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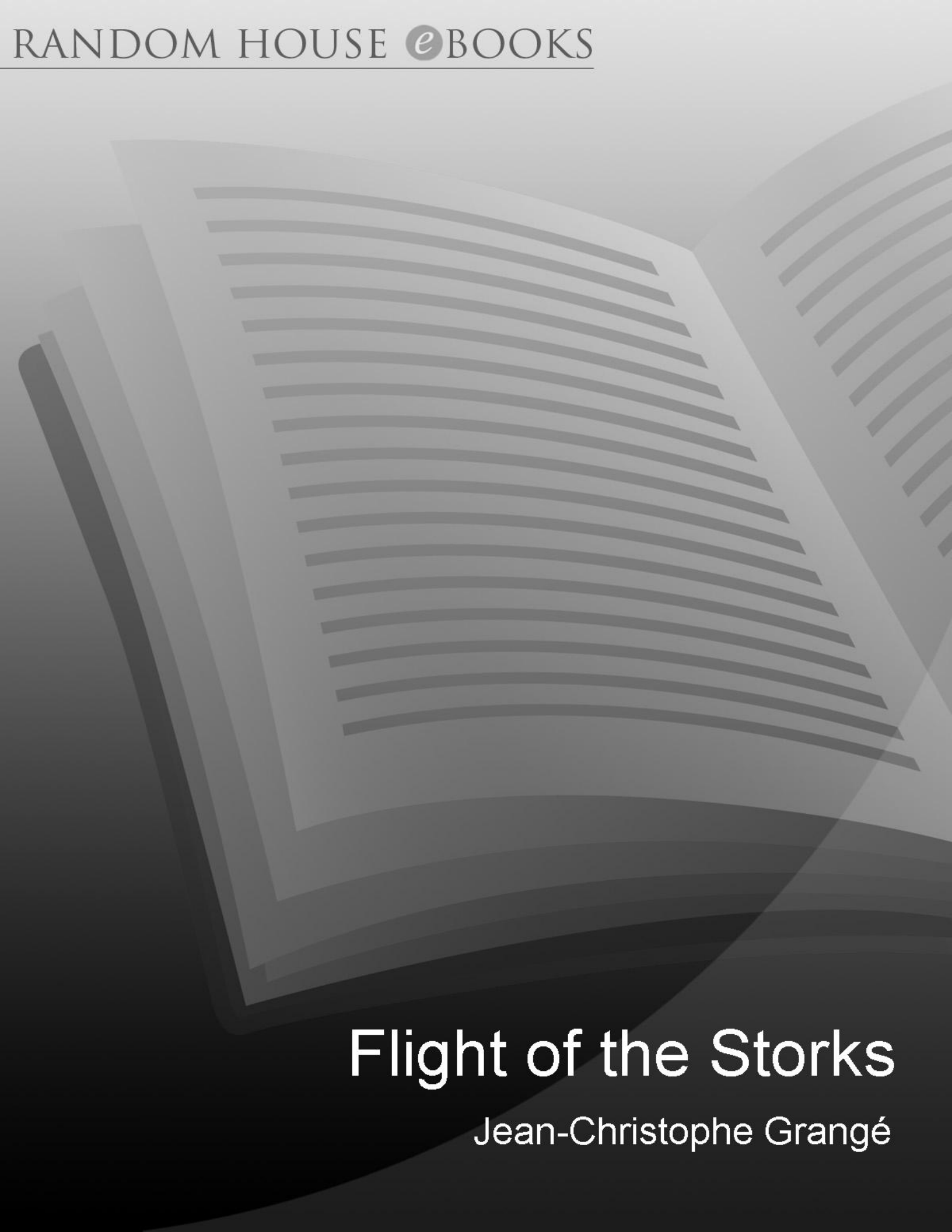

Flight of the Storks

Jean-Christophe Grangé

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About the Book

A journey to the green inferno of the African jungle brings one man face to face with his macabre past.

Every year the storks set off on their astounding 12,000-mile migration from Northern Europe to the remote Central African Republic. One year, inexplicably, puzzling numbers of them fail to return.

At the invitation of a Swiss ornithologist, Louis Antioch agrees to investigate the mystery of the birds' disappearance. Before he can set off on his quest, however, his patron is found dead in bizarre circumstances.

Jean-Christophe Grangé's uncompromising narrative develops at a nightmare pace from a Bulgarian gypsy encampment to a kibbutz in the Occupied Territories, to the African jungle, to Calcutta, where an appalling and gruesome truth emerges: the end of a mission that began with the flight of the storks. . .

About the Author

Jean-Christophe Grangé was born in Paris in 1961. Now an independent international reporter, he worked with magazines all over the world, before setting up his own news agency. *Flight of the Storks* was his first published novel. *Blood-red Rivers*, his second novel, became a prodigious bestseller in France and a film is in preparation.

Ian Monk is one of the most resourceful translators from the French. He made his own translation of George Perec's e-less novel, *La Disparition* before Gilbert Adair's version, and went on to translate Perec's novel that uses no vowel but e, *Les Revenentes*.

ALSO BY JEAN-CHRISTOPHE GRANGÉ

Blood-red Rivers
The Stone Council

For Virginie Luc

Jean-Christophe Grangé

FLIGHT OF THE STORKS

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY
Ian Monk

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

I
Sweet Europe

CHAPTER 1

BEFORE SETTING OFF, I had promised to pay a final call on Max Böhm.

That day, a thunderstorm was brewing over the French-speaking part of Switzerland. The sky was scarred with deep blue and black marks, from which translucent beams emerged. A hot wind was blowing in all directions. In a hired convertible, I drove along the banks of Lake Geneva. Around a corner, Montreux appeared, looking hazy in the electric atmosphere. The waters of the lake were becoming turbulent and the hotels seemed condemned to an ominous silence, despite the tourist season. On reaching the centre, I slowed down and drove through the narrow streets that lead up to the top of the town.

When I arrived at Max Böhm's chalet, the sky was almost black. I glanced at my watch. It was 5 p.m. I rang, then waited. No answer. I tried again and pressed my ear to the door. Nothing was moving behind it. Strange. From what I had noticed during my initial visit, Böhm seemed to be the punctual sort. I went back to the car and waited. Dull rumblings racked the sky. I pulled down the roof of the convertible. At half past five, he had still not turned up. I decided to go and take a look around the enclosures. Maybe the ornithologist had decided to pay a call on his charges.

I entered German Switzerland via a town called Bulle. The rain was still holding off, but the wind had doubled in intensity, throwing clouds of dust under my wheels. One hour later, I reached the outskirts of Weissembach, just beside the enclosed plot of land. I switched off the ignition then walked through the farmer's fields as far as the cages.

Behind the wiring, there were the storks, with their orange bills, black and white plumage and penetrating stares. They looked impatient. They were furiously beating their wings and snapping their bills. Presumably on account of the storm, but also because of their migratory instinct. Böhm's words came to mind: "Storks are instinctive migrants. Their departure is not triggered off by weather conditions or dietary variations, but by an inner clock. The day comes when it is time to go, it's that simple." It was the end of August and the storks must have been sensing that mysterious signal. Nearby, in some pastureland, other storks were coming and going, shaken by the wind. They too were attempting to take wing, but Böhm had "clipped" them, that is to say, plucked the feathers from the first phalanx of one of their wings, thus destabilizing them and preventing them from taking off. This "friend of nature" definitely had an odd way of looking at the natural order of things.

Suddenly, a scrawny man, doubled up by the wind, appeared in the nearby fields. The smell of cut grass was billowing at me and I felt a headache easing its way into my skull. From far off, the scarecrow was yelling something in German. I shouted back in French. He replied immediately in the same language: "Böhm hasn't been here today. Nor yesterday, for that matter." He was bald and a few locks of hair fluttered over his forehead. He kept plastering them back onto his scalp. He added: "He usually comes here every day to feed his creatures."

I went back to the car and headed for the Eco-Museum. It was a sort of wide-open space, not far from Montreux, where some traditional Swiss chalets had been reconstructed down to the very last detail. On each of the chimney pots, a pair of storks had been installed, under Max Böhm's supervision.

Before long, I had reached this artificial village. I set off on foot through the empty lanes. For some time, I

wandered through the maze of brown and white houses, which looked as if they were totally deserted, and finally arrived at the belfry – a dark square tower that stood over twenty metres high. At its summit sat a nest of quite gargantuan dimensions, of which only the edges were visible. “Europe’s biggest nest,” Max Böhm had told me. The storks were up there, on their throne of twigs and mud. The clicking of their bills echoed down the empty streets, like the snapping of worn-down jaws. Böhm was nowhere to be seen.

Retracing my steps, I went in search of the janitor’s house. I found him in front of his TV. He was eating a sandwich while his dog was munching up some meatballs from its bowl. “Böhm?” he said with his mouth full. “He came to the belfry the day before yesterday. We got the ladder out. (I remembered the infernal machine the ornithologist had used to gain access to the nest – an ancient, worm-eaten fireman’s ladder.) But I haven’t seen him since. He didn’t even put his things away.”

The man shrugged his shoulders then added:

“Böhm is at home here. He comes and goes as he likes.”

Then he bit off another lump of his sandwich, to show that he was through.

“Could you get it out again?”

“What?”

“The ladder.”

We set off in the storm, with the dog at our heels. The janitor walked in silence. As far as he was concerned, it was too late in the day for all this. At the foot of the belfry, he opened the doors of a barn that abutted on the tower. We took out the ladder, which was fixed on two cart wheels. The contraption looked more dangerous to me than ever. Nevertheless, with the janitor’s help, I got the system of chains, pulleys and cables going and, slowly, the ladder extended its rungs. Its top wobbled in the wind.

I swallowed hard and gingerly started to climb. The higher I got, the more the altitude and the wind troubled my eyesight. My hands clung onto the rungs. I felt an abyss open up in my guts. Ten yards. I concentrated on the wall and climbed higher. Fifteen yards. The wood was damp and my feet kept slipping. The entire ladder was wobbling, sending shock waves into my knees. I risked a glance upwards. The nest was within arm’s reach. I took a deep breath and clambered over the last rungs, putting my weight on the branches in the nest. The storks flew off. For a fleeting moment, all I could see was a cloud of feathers, then a vision of horror.

Böhm was there, lying on his back, his mouth agape. He had found his final resting place in that huge nest. His ghastly white stomach, dotted with mud, could be seen through his filthy shirt. His eyes were no more than empty bleeding sockets. I do not know if storks really bring babies, but they can certainly take care of the dead.

CHAPTER 2

STERILE WHITENESS, THE clicking of metal, ghostly forms. At three in the morning, I was waiting in Montreux's little hospital. The doors of the emergency room opened and closed. Nurses scurried by. Masked faces appeared, indifferent to my presence.

The janitor had remained at the artificial village in a state of shock. As for me, I was in no great shape either. I could not stop shivering, and my head was empty. I had never seen a corpse before. And for a first experience, Böhm's body was quite something. The birds had started to devour his tongue and other parts of him, deeper down in his throat. Multiple wounds had been discovered on his abdomen and flanks: incisions, lacerations, cuts. In the end, they would have completely devoured him.

"You do know that storks are carnivorous, don't you?" Max Böhm had told me when first we met. There was no way I was going to forget that now.

The firemen had taken down the body from its perch, under the slow suspicious flight of the birds. For the last time I saw Böhm's flesh, back on earth, covered with scabs and mud, before it was wrapped up in a rustling body-bag. I had followed this moonlit show under the intermittent flashes of the ambulance's lights without uttering a word and, I must admit, without feeling the slightest emotion. Just a sort of absence, a terrified isolation.

Now I was waiting. And mulling over my existence during the previous few months – two months of ornithological enthusiasm, that had now finished with a funeral.

At the time, I was a thoroughly respectable young man. Aged thirty-two, I had just obtained a PhD in history. The

culmination of eight years spent contemplating the “Concept of Culture in Oswald Spengler”. When I had completed that thousand-page doorstopper, which was absolutely useless in practical terms, and rather a drain in personal terms, my only idea was to forget about academia. I was fed up with books, museums, and arty experimental films. I was fed up with that surrogate existence, the shadow-play of art and the vagueness of the social sciences. I wanted to live life to the full, to bite the apple of existence.

I knew young doctors who had gone into humanitarian work because they had a “year to kill”, as they put it. Or up-and-coming lawyers who had wandered off to India and tried a little mysticism before embracing their careers. As for me, I had no vocation, and no taste for things exotic or for the misfortunes of others. So, once again, my adoptive parents came to my aid.

“Once again”, because, ever since the accident in which my brother and my parents had died, twenty-five years earlier, those two elderly diplomats had always given me what I needed: first of all, the company of a nanny when I was a child; then a sizeable allowance, which allowed me to maintain a genuine distance from money worries.

Georges and Nelly Braesler had suggested that I contact Max Böhm, one of their Swiss friends, who was looking for someone like me. “Someone like me?” I asked, while noting down Böhm’s address. They replied that it would probably be for several months. They would see about finding me a permanent position later.

Then, things took an unexpected turn. And my first, mysteriously unsettling meeting with Max Böhm will remain forever engraved in my memory down to the last detail.

That day, 17 May 1991, at about 4 p.m., I arrived at 3, Rue du Lac, after having wandered for ages through the tiny lanes around the heights of Montreux. At the end of a

square, dotted with medieval lamps, I came across a chalet, which bore the name “Max Böhm” on its solid wooden door. I rang the bell. A long minute ticked by, then a live-wire aged about sixty opened it with a broad smile on his face.

“You must be Louis Antioch,” he proclaimed. I nodded and went inside.

The interior of the chalet resembled the neighbourhood. The rooms were cramped, over-elaborate, full of nooks, crannies, shelves, and curtains that plainly did not conceal windows. The floor was a network of steps and daises. Böhm pulled aside a curtain and invited me down into his sanctuary in the basement. We entered a room with whitewashed walls, furnished with only an oak desk, on which stood a typewriter and piles of documents. Above it, hung a map of Europe and of Africa and numerous engravings of birds. I sat down. Böhm offered me some tea. I accepted with pleasure (all I drink is tea). In a series of rapid gestures, Böhm produced a thermos, cups, sugar and lemons. As he bustled about, I watched him more attentively.

He was short, thick-set and his crewcut hair was totally white. His round face was divided by a cropped moustache, which was also white. His corpulence made him look awkward, and his movements heavy, but his face imparted a curious friendliness.

Böhm carefully poured out the tea. His hands were chubby, his fingers graceless. “A wild man of the woods,” I said to myself. There was something vaguely military about him – a past spent in the army or some other violent activity. At last he sat down, folded his hands and, in a soft voice, began:

“So, you are related to my friends, the Braeslers.”

I cleared my throat.

“I’m their adopted son.”

“I didn’t think that they had any children.”

“They don’t. I mean, none of their own. (Böhm said nothing, so I went on:) My real parents were close friends of the Braeslers. When I was seven, my mother, father and brother were killed in a fire. I had no other family. So Georges and Nelly adopted me.”

“Nelly has told me about your intellectual capacities.”

“I’m afraid she might have exaggerated them slightly. (I opened my briefcase.) I’ve brought you my curriculum vitae.”

Böhm pushed the sheet of paper away with the flat of his hand. His hand was huge and powerful. It looked as though it could break your wrist with a simple twist of just two fingers. He replied:

“I’ll trust Nelly’s judgment. Has she told you about your ‘mission’? Has she pointed out that this is a very special piece of business?”

“Nelly didn’t tell me anything.”

Böhm fell silent and stared at me. He seemed to be on the lookout for my slightest reaction.

“At my age, idle hands lead to the acquisition of fads. Certain beings now mean much more to me than they did before.”

“Who is that?” I asked.

“Not human beings.”

Böhm fell silent again. He clearly liked working up the suspense. He finally murmured:

“I’m talking about storks.”

“Storks?”

“You see, I’m a nature lover. I’ve been interested in birds for the last forty years. When I was young I read everything I could find about ornithology. I spent hours in the forest, clutching my binoculars, observing each species. I was particularly fond of the white stork. The reason why I loved them more than the rest is because they are wonderful migrants, capable of covering more than twelve thousand miles each year. At the end of summer, when the storks set

off for Africa, my soul would fly off alongside them. So it was that I later chose a career which allowed me to travel and follow those birds. I am a retired civil engineer, Monsieur Antioch. Throughout my life, I managed to find work on large building projects in the Middle East, or Africa, on the birds' migration paths. Nowadays, I stay put here, but I am still studying migration. I have written several books on the subject.

"I know nothing about storks. What is it you expect from me?"

"I'm coming to that. (Böhm sipped his tea.) Since I retired here, in Montreux, the storks have been thriving. Each spring, my pairs come back and find exactly the same nests again. It all runs like clockwork. But, this year, the storks from the east have not returned."

"What do you mean?"

"Of the seven hundred migratory pairs counted in Germany and Poland, fewer than fifty reappeared in their skies during March and April. I waited for several weeks. I went there myself. But there was nothing to be done. The birds did not come back."

The ornithologist suddenly seemed older and lonelier to me. I asked:

"And do you know why?"

"Perhaps because of some ecological catastrophe. Or the effects of a new insecticide. But these are only 'maybes'. What I want is proof."

"How can I help you?"

"Next August, dozens of juvenile storks will set off, as they do every year, on their migration paths. I want you to follow them. Day after day. I want you to take exactly the same route as they do. I want you to observe all the difficulties they come up against. To question local inhabitants, the police, each region's ornithologists. I want you to find out why my storks disappeared."

Max Böhm's plan amazed me.

“Wouldn’t you be far more qualified than me to . . .”

“I swore never to set foot in Africa again. In any case, I am now fifty-seven. I have a weak heart. It would be impossible for me to do the fieldwork.”

“Don’t you have an assistant, a young ornithologist who could do the job?”

“I don’t like specialists. I want a man with no preconceived opinions, no previous knowledge, someone with an open mind who would go to the heart of the mystery. So are you going to accept, or are you not?”

“I accept,” I answered without any hesitation. “When do I leave?”

“When the storks do, at the end of August. The journey will take about two months. In October, the birds will be in Sudan. If anything is going to happen, then I imagine that it will be before that date. Otherwise, you then come home and the mystery will remain unsolved. Your salary will be 15,000 Swiss francs per month, plus expenses. It will be paid by our association, the SPES – The Society for the Protection of the European Stork. We are not particularly well-endowed, but I have arranged the most comfortable ways to travel: first-class flights, hire cars, luxury hotels. The first instalment will be paid in mid-August, along with your plane tickets and reservations. Does my offer seem reasonable?”

“I’m your man. But tell me something first. How did you meet the Braeslers?”

“It was in 1987, at an ornithological symposium in Metz. The main theme was ‘Storks: an endangered species in Western Europe’. Georges also gave an interesting lecture about the common crane.”

Later, Max Böhm took me round Switzerland to visit some of the enclosures where he raised domestic storks, whose young became migratory birds – the very ones that I was to follow. As we travelled, the ornithologist explained the guiding principles of my journey. Firstly, the paths

storks follow have for the most part already been traced out. Secondly, storks cover only about sixty miles per day. Finally, Böhm had an infallible way of identifying the European storks. He had ringed them. Each spring, he fixed rings on the storks' feet, which bore their date of birth and identification number. With a pair of binoculars, it would thus be possible to pick out "his" birds each evening. Added to all this was the fact that Böhm corresponded with ornithologists in each country along the path, who would be able to help me and answer my questions. In these circumstances, Böhm was sure that I would be able to find out what had happened last spring on the birds' migration paths.

Three months later, on 17 August 1991, Max Böhm telephoned me in a highly excited state. He was just back from Germany where he had noticed that the storks were about to depart. Böhm had credited my account with an advance payment of 50,000 francs (two months' salary, plus an initial contribution to my expenses) and sent me, by DHL, the plane tickets, vouchers for hiring cars and a list of hotel reservations. The ornithologist had added in a "Paris–Lausanne" ticket. He wanted to see me one last time so that we could check the details of the project.

So, at 7 a.m. on 19 August, I set off, well supplied with guide books, visas and medicines. I had decided to travel light. My entire belongings – computer included – fitted into a medium-sized suitcase, as well as a small rucksack. Everything was in order. On the other hand, my heart was beating chaotically, full of a burning confusion of hope, excitement and apprehension.

CHAPTER 3

YET NOW, IT was all over. Before it had even begun. Max Böhm would never know why his storks had disappeared. And neither would I, for that matter. Because his death meant that my investigations had come to an end. I would pay the money back to the association and return to my studies. My life as a traveller had been extremely brief. And I was not even surprised at this aborted career. After all, I had never been anything more than an idle student. There was no reason at all why I should now suddenly become a swashbuckling adventurer.

But still I waited there. In the hospital. For the arrival of the Federal Inspector and the result of the postmortem. Yes, there had been a postmortem. The doctor on night duty had begun it at once, as soon as he had received police permission – Max Böhm apparently had no family. So what had happened to old Max? A heart attack? A stork attack? These questions needed answering, and that was no doubt why the ornithologist's body was now being dissected.

"Are you Louis Antioch?"

Lost in my thoughts, I had not noticed the man who had just sat down beside me. His voice was kind, his features too. A long face, with a polite expression, under an agitated mop of hair. He gazed at me with sleepy eyes, still half in dreamland. He was unshaven, and I clearly sensed that this was exceptional. He was wearing light, neatly tailored cotton trousers and a lavender blue Lacoste shirt. We were dressed almost identically, except my shirt was black and had a skull emblazoned on it instead of a crocodile.

"Yes. Are you from the police?" I answered.

He nodded and put his hands together, as though he was going to pray.

“I’m Inspector Dumaz. I’m on night duty. A nasty business. So you found the body?”

“Yes.”

“What was it like?”

“Dead.”

Dumaz shrugged and produced a note pad.

“In what circumstances did you find it?”

I told him about the trail that had led me to Böhm. Dumaz slowly noted it all down, then asked:

“Are you French?”

“Yes. I live in Paris.”

The inspector carefully jotted down my address.

“Had you known Max Böhm for long?”

“No.”

“What was the nature of your relationship?”

I decided to lie.

“I’m an amateur ornithologist. He and I were planning to put together an educational programme concerning various species of birds.”

“Which ones?”

“Mainly the white stork.”

“What’s your job?”

“I’ve just completed my studies.”

“What sort of studies? Ornithology?”

“No, history and philosophy.”

“And how old are you?”

“Thirty-two.”

The inspector whistled softly.

“You’re lucky to have been able to pursue your interests for so long. I’m the same age as you, and I’ve been in the police force for thirteen years.”

“History doesn’t interest me,” I said coldly.

Dumaz stared at the wall in front of us. A dreamy smile drifted over his face once more.

“My job doesn’t interest me either, I can promise you that.”

He turned his eyes to me again.

“How long do you think Max Böhm had been dead for?”

“Since the day before yesterday. The evening of the seventeenth. The janitor saw him climb up to the nest, but didn’t see him come down again.”

“And what do you think he died of?”

“I’ve no idea. A heart attack, maybe. The storks had started to . . . eat him.”

“I saw the body before the postmortem. Do you have anything to add?”

“No.”

“You’ll have to sign a statement at police headquarters in the town centre. It will be ready at the end of the morning. Here’s the address. (Dumaz sighed.) This death is going to make tongues wag. Böhm was a celebrity. I suppose you know that he reintroduced storks into Switzerland. Things like that mean a lot to us Swiss.”

He came to a halt, then gave a short laugh.

“You’re wearing an unusual shirt . . . It’s rather appropriate, don’t you think?”

I had been waiting for this since the start. I was saved by the arrival of a short, forthright woman with dark-brown hair. Her white coat was blood-stained, her face blotchy and covered with wrinkles. The sort who has been around a bit. Oddly enough, in that cotton wool atmosphere, she was wearing high-heels, which clicked at each step she took. She came over to us. Her breath stank of tobacco.

“You’re here for Böhm?” she asked in a hoarse voice.

We stood up. Dumaz dealt with the introductions.

“This is Louis Antioch, a student, and Max Böhm’s friend. (I sensed a tone of irony in his voice.) He’s the one who discovered the body tonight. I’m Inspector Dumaz, from the Federal Police.”

“Catherine Warel, heart surgeon. The postmortem took a long time,” she said, wiping her forehead, which was running with sweat. “It was a more complicated case than expected. Firstly, because of the wounds. All those lumps that had been pecked out of him. Apparently he was found in a stork’s nest. What was he doing up there, for heaven’s sake?”

“Max Böhm was an ornithologist,” Dumaz explained stiffly. “I’m surprised you’ve never heard of him. He was extremely famous. He protected Switzerland’s storks.”

“Ah, did he?” the woman said, unconvinced.

She took out a packet of French cigarettes and lit one. I noticed the no-smoking sign and realized that she was not Swiss. After blowing out a long puff of smoke, she went on:

“Let’s get back to the postmortem. Despite all of the injuries – you’ll receive a typed description of them later this morning – it is clear that he died of a heart attack on the evening of August 17, at about eight o’clock. (She turned towards me.) If it hadn’t been for you, the smell would have ended up alerting the tourists. But there is something surprising. Did you know that Böhm had had a heart transplant?”

Dumaz stared round at me quizzically. The doctor went on:

“When the team found a long scar on his sternum they called me in so that I could supervise the postmortem. There is no doubt about the transplant. First of all there’s the scar typical of a sternotomy, then abnormal adhesions in the pericardiac cavity, which are signs of a previous operation. I also found the sutures of the graft around the aorta, the pulmonary artery and the left and right auricles, which were done with non-reabsorbent thread.”

Dr Warel took another drag, and continued.

“The operation evidently occurred several years ago, but the new organ was remarkably well accepted – normally we find a large number of white scars on a transplanted heart,

which correspond to points of rejection, or, to put it another way, muscular cells with necrosis. Böhm's transplant is therefore extremely interesting. And, from what I could see, the transplant was performed by someone who knew what they were doing. Now, I asked around and Max Böhm was not being treated by any of our doctors. There's a little mystery to solve, gentlemen. I'll look into it myself. But there's nothing original about the cause of death. A classic coronary thrombosis, which occurred about fifty hours ago. From the effort of climbing up to the nest, presumably. If it's any consolation to you, Böhm didn't suffer."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Warel blew out a long puff of nicotine in the aseptic air.

"A transplanted heart is independent from the host nervous system. So a heart attack doesn't cause any particular pain. Max Böhm didn't feel himself die. That's all, gentlemen." She turned towards me. "Are you going to deal with the funeral?"

I hesitated for a second.

"Unfortunately, I have to go away and . . ." I replied.

"Okay," she cut in. "We'll sort things out. The death certificate will be ready later this morning. (And then, to Dumaz:) Can I speak to you for a minute?"

The inspector and the doctor nodded to me in farewell. Dumaz added:

"Don't forget to come in and sign your statement at the end of the morning."

Then they left me in the corridor, him with his dreamy face, and her with her heels clicking. Though not loud enough to drown out what she whispered to him:

"There's a problem . . ."

CHAPTER 4

OUTSIDE, DAWN WAS making metallic shadows, and casting a grey light through the sleepy streets. Ignoring the traffic lights, I crossed Montreux and drove directly to Böhm's house. I did not know why, but I was terrified of the idea of the police investigating him. I wanted to destroy all the documents that concerned me, and quietly pay back the SPES, without the police becoming involved. No trace, no problems.

I parked at a discreet distance from the chalet. First of all, I checked that the front door was not bolted, then went back to the car and fetched a flexible plastic divider from my bag. I slid it in between the door and the frame. Playing with the lock, I tried to slip the plastic sheet under the latch. At last, after I had given it a good shoulder thrust, the door silently opened. I entered the residence of Monsieur Böhm, deceased. The half-light made the interior of the chalet look smaller and more cramped than ever. It was already a dead man's house.

I went down to the study in the basement and had no difficulty in finding the file marked "Louis Antioch", which was lying on the desk. It contained the receipt of the bank transfer, bills for the plane tickets and rental agreements. I also read the notes that Böhm had taken about me from what Nelly Braesler had told him:

> "Louis Antioch. Age thirty-two. Adopted by the Braeslers at the age of ten.
> Intelligent, brilliant and sensitive. But indolent and disillusioned. To be handled with caution.
> Watch out for traumas from the accident. Partial amnesia."

So, as far as the Braeslers were concerned, even after all those years I was still in a critical condition – a nutcase. I turned over the page. There was nothing more. Nelly had told him nothing about my family tragedy. Just as well. I kept the file and continued looking. In the drawers, I found a file entitled “Storks”, similar to the one Max had prepared for me that first day, with contact addresses and a ream of information. I hung onto that one, too.

It was time to go. But, gripped by a strange curiosity, I continued searching in a random manner. In a metal filing cabinet, as tall as I was, I found thousands of index cards for his birds. They were crammed in together, vertically, with different coloured edges. Böhm had explained this colour coding to me. For each event or piece of information a different shade was given: red – female; blue – male; green – migratory; pink – accident involving electrocution; yellow – illness; black – death, and so on. Thus, by just looking at the edges of the cards, Böhm could pick out those that concerned any given research subject.

An idea occurred to me. I looked through the list of storks that had disappeared, then dug out some of the cards concerning them from the drawer. Böhm used an indecipherable coded language. All I could figure out was that the storks that had vanished were all adults, more than seven years old. I pocketed the cards. I was beginning to become a kleptomaniac. Still in the throes of an irresistible impulse, I went right through the desk, this time in search of a medical file. “Böhm is a textbook case.” Dr Warel had said. Where had he been operated on? Who was the surgeon? I found nothing.

In desperation, I turned to a small recess that was adjacent to the study. There, Max Böhm soldered his rings and kept his ornithological equipment. On the work surface lay a pair of binoculars, some photographic filters and myriad rings of every sort and every description. I also found some surgical instruments, some hypodermic

syringes, dressings, splints and disinfectants. In his spare time, Max Böhm had obviously also played at being an amateur vet. That old man's universe now seemed increasingly lonely, centred on his incomprehensible obsessions. At last, I put everything back into place and returned to the ground floor.

I strode across the main sitting-room, the dining-room and the kitchen. All they contained were Swiss knick-knacks, junk mail and old newspapers. I went up to the bedrooms. There were three of them. The one where I had slept that first night was still just as anonymous, with its narrow bed and cramped furniture. Böhm's room smelt damp and sad. The decor was faded and the furniture piled up, without any apparent rhyme or reason. I searched the lot: wardrobe, desk and chests-of-drawers. They were all practically empty. I looked under the bed and the rugs. I pulled up the corners of the wallpaper. Nothing. Apart from a cardboard box at the bottom of a wardrobe containing some old photographs of a woman. I looked at these snapshots for a moment. She was small, with vague features and a fragile face, against a background of tropical scenery. This had to be Madame Böhm. In the more recent photos – with the outdated colours of the 1970s – she looked about forty. I went into the third bedroom. All I found was the same antiquated atmosphere, nothing more. Brushing the dust off my clothes, I went back down the narrow staircase.

Through the windows, the sun was coming up. A golden ray of light stroked the backs of the furniture and the edges of the daises, which rose up for no apparent reason in each corner of the room. I sat down on one of them. This house was definitely missing several things: Max Böhm's medical file (someone with a heart transplant must have endless prescriptions, scans, electrocardiograms, and so on); the classical souvenirs of a life spent travelling, such as African bric-à-brac, Oriental rugs, hunting trophies and what have

you; the remnants of a professional career – I had not even found a file dealing with his pension, let alone bank statements or tax returns. If Böhm had decided to obliterate his past, then he could hardly have gone about it more thoroughly. And yet, there just had to be a hiding place somewhere.

I glanced at my watch. It was 7.15. If there was going to be an investigation, the police would be there soon, to set seals on the door, if nothing else. With a feeling of regret, I stood up and went to the door. I opened it, then thought about all those steps. Those daises in the main living-room were ideal hiding places. I retraced my steps and tapped on their sides. They were hollow. I ran downstairs to the recess, fetched a few tools and dashed back up. Twenty minutes later, I had opened up the seven steps in Böhm's sitting-room while doing a minimum of damage. In front of me were three brown, dusty, anonymous envelopes.

I went back to the car and, in search of a quiet place, drove off to the hills that overlook Montreux. Six miles further on, down an isolated lane, I pulled up beside a wood that was still wet with dew. My hands trembled as I opened the first envelope.

It contained the medical file of Irène Böhm, née Fogel, born in Geneva in 1942, died at Bellevue Hospital, Lausanne, in August 1977, of a generalized cancer. The file contained a few x-rays, diagrams and prescriptions, then a death certificate, with an attached telegram addressed to Max Böhm plus a letter of condolence from Dr Lierbaüm, who had treated Irène. I looked at the little envelope. It bore Max Böhm's address in 1977: 66, avenue Bokassa, Bangui, Central African Republic. My heart was racing. The Central African Republic had been Böhm's last address in Africa. That country so tragically famous for the lunacy of its short-lived dictator, Emperor Bokassa. That glistening jungle, sweltering and humid, hidden in the heart of Africa – and also hidden in the depths of my own past.