

CHALET IN THE SKY

I. The Great Resurfacing of the World.

Seated between his nephews Andoche and Moderan on the balcony of the villa that he had just bought, with a view to a fairly long stay, the well-known scholar Monsieur Cabrol seemed thoughtful, his brows slightly furrowed.

“Aren’t you pleased with the arrangements, Uncle?” asked Moderan.

“Yes, yes, they’ll do,” said Monsieur Cabrol. “The first floor is quite well organized: four rooms...one for you, two for me, and we still have one for guests—that’s enough. That will do very well. What worries me a little is...but no, no...it will do. I was thinking about my work, my dear Moderan—I don’t want it to suffer from our move. No, no, it won’t suffer...on the contrary, with the tranquility, the calm, the silence...nor will our studies, my lads, for you’ll be working too!”

“Oh, certainly, Uncle!” exclaimed Andoche and Moderan, with one voice.

At that moment, the balcony shifted abruptly. Andoche almost slid off the divan. Behind them, the villa oscillated.

“Come on—one last look at the furniture,” said Monsieur Cabrol, pushing the French windows. “My bedroom is fine, my bedstead, my desk and filing-cabinet. There are only 40 drawers and pigeon-holes for my 42 works in progress—it’s inconvenient, but, well, I need order; it’s a matter of not confusing my archives! 42, my lads! I know that many don’t yet have any more than a title written down, but they’ll make progress!”

“Look down there, Uncle,” said Andoche, going back on to the balcony.

“Oh yes—the swirls of dust and smoke above the elevators and winches of the Great Northern Works, which became active a fortnight ago. We should have left already.”

Monsieur Cabrol turned his back on the Great Northern Works, muttering: “The world is becoming uninhabitable, alas. Our planet is being sabotaged. No solidity anywhere, in Europe and America, or in the scarcely-tranquil hidden corners of Central Africa. The perforated, worn-out soil, creviced in all directions by quakes, subsidence, shocks and slippages, former mines collapsed or invaded by subterranean seas, forests destroyed... I’m not making recriminations; doubtless the imprudence of our ancestors is to blame, but our globe is getting old as well, and it’s aging terribly badly.”

“Oh yes!” said Moderan.

“Then again, it must be admitted that the work of the first great consolidation undertaken in the 22nd century, rather meanly, with the simple resources that the state of Science could furnish in that distant era, didn’t do a lot of good. It’s necessary now to resume work on a vast coordinated plan.”

“And here’s the first part getting started!” said Moderan, pointing northwards at new vortices of vapor and smoke, which accompanied a frightful racket of rattlings, whistlings and explosions.”

“Yes, there it is, as it has to be! The pyramids sank further three months ago, you know. The former summit of the great pyramid is no more than 72 centimeters above ground now; the others have completely disappeared! It’s time to decide on a general reconstruction of our planet. But how long will this vast resurfacing that has become so very necessary take? How vexatious it’s going to be, before a brand new and perfectly solid globe is restored! Far-sighted men, friends of tranquility, have already gone, flown away hastily, to go and live in remote spots preserved by chance or in sectors that won’t be disturbed straight away...”

“Let’s go, Uncle, let’s go!”

“Personally, I’d rather see the commencement of the upheaval, to give more savor to our tranquility elsewhere. The egotism of a sybarite—it’s very naughty, and I’ve already been punished for it, since I’m told that all of these fortunate and rather rare *Elsewheres* are already full—overfull—of fugitives like us.”

“But what about the sixth continent, Uncle?”

“The sixth continent? But your sixth continent is already old, my boy, since it was constructed at the end of the 20th century.”

“Yes, that’s true, you showed me an old atlas from 1975 in which it wasn’t yet depicted.”

“Don’t worry, though—I hope I can still find a few nice little corners for us near the South American pleasure-cities, in the Chilean Switzerland or the Patagonian Riviera, or the islands constructed in the Pacific—they’re said to be very successful.”

In spite of his uncle’s explanations, however, Andoche’s lips visibly formed a sort of moue.

“Well, what now?” said Monsieur Cabrol.

“Why not another world?” Andoche objected, eventually.

“Oh!” said Moderan.

“You’d prefer another word, imprudent youth”

"Not me!" said Moderan.

"Yes, you're more reasonable; I've always said that you resemble me, physically and intellectually, and I was paying you a compliment! Personally, I detest adventures, as you do—that's very good, but this Andoche is a risk-taker. When you were little, by virtue of crazy imprudence, he was always setting off over the ground or into the air with his aeroclettes, getting into dangerous situations from which you, his junior, had to extract him. I wouldn't have taken responsibility for him if you weren't with him to put a brake on his high spirits."

"I'll put the brake on, Uncle!"

Bursting into laughter Moderan and Andoche exchanged a few friendly punches.

"Calm down, calm down!" said Cabrol. "Both of you put the brakes on."

"There are some other worlds that are very nice!" Andoche protested, again. "I've read about interesting communications by the Geographical Society."

"I've read them too. I'll even say that it's been reported that the conditions of life there are truly delightful for our Earth-dwellers...and that acclimatization is easy, even in the worlds newly arrived in our skies, diverted from their routes by ZZZ rays and imprudently captured by distant planets."

"Oh!" said Andoche.

"Come on, young fellow! You must know very well that the voyage presents a few difficulties, all the same. You find those great difficulties tempting, with your daredevil mentality, but you'll see..."

"No trouble," said Moderan.

"Firstly, you need a special apparatus, very carefully constructed, of guaranteed solidity, almost invulnerable, with internal equipment—and it's extremely delicate, the internal equipment of such apparatus. Then one sets off, launching into the blue—that's all well and good, but does one ever know what one will find out there? Listen—as I've told you many a time, I to, in my youth, was adventurous, like Andoche, and I didn't have a younger brother to put a brake on me. I allowed myself to be tempted by the travel agencies' advertisements. I made a great voyage to the Moon. It was expensive: 80,000 francs all-included: hotels, meals, excursions, guides, etc. Except that I didn't see anything! We arrived in the middle of a flu epidemic and fell victim to it as soon as we tried to put our noses outside! We followed the entire program, of course, but from one quarantine to the next, all the travelers in bed..."

"Not enjoyable," said Moderan.

"Yes, yes!" said Andoche.

"My dear Andoche, don't pull that face again—we're going to offer ourselves good weather and places to see, without difficulty and without fatigue, as comfortably as possible. Come on, one last tour of the house where we're going to live for seven or eight years—perhaps ten, for it's always necessary to expect delays in huge, enormous enterprises like that of the reconstruction of our dusty old planet, disfigured in an abominable fashion by preceding generations: careless people, tenants, simple occupiers like us, but who have used and abused the place instead of living like the parents of families, as was their duty, and have left us a heritage in an awful state!"

"We're made a complete tour of the house, Uncle," said Andoche. "Everything's perfect. It's genteel, elegant, the furniture well-made, the beds and armchairs comfortable."

"It's a little expensive—out of our price range, under normal circumstances, but I've told the constructor that your father recommended me. Needless to say, he's furnished us with the latest model aerochalet, state-of-the-art, carefully finished, with a proven intra-atomic-energy motor, carefully checked in running, able to go anywhere, with no fear of squalls or tempests. In sum, an all-purpose aerial caravan, for air, sea and land! In case of a mid-Ocean breakdown—improbable, but it's necessary to be prepared for any accident—we can sail, and get ourselves out of trouble by our own means..."

"Of course!" said Andoche, smiling with pleasure.

"And if I'm content and satisfied, I'll have given my constructor a further payment in five years and an additional premium in ten—and I ask nothing more than to pay him that additional premium. For the moment, I declare myself quite content with our chalet, a floating villa that will carry us far away from that colossal Reconstruction Works, flying from country to country in search, not of a single pleasant place to live, but ten or 20 in succession! When we've studied the local people and horizons sufficiently, and want a change, we'll change them!"

"Bravo!" cried Andoche. "I like variety!"

"Me too," said Andoche.

"And me, just as much as you!" concluded Monsieur Cabrol. "So, you've seen everything. There's your room, with its two beds in front of one large window, from which you won't miss any of the landscape. My bedroom's next door; I'll have you close by; we'll each work in our own rooms. Meals will be taken in a corner of my study, at the customary hours, in order not to change our routines at all. Instead of staying rooted to the spot in our earthbound domicile, my flying villa will carry us wherever we wish, as we wish, at top speed when it's a matter of gaining ground, or very gently when the landscape is worth the trouble of being savored in every detail, without missing anything. That's real tourism! And then, in nice places, descent to Earth and rest; we'll

moor the house with a good view for a few days or a few months, in some proud promontory, gentle hill or Alp-like peak, or even in an air-garden, close to some interesting city. Are you content?"

"Content? Joyful! Let's get going right away."

"Ah! First, we have to give a name to our flying villa, where we'll be so comfortable. I propose..."

"The Villa Beauséjour."

"No, the Beauséjour Family Aero-Boarding-House! Tomorrow, the opening of our family boarding-house, the house-warming and leaving party."

Monsieur Cabrol rubbed his hands together and his face took on a jovial expression; his eyes seemed to be laughing through his spectacles, the creases in his slightly-hollow cheeks quivering.

He was a man of average height, but rather thin and very stiff. He was, as always, dressed in a long doublet—a sort of overcoat, as they used to say in olden times—with a broad belt, with a hood folded down over the shoulders and a broad upturned collar. That collar framed a long neck, a narrow, sharply-outlined face hollowed out beneath the cheekbones, and spectacles set over other hollows sheltered by black bushy eyebrows. A long moustache hung down in two lovely black curls. As for his hair, that was reduced to a single thick tuft at the rear of a majestic skull, which seemed to be full of thoughts, whose seething kept his wrinkles perpetually in motion.

His nephew Andoche resembled him, perhaps, but rather vaguely, being more filled-out. He was young, and life, with all its exigencies, studies and formidable brain-work, had not yet sculpted his face and his rounded pink cheeks, nor traced the slightest wrinkle on his forehead. Let us note that he was behind other young folk of his generation in that respect. His lips laughed easily and, when they were not smiling, had an audacious expression that accentuated the gaze of his keen, alert eyes.

Moderan was also good-looking, with pink cheeks, but he had a soft gaze, and gentler features. The resemblance between the two brothers was in the legs, nervously agitated in perpetual motion—the legs of young sportsmen, avid to run and jump.

"Let's go—tomorrow, we escape!" concluded Monsieur Cabrol, after a last circular glance around the aerochalet's drawing-room.

The two brothers leapt into action. Moderan took the floating stairway, while Andoche launched himself on to the airstrip hanging on to a wire.