

Excerpt from **LÉODINE OF THE BELGIAN CONGO**,
formerly **THE BLACK ANCESTOR** by Albert Russo -
Part of the **AFRICAN QUATUOR** -

My mother and Piet decided to spend their first vacation together in the eastern province of Kivu and to take me along with them. It was probably because of the wonderful memories she had of her honeymoon with my father in the Great Rift Valley. I, too, was delighted to go away, for I was beginning to suffocate in that city of mine that, suddenly, appeared to be treating me like a stranger.

I wished my memory would turn blank, as sometimes happens with people who, having suffered an accident or some great shock, can no longer recall their identity and fail to recognize their kith and kin. What do these amnesiacs feel, cut off from a world that was once so familiar? Sadness? A gnawing loss of identity? Or are they simply curious, the way infants are when they start perceiving their immediate environment, step by step, instant after instant, unconcerned about the past, which barely exists in their case, or about the future, a notion they can't grasp yet? It would be so much more comfortable if one could break up one's mind into various compartments and be able to open them at will, like the drawers of a cupboard.

"Stop this ranting," I scolded myself. "Instead of harking back to that 'mixed blood' nonsense, which no one around you wants to hear about, anyway, think of your next trip to Kivu."

I ambled groggily towards the living room where, dominating three shelves of novels, cookbooks, and illustrated guides to several European countries, stood the two impressive volumes of *The Encyclopedia of Belgian Africa*, bound in a dark green cloth. Until now, it hadn't even occurred to me that I should want to peruse the encyclopedia, as if it were some sacred object not to be tinkered with. My father had bought it as a present to his wife and their future children, so that they should discover the wealth of Central Africa, the cradle of humanity, the land that so generously welcomed them, and which they would never, ever have to consider, like Conrad, as the heart of darkness.

It was the first time I had read the dedication, and I felt, there and then, that whoever composed it must be touched by grace, a man whose incurable optimism and faith in the future I couldn't possibly, at this early stage of my life, comprehend, inasmuch as he already believed that Creation's first man was black and that he would give me—his only child—brothers and sisters. He wanted seven children, as my mother told me later, for seven was his lucky number.

A thought suddenly flashed through my mind and put me ill at ease: I was happy to be a single child, and I harbored the wish that the situation would remain thus, in

spite of Piet's arrival. Did this also mean I preferred my father dead? Now that I think of it, in retrospect, my presumed brothers and sisters would have logically also been born of mixed blood, and there was a probability that some of them, at least, might have borne irrefutable negroid traits and that they would have been darker-complected than I. As a consequence, we would all have been cast out of European society. In this case, would my father have been willing, like Yolande's father, whose son was now living at the Cité Indigène, to separate his children? A shudder coursed along my spine as I asked myself, "What if I had been as black as Mario-Tende? Where would I be living now?" My thoughts ran wild, and I pictured myself left in the care of a Congolese wet nurse or simply abandoned in the bush, like so many mulatto babies were then, at the mercy of wild beasts.

In an effort to chase away these nightmarish considerations, I began feverishly to turn the pages of the encyclopedia, thumbing through sections that dealt with the geography, the origins, and the history of this immense territory, eighty times the size of its mother land, Belgium. I perused information about its mineral wealth (which made it a 'geological scandal'), its innumerable ethnic groups and dialects (the number 300 had struck me as almost unbelievable), the colonial administration with its columns of figures, and its fauna and flora, both infinitely varied. Yet, before I tackled the pages dedicated to tourism, which were the only ones, right now, that could have appeased my anxieties, I happened upon the section of tropical diseases, with horrendous pictures showing leper-ravaged Africans, some of whom had their flesh hanging as if they had been mangled by a lion, and others so disfigured that nothing left reminded one they were once human: their faces gaping horribly, a pair of stray eyes that seemed not to belong amid such carnage, and what was left of their teeth. I almost jumped out of my skin when I saw that shrunken man whose legs appeared almost quartered by the swollen monstrosity that was his genitals. The poor chap had elephantiasis. This last image gave me a misconception about Africa's largest mammals and, persuaded that they were the cause of such calamity on human beings, I long considered elephants to be our fiercest enemies in the animal kingdom, so much so that I was happy to read how they were regularly hunted by poachers and killed for their skin and their tusks. I wanted to tear out these pages, but a sense of propriety stopped me from doing it. My early enthusiasm for the trip had, as a consequence, evaporated, replaced by peevish, and then melancholy, thoughts.

I particularly cherished those Sunday outings when we would drive towards Elisabethville's airfield to watch the DC6

of Sabena airlines flying in from Europe. It loomed on the horizon like a majestic bird, appearing as if by divine sleight of hand in the early evening sky, where soon the twilight would splash its iridescent colors against a blue dome interspersed with endomorphic clouds, swiftly turning to crimson, then to violet, after having played its symphonies of turquoise, flaming green, and blood orange. This spectacle never failed to amaze me, even if I should see it repeated every Sunday of the year, and my heart would race the very instant the gleaming machine touched down at the far end of the runway with boisterous élan, rolling towards us in a deafening uproar, as if, all

of a sudden, the surrounding savannah had acquired a thousand ears, banishing all other noise. And how I would try to keep my gaze fixed on the sight, squinting to challenge the plane's glare so as not to miss the crowning moment when the four mighty propellers would rev up at full throttle, giving me the tingling sensation of an imminent, imaginary apocalypse. I would almost feel the earth quake beneath my feet as I prepared for the awaited shattering boom. And just before the engines came to a standstill, there was that ultimate cough, which echoed in my head with these words: "They should thank me a thousand times, those passengers, whom I have pampered for so many long hours, after having bridged two continents, spanned the planet's largest sea and flown over the forbidding Sahara, which every year gains a bit more territory to the south, and then finally traversing the dense rain forest that some call paradise and others, green hell. All these memories and emotions will be washed away under a warm shower, and I shall be forgotten at the turn of a tap. O, the ungratefulness of human beings!"

Yes, I think I had more admiration for those winged steel giants than for the people or the objects they carried in their bellies, except for the pilots, whom I compared to guardian angels. And I would catch myself dreaming that, one day, I, too, might sit behind the control panel of some imposing transatlantic airliner, even though I knew that most women who served in aviation could not aspire to be more than air hostesses.

After having watched, from a distance, the happy and noisy reunion between passengers and their families and friends punctuated by the inevitable jam sessions of tearful embraces, querying matches, and exclamations of surprise, particularly when children were involved, we would leave discreetly, and Piet would take us—it was by now a well-worn ritual—to the Sabena Guesthouse, a five-minute drive from the airport.

On the terrace, flanked by two columns and overlooking a garden of cacti, pink-flowered frangipani trees, and varicolored bougainvillea, a table awaited us holding bowls filled to the rim with roasted peanuts and Calamata olives, and a small plate of cheese cubes sprinkled with celeriac salt. Beyond the thick red and lilac creepers, interlaced here and there with white, orange, and violet boughs of flowers, stretched the ubiquitous Katangese savannah, marred by those bloated, sepia-tinted antheaps, an eyesore I associated with gigantic boils. The vivid bougainvillea blossoms appeared like a splash of beauty against that dull landscape, which, in the dry season, seemed to be covered with a perennial veil of lateritic dust that I thought I could taste at the tip of my tongue just by looking at it. This spot—at once privileged, a refreshing oasis amid purgatory and terribly oppressive—would conjure up in my mind, when I least expected it, some of the most hair-raising pictures of people disfigured and maimed by tropical diseases; though I had only seen them once in the Encyclopedia of Belgian Africa, they seemed to pursue me right into my bedroom and trigger new strains of nightmares. In order to dispel those dreadful and disturbing thoughts, I would force myself to concentrate on the more banal or even funnier

memories, such as the stories Tambwe had told me. The one about Pala, the gazelle, and Konoko, the snail, had driven me to fits of laughter.

Here it is:

One bright morning, Konoko, the snail, challenged Pala, the gazelle, in front of the macaque villagers, with these words:

“Hey, my good Pala, how about if you and I entered a race up to that anthep over there, behind the third eucalyptus tree?”

The monkeys guffawed, some shrieked incredulously, still others uttered hubbah hubbahs, while slapping their legs or even their heads, so outlandish the proposition appeared. But the most baffled of all was Pala, herself, who couldn't decide whether to chuckle or to hiccough, and who, after capering about on the outskirts of the village, said, twisting her tongue, “That's the best one I've heard in a long time.”

“Oh yeah,” retorted Konoko, “and, what's more, I bet you I'll be the winner.”

Pala, who was so hysterical she couldn't stop wriggling and burping, snickered. “Admittedly, you have some exceptional features, Konoko, such as a pair of handsome antennae and, especially, that pretty shell-house you carry on your shoulders wherever you go.” Giggling, she then added, “Shoo shoo, one thumb forward, whoa, a little pause, then, shoo shoo, comes out the toe, whoa, another pause...ready, steady, go...whoa.”

This last phrase increased the macaques' hilarity. But their chief, Kima, began to scratch his armpits more and more vigorously, an irrefutable sign of authority among the monkey folk, and ordered his subjects to be silent. Then, when the hubbub receded and all eyes focused on him, he clucked his tongue, smack, smack, smack, and spoke:

“I shall appoint myself as the umpire of this race, and the winner shall be recompensed with the High Order of the Banana. He shall furthermore receive a whole coconut, a basket of fruit, and a pot of honey every morning for the duration of two full seasons. And, to top it all, the loser shall become his servant for the rest of his life. The departure time shall be set tomorrow at daybreak.”

So, when the crickets had ceased their nightly din, Kima, chief of the macaques, surrounded by his subjects, many of whom were rubbing eyes still swollen with the stuff of pipe dreams, gave the starting signal.

Pala dashed forward, proud and perky. She gamboled and gamboled, skipped and hopped, improvising new dancelike steps, bowed and curtsied, so sure she was of her victory, then cast a glance backwards. “Ho ho,” she sighed, barely puffing. “His Lordship, the Snail, is so far behind that I can't even see his trail.”

“How do you mean, no trail?” she heard someone whisper. “Look to the left of the path, in front of you. Would you be confusing me with a horned toad, by any chance?”

Pala couldn't believe her eyes. The snail had indeed outstripped her, and to show all the effort she had exerted doing so, she huffed: shoo shoo, one step forward, whoa, a little pause and...whoa again, for he had well deserved this moment of rest.

“This must be some trick of witchcraft,” snorted the gazelle. “Oh, no, I shall not let myself be doublecrossed by a pipsqueak of a mollusk.” And, as she said this, Pala took to her heels, dashing furiously ahead. The real race could begin. “We shall see what we shall see,” whistled Pala.

The gazelle was running so fast now that she felt her nostrils clasp shut, and her heart thumped like a ball of fire gone crazy. So much so that she had to stop for a brief moment, lest her sight be totally blurred by beads of perspiration that flowed from her forehead.

“What are you still doing behind me?” lisped a tiny voice. “Have you forgotten how to run?”

“So, I don't know how to run, hey, is that what you think? Damn critter! I'll show you what a gazelle can do,” said Pala, at once fuming and bamboozled.

And she literally flew. She had never reached such velocity in her life. Between the batting of eyelashes she even imagined herself as an eagle cleaving the air. But, as she neared the third eucalyptus tree where a mob of macaques were awaiting the winner, Pala,

alarmed and half dead, saw the snail cross the finish line...in front of her.

“The witch doctor has cast a spell on me!” she concluded, incredulous, with all her limbs trembling, tears mingling with the abundant sweat that was pouring from her nostrils.

Puzzled, I queried Tambwe, “How is that possible?” Doubled over with laughter, he explained how Konoko had duped his rival. The smart old snail had reunited his numerous family and his friends, asking each one of them to post himself at strategic spots along Pala's path, so that the gazelle, out of breath, would think she was seeing Konoko.

Thank goodness, there were no bicycle riders on the way, I thought, because if just one of those poor snails were crushed under a tire, not only would it have meant death for the poor animal, but the fraud would also have been discovered.