon his naked body.

Having always lived among monkeys, believing himself to be a monkey, he had no knowledge whatsoever of clothing. Ever since his arrival on the isle, however, he had worn the tobacco-pouch containing his birth certificate around his neck; his adoptive parents had attached it there without really knowing why, and Farandoul had become accustomed to wearing it.