

# CYBELE

## CHAPTER II

Still pensive, Marius went back to his own house, entering by the small door to the garden, of which he had the key. At that hour of the night, the place doubtless lent itself to the young man's need to savor a moment of solitude before going to bed, since, instead of immediately going to his apartment, he started strolling at a measured pace along the lateral pathway to which the door that he had closed behind him gave access, wandering back and forth through the black shadow that the house projected—a shadow all the blacker because it extended along the high row of dark yews at the bottom of the garden.

Between the top of that obscure vegetable wall and the roofs of the houses there was room for a fine extent of sky where the scintillating stars seemed to be challenging the pale light emitted by the shining arc of a moon scarcely in its first quarter. It is necessary to believe that Marius continued to delight in his nocturnal meditation, for, pausing in his walk, he sat down on one of the large benches with comfortable backs that modern taste is gradually introducing everywhere, in our gardens as well as on our public promenades.

A profound silence, scarcely disturbed by a distant croaking of frogs, reigned in the surroundings. In the house, everyone was asleep, except for Marius and the brave Houzard, who came silently to lie down discreetly at his master's feet. It seemed momentarily, however, that a few soft notes of music came from some way off, doubtless well-known to the amorous young man, because he pricked up his ears immediately. They were the opening chords of the tender melody from *Mireille*:<sup>1</sup>

*My heart cannot change;  
Remember that I love you.*

The fugitive notes were coming from Jeanne's shuttered bedroom, where she too was staying up late—but the delightful harmony only sighed briefly, before the silence—the great silence of midnight—reigned once again in all directions.

High above sparkled the golden nails of the “carts” of Ursa Major and Minor, between which snaked the polar Draco, which turns its mysterious head toward the mysterious region of the sky into which, it is said, our own sun is traveling, drawing its cortege of planets in its wake. It is there that the quadrilateral of Hercules can be seen, beside that of the ravishing Corona Borealis, the astonishing symmetry of which does indeed design a veritable diadem of celestial pearls. Thus, Gemma, or the Pearl, is the well-merited name given to the queen of that unparalleled item of jewelry. It really is a set of jewels, to which no crown of this world can be compared, except, perhaps, the white crown of a bride.

And the delighted imagination of the young man sank into the sweetest of interior contemplations—that of his own happiness—with his eyes on the celestial diadem, which, in his amorous folly, he wanted to see descend to within arm's reach, and surrender itself to him...so that he might give it to her.

And still the gold of the constellations scintillated, the limitless field of which seemed the only backcloth worthy of supporting the magnified thought and the divine reams of the most besotted of lovers.

It was, above all, the gentle opaline radiance of Gemma that held his gaze, suspended by the reverie. He could not take his eyes off it, no longer seeing anything but the beautiful queen, who seemed to be gathering her followers together for some mysterious conspiracy. From different directions, however, like a discreet advertisement for Marius, continual fulgurations were launched—winks, so to speak—that the nearer stars seemed to be addressing to him and exchanging between themselves, like signs of intelligence.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Gounod's 1864 opera, based on a poem by the Provençal poet Frédéric Mistral.

That excessively prolonged fixity of gaze ended up having a strange effect. Thus, the star appeared to light up more brightly, staring in its turn at the imprudent watcher; in a way, it took possession of the gaze that had lingered too long on its fire.

Marius had the sensation of a kind of charm that he wanted to break by looking away, either toward the superb Vega or toward the brilliant Arcturus, but it was in vain that he tried to flee the attraction commenced. Even when he closed his eyes, Gemma remained nailed to his retina, and imposed her magnified and magnetic flamboyance more and more despotically. An invincible torpor gripped the young man, gradually removing the lucidity of his mind.

For anyone who has not experienced the strange hallucinations of hypnotism, the fact that we are reporting may appear utterly incredible, but how many things, each more incredible than the last, have imposed themselves on our belief since hypnotism began to provoke talk and rumor of its miracles?

In the meantime, the spell intensified, and poor Marius became breathless, his face turned to the sky. Suddenly, the luminous ray penetrated into the utmost depths of his being, like a steel needle. Would you believe it? It was now Gemma who was looking, staring, at Marius. The soft and timid gleam of a moment before had become a fascinating and imperious gaze that seemed to be saying: "Come to me! I command it!"

How was it that our friend suddenly lost the sentiment of his situation, to the point that the star no longer seemed to be floating above his head? On the contrary, he saw it, fearfully, sparkling at the very bottom of an immense abyss open beneath him.

At any rate, vertigo progressively overwhelmed him, and he believed that he was suspended above a frightful void. A sudden instinct of self-preservation made him extend his clutching hands with a desperate energy, which feverishly gripped the wooden slats of the back of the bench supporting his head.

But was that not absurd, impossible? What about the law of gravity? What, then, had become of the centripetal force that attaches terrestrial objects to the ground and retains them?

Oh, was it really a matter of the reasonable and the possible? It was doubtless just a horrible nightmare that was about to end.

But no! The unfortunate fellow felt, in his delirium, that the rotating Earth was now suspending him upside-down, over the infinite abyss that was gaping before his eyes, with no other support than his desperate grip—and his strength was running out, and the magnetic attraction of the star was increasing. The perfidious queen of the magic circle was darting her most urgent effluvia at him, and ordering once again: "Come to me!"

The unfortunate Marius realized that he was lost. In his anguish, he saw his entire life, all of his happiness, flying away from him in a supreme vision.

"Help! Help!"

Suddenly, his fingers, at the limit of their strength, relaxed, and, uttering a loud scream, he fell into the immensity...

A sensation of a rapid wind, producing in his ears the sound of rushing water, finally extracted our poor friend from a long, perfectly understandable and excusable faint. One sees people fall ill every day for less.

He was immediately conscious of his terrifying situation, and wondered how many instants still separated him from the most horrible death. To prolong such an agony was not desirable. It was better to get it over with as quickly as possible—and yet that death did not come. The seconds succeeded one another, and he fell, still falling face forwards, once again having the diabolical star before his eyes—without, moreover, feeling unduly uncomfortable.

In such an extremity, the length of time that goes by reanimates calm and relaxation in the mind of its own accord. He was able to think and say to himself: *My poor Marius, if you're still in this world, something supernatural is happening here that you don't understand.*

Soon, the vertiginous shock of the commencement of the fall was gradually transformed into the smooth sensation that a bird must experience in cleaving through the air toward its objective. After having counted the seconds, it was long quarters of an hour that appeared to succeed them.

In the end, it even became monotonous. Marius pulled himself together completely, and began, in order to kill time, to remember appropriate stories, including that of a prodigious jumper of whom he had heard mention in Marseilles, who leapt so high and remained in the air for such a long time that he began to get bored.

If only he knew how long this fantastic voyage would last!

It was definitely time to try to figure out where he was. The poor fellow attempted to look around, which he had not yet dared to do.

The first thing that struck his gaze when he raised his head was, some distance ahead of him, the most astonishing landscape imaginable: a landscape in which a curious distribution of light separated a region bathed in light from a vast area that remained in shadow, faintly illuminated by a kind of moonlight. From where he was, Marius could see the most magnificent succession of high mountains with tormented summits and profound valleys that faded away on the horizon—a horizon cut out from an almost black sky by a clear, sharp line.

It was the lunar region that was directly in front of Marius; it appeared that it really was the moon, obligingly keeping company with him, since he was traveling in such an extraordinary fashion himself. Perhaps he would reach the end of the insensate journey there.

If that were the case, what would become of him in a land so different from his own? That prompted our friend to remember all the knowledge he had acquired and everything he had read concerning the abode of the Selenites. He would, therefore, be able to check the marvelous tales told by travelers who had preceded him to that country, so little known as yet, who had doubtless exaggerated the reality somewhat, as is usual for the enthusiastic temperament of bold discoverers of distant lands.

“The travelers that had preceded him?” you say.

Certainly, my dear reader. Come on, try to remember.

Without going back as far as Lucian of Samosata, who witnessed the great battle waged between the armies of the sun and moon, comprised of hippogriffs, fleas as large as elephants and other curious monsters, he remembered Astolpho, whose story Ariosto told in the *Orlando Furioso*, and who, accompanied by St. John, traveled to the Moon in the same chariot the prophet Elijah had once used. Among other curious items that he found in the valley in which they landed, there were all the things that we lose of our own accord, including reputation and common sense, which remain there in tightly-sealed bottles, in order to guarantee those extremely volatile substances against evaporation. Astolpho collected his own, as well as Orlando’s, the latter being in dire need of his at that moment, and returned without difficulty, bringing the bottles back intact.

Marius had also read about the adventure of Don Domingo Gonsales, a gentleman from Seville, who, according to the report made by the worthy Bishop Godwin, had been able to domesticate a flock of geese, to which he had attached a gondola in which he traveled through the air. Although the voyage to our satellite that the latter carried out in that fashion was involuntary, entirely due to a caprice of his team, which took off from the peak of Tenerife and flew straight to the moon, he nevertheless reaped the glory of the enterprise, and eventually came back to inform us that there are men on the moon who grow to thirty feet tall; that they express themselves exclusively in music; that they sleep during hot days that last fifteen times as long as ours and stay awake during long nights brightened by the light coming from the Earth; and, finally, that because everything weighs so little out there, the giants in question can travel through the air, steering by waving fans.

Another of the most interesting explorers was Cyrano de Bergerac, whose flew by means of a machine of his own invention. He, too, saw giants on the Moon, who, far from flying through the air, walked on all fours, but were nevertheless very intelligent and even humorous individuals—as Cyrano had occasion to learn to his cost, for they captured him and trained him to do somersaults and pull faces to amuse the public, deeming a man of his species good for nothing else. That did not prevent him from making a host of curious observations, which he passed on to us in his turn, such as the aptitude of the Selenites to satisfy their nutritional needs with odors alone, and their custom of paying for everything in intellectual currency—which is to say, with poetry of their own composition, varying in quality.

Marius, who was already anxious regarding the means by which he might make himself understood by the inhabitants if he happened to run into them, recalled that Cyrano de Bergerac had also observed that the local language consisted entirely of music, but only in the educated classes, the lower orders expressing thoughts solely by means of signs and contortions. He felt reassured in either case, for our friend was a passable musician; and as for gestures, was he not from the Midi, where sign-language always accompanies speech, and is sometimes more significant?

There have been explorers who traveled even further than those just mentioned, who did not come from sublunar regions, as witness the Micromegas whose marvelous story was told by Voltaire. That native of Sirius, whose height extended to eight leagues, traveled from star to star with the sole aim of learning. On Saturn he found dwarfs who were only two thousand meters tall, and took one of them with him, who was none other than the secretary of that planet's Académie des Sciences.

When they arrived together on the terrestrial globe, Micromegas scooped up some water from the Baltic in the palm of his hand, in which something seemed to be moving. When that something was examined through a stone in his companion's necklace that served as a magnifying-glass, it turned out to be a ship undertaking a scientific expedition to the North Pole. That was a good opportunity to talk about science and philosophy, of which the Sirian and the Saturnian promptly took advantage, entering into communication with the microbes by means of tiny tubes, which permitted them to have a fairly long conversation with the terrestrial scientists.

The conversation ended with the peremptory affirmation of a learned ecclesiastic who declared that the entire universe had been created solely for mankind—on which the two friends laughed wholeheartedly at the pride of the human insects.

To get back to the Moon, in addition to the eye-witness testimony of those great voyagers, respectable authorities have also offered pronouncements with regard to what occurs on the night-star, which was once both the goddess Diana and Proserpina. In the first rank is Fontenelle, who imagined the Selenites worshiping the Earth floating majestically in their sky, in the same way that some terrestrial peoples revere the moon—which places the inhabitants of both lands in a position of reciprocal adoration.

Did not the great Kepler himself, in a moment of relaxation for his powerful genius, speak in his *Astronomical Dream* about the subvolvans, the Selenites who see the Earth turning, and the privolvans, those on the far side who are deprived of the beautiful spectacle of the Earth illuminating the nights of the subvolvans—who, without being any more irrational than terrestrial humans, might believe that the star in question, thirteen times large in surface area and more luminous for them than the moon is for us, was made expressly to illuminate them and provide them with amusement in being present to their eyes?

All these facts and extraordinary stories, to which Marius hardly gave any thought in other circumstances, came back to mind now in a very timely fashion. If those different accounts were added together, the result was, in sum, that the moon—which astronomers declare to be denuded of any element supportive of life, and hence utterly inhospitable—was probably better than the reputation they have conferred upon it. Other scientists have declared that, although the face we can see is devoid of water and air, the other is quite different, because the centrifugal force of the world's movement, which is only exercised on one side in this case, as on a stone whirled by a slingshot, draws those fluids and the life that depends on them to the side that is entirely unknown to us.

At any rate, Marius would soon know what the truth of the matter was, if he succeeded in landing safe and sound in the almost-virgin territory to which he was getting closer and closer.

There was only one difficulty, which was also in contradiction to the laws of gravity, which ought to have been drawing the unfortunate castaway toward the lunar globe with ever-increasing speed because of the inverse-square law. The trajectory that our friend was following was, by contrast, carrying him away, manifestly and without deviation, from the orbit of the moon, which was therefore not exerting any force on the body that was traversing its sphere of attraction with impunity. It was becoming probable that Marius would pass beyond it: one more ordeal for the unfortunate, who saw the saving plank on which he was already counting for salvation escaping him—a highly problematic salvation, however, since it would apparently involve a necessarily-fatal fall on to the rocks whose thousand asperities he could see. But was that not preferable to the frightful fate of being swallowed up forever in the abysses of infinite space?

While such dark thoughts were agitating him, in the same way that he had begun, instinctively, to move his head, Marius tried to move his arms and legs. He perceived that an approximately regular movement of his four limbs had effects reminiscent of aerial swimming, as had happened to him in dreams many a time, when he had felt himself flying through the air like a bird.

Marius was a good swimmer, but his discovery could only have very limited effects, for his vertiginous course only permitted him to veer slightly to one side without him being able to break away from the insurmountable current that was bearing him away. Nevertheless, the ability to alter his course by an appreciable angle was something, and in the present circumstances, it might perhaps enable him to reach one of the lunar mountains, whose peaks he was about to skim, to clutch some point of support and hang on tight.

He therefore started swimming vigorously, and in less than five minutes, he had altered the line of his projection sufficiently to see the rocky summits of Mount Tycho, the largest of the ancient lunar volcanoes, at very close range.<sup>2</sup>

If our swimmer had had the time, at a moment of such confusion, to contemplate the landscape that was unfolding before his eyes, illuminated by splendid earthlight, he would have admired the incomparable beauty of the immense luminous streaks radiating from the mountain, which seemed like as many enormous rivers with silvery reflections, emerging from the central crater through gaping fissures, to extend to the horizon not in capricious meanders, like our terrestrial rivers, but in straight lines, traversing mountains and valleys. He would have thought that he saw then that those astonishing rivers have immense fissures in the ground for beds, and are formed by prodigious flows of a metal that solidifies without losing much of its natural gleam, and he would have understood that the crust of the worldlet must have been well and truly smashed up in ancient times by the force of internal explosions, after which that molten matter, rising up from the interior, had come to fill in all the furrows left by the enormous starrings thus produced.

What are our paltry volcanoes and timid earthquakes by comparison with the sequence of frightful cataclysms that our satellite saw when, following the explosions of Copernicus and Aristarchos, the eruption of the region of Mount Tycho might have rendered possible the complete dispersion in space of the lunar globe, entirely reduced to dust?

But that was not what was occupying Marius' thoughts for the moment. In the matter of hypotheses, in fact, he was only considering—coolly enough, however—that of a possible landing, if the word “possible” is applicable here. In consequence, he was making superhuman efforts to get closer to the summits—which he was, however, fated never to reach, for it was elsewhere that destiny was driving the unfortunate victim of the perfidious Gemma's spell. It was much further away that our hero was expected.

It was in vain that the ethereal swimmer, with courage and desperation, multiplied the most skillful and most energetic strokes, the lunar globe and he soon crossed paths, barely a thousand meters apart, and then that distance began to increase again, the former advancing in its eternal orbit around the Earth, the latter hurtling on, ever more rapidly.

Although hope and insensate efforts had previously absorbed all of Marius' faculties, preventing him from fruitful study of the landscape that the moon invariably turns toward its hierarchical superior, the terrestrial globe, it was now bleak despair that overwhelmed him and rendered him almost indifferent to the spectacle, absolutely new for a Terran, presented by the unknown, sunlit side of our satellite.

He went past rapidly, but not so fast that he could not distinguish its essential features.

It was not as if there was any great difference in its general configuration: more craters of all sizes, more mountains and surfaces that were only lacking names akin to the familiar names of the seas of Nectar, Fecundity and Serenity, the lake of Dreams, and so on; in sum, a selenography quite similar to the visible one. What had changed, however, was a particular background coloration, undeceptive reflections that advertised true seas, this time of water, either in the depths of extinct craters or on plains where there was verdure vaguely reminiscent of ferns, reeds and rushes. That evidence supported, therefore, those

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<sup>2</sup> Because it was widely assumed at the time that the Moon's craters had to be volcanic in origin, Alhaiza was by no means the only author of interplanetary fantasies to misrepresent Tycho as a huge mountain.

who supposed that the remnants of lunar life had taken refuge, with all the indispensable elements, entirely on the side to which centrifugal force draws the fluids, of which no trace remains of the side that we can see.

Perhaps, with good eyes and closer attention, Marius would have seen the waves and tall grass stirring in places, and some undulating monster appear, reminiscent of the rudimentary forms of a life that had returned to its initial sketches on that prematurely-aged star—for it too must have had its epochs of prosperous life, as various whitened places seem to testify where contours are outlined that have every appearance of being ruined walls. They are doubtless the last vestiges of an ancient lunar civilization, for nothing advertises the continuing presence of intelligent life on the strangely divided globe, whose Earth-facing side could not be approached by living beings without mortal danger. The result of that is that, while we can no longer see the habitable part of their world, they can no longer see ours. Theirs is, at any rate, a dying world, which, although it still retains internal forces seemingly capable of determining minor superficial changes from time to time—including eruptions like the recently-observed flamboyance of Aristarchus<sup>3</sup>—is certainly not far removed from being an ambulant cadaver.

The state of mind in which Marius found himself at that moment ought to render us indulgent of the scant attention that he devoted to the serious study of the lunar hemisphere that in totally unknown to us. In any other circumstances, it would have been absolutely unforgivable for him not to have made reliable notes and accurate sketches of the lands of the privolvans, for such an opportunity would not come along again anytime soon.

Although he had an excuse, however, we ought to recall that other voyagers more scientifically-minded than Marius, as were the famous Barbicane, the president of an American Gun Club, and his two friends, whom the audacious Jules Verne sent to visit the Moon in a cannonball, were just as inattentive, and told us little more when their return to Earth produced a worldwide emotion and interest that continues to endure.

Will it be necessary, then, for us to discover our satellite in its entirety, in an accurate manner, to wait until the critical moment when—because, according to the calculations of astronomers, the distance separating the moon from the Earth is always shrinking—the fatal moment arrives when it will end up falling on our heads?

In any case, it is not poor Marius that will inform us more amply on that interesting subject, even if he returns to us some day—something that we do not know yet, for he was now being carried with increasing speed away from that inaccessible lunar landscape. Nor was it apparent that he would succeed any better in encountering and landing on one of the other planets of the solar system—which, moreover, remained invisible to him in the bright light that was dazzling him. He scarcely obtained a vague momentary impression of one vast disk close by—that of the immense Jupiter, majestically enveloped in thick clouds, as befit the god of thunder that it had been for such a long time.

Even the daylight soon began to fade away gradually, however. The voyager crossed the ultimate limits of the solar system, limits doubtless more remote than is commonly thought, for even beyond Neptune, the pale faces of two or three indubitable planets, unknown to their terrestrial sister, went past him one after another, like fleeing meteors.

What human courage and what hope, however tenacious it might be, could resist such a situation? The previous ordeals of physical and moral strength were followed, in Marius, by the resigned fatalism and total self-abandonment of a man who thinks that he is conclusively doomed. Could he not see, in the far distance, in a nimbus that was not very luminous but was nevertheless visible, a small celestial company that could be measured by a hand-span, and which represented for the unfortunate exile the entire solar system—that world, in a corner of which he had been so happy and, where he had left behind everything that he loved? Then too, in front of him, more scintillating than ever, there was still the fateful star, Gemma, and her menacing circle, which seemed to have swelled further, and to be opening up her gaping abyss, as if to capture the unlucky human more securely.

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<sup>3</sup> Aristarchus, one of the brightest points on the moon's surface, has always been a prolific source of observations of "transient lunar phenomena," which are still being reported and discussed today.

Soon, he was reduced to complete mental prostration, for the physical numbness caused by the extreme cold of space penetrated to the marrow of his bones and extinguished all remaining sentiment. He was no more than an inert mass, a lethargic body continuing its plunge into the limitless extent...

How long did our friend's unconsciousness last? We cannot say, and nor could he. But that death-like annihilation was to come to an end. A time came when a benevolent heat warmed up his frozen blood, and a life that had remained dormant reappeared in the insensible body. There was no immediate awakening, but in the limbo of long-extinct thought, tremulous glimmers began to ignite, and vague images stirred that soon took on the fugitive consistency of dreams—of a dream that was at first enchanting, in fact.

A delightful landscape gilded by the sun, surrounded him. In the distance, there was the horizon of a blue sea; close at hand, there were woods bathed with shadow. Attracted by the gentle seductions of coolness and mystery, the young man had gone into the wood, beneath the thick foliage, when he saw advancing from one side, with the majesty of a goddess, a woman of celestial beauty, whose white clothing was intermittently illuminated when she passed through the narrow sunbeams filtering through the leafy crowns of the trees as she walked through the dark green undergrowth. The delightful apparition stopped a few paces away from him, while staring at him.

O joy! What a surprise! It's her, it's his Jeanne!

And the dreamer, mad with love, falls to his knees and holds out his arms to his beloved...but why that cold gaze, that indifferent expression? Does his Jeanne no longer recognize her fiancé?

Heavens! She opens her mouth to proffer haughty words. She turns her head away and passes by. It's too much!

So Marius opens his eyes, and, recovering consciousness, perceives that he is emerging from a deceptive dream, from a chimerical anguish, instead of which comes the heartache of another anguish, this time far better motivated: that of the reality of his situation.

Then, a spark of revolt and anger against unjust destiny ignites in his eyes. He is doubtless about to see the implacable Gemma again, with her infernal circle.

But no, the malignant star is no longer there. What there is instead is the bright light of a splendid sun, no longer fleeing behind him but above his head, attracting him, drawing him toward its fire!

What has happened to him, then, during his long period of unconsciousness? How is it that the force that was previously drawing him away from the Earth is now bringing him closer to it? Is that really the solar system in front of him?

He cannot doubt it, because, in spite of the light inundating him, the strange and unique planet Saturn appears in the distance, surrounded by the corpuscular crown that we call its ring. It is, therefore, necessarily a fact that, in the course of his fantastic voyage, he has described an immeasurable curve that is now bringing him back to his point of departure—or it might be the case that, having been launched like an arrow into the sky, he is now falling back again, exactly like a projectile of that sort.

The dream he had just now was, therefore, a premonition of his homecoming. He is about to return to the Earth, to his homeland, to his affections, to his happiness!

He tries with all his might further to accelerate his fall toward so unexpected a denouement. He greets with an enthusiastic cheer that first encounter with a world of his own heavens, the immense Saturn that is now deploying its peerless ring so close to Marius that he can see it swirling before his eyes like a vast roundabout. He has only to steer slightly to his right with a few energetic strokes in order to pass through the immense hoop with the agility of an unparalleled acrobat

In the distance, directly ahead of him, a world finally appears that is softly illuminated with a pale blue radiance. Its disk, growing by the minute, soon displays the forms of familiar continents, and the presence of its faithful companion the moon at its side—which our friend rediscovers without having the slightest desire, this time, to stop there—obliterates any lingering uncertainty there might be.

*Earth! Earth!* exclaims the exile, deliriously, finally on the point of being returned to his homeland.

Soon, he is close enough to be able to contemplate the majestic spectacle of the rotation of the terrestrial globe on its axis. In spite of a zone of light clouds, iridescent with a thousand colors in the

oblique radiance of the sun, the outlines of the continents and seas are distinct, with their bays and capes, which sink and disappear successively in the east, while new lands and oceans rise in the west: an admirable scene that the followers of Copernicus and Galileo were the first to glimpse with the intuition of genius, and which Marius was now seeing in reality with his excellent twenty-five-year-old eyes.

He did not linger long in philosophizing about the vicissitudes of science, whose eternal verities are so slow to prevail in the human mind; he did not devote any time to recalling the vain systems of Ptolemy and Tycho Brahe, or even the ingenious theory of the worthy monk cited by the amiable Cyrano de Bergerac, who thought that the Earth rotated because, the central fire being Hell, the damned, desperate to escape the flames, were hanging on to and climbing over the interior walls of the sphere, which was spinning under their efforts like a squirrel-cage. No, he had but one sole thought and one sole objective: to succeed in landing on the beloved globe toward which he was now falling with ever-increasing force without sustaining any damage.

It was necessary for him to make the precise instant of his final fall coincide with the passage of the old continent, as close as possible to France, and, above all, to aim at a liquid surface in order to deaden the frightful impact in the waves of the sea, not far from a coast, instead of breaking his bones on solid ground.

So, in his preoccupation, he did not notice certain significant changes in the regions near the poles, including the fact that the white surface of the Arctic ice had grown considerably, for his eyes never quit the vicinity of the forty-third degree of latitude, anxiously measuring the time and distance that still separated him from the critical moment.

Now or never was the moment to take advantage of the ability he had, limited as it was, to use the swimming strokes with which he had already had the opportunity to experiment—especially the counter-strokes—in a course so vertiginous that it hindered his calculations, not to mention that a burning wind was already setting fire to his face as he traversed the terrestrial atmosphere like a aerolith.

Apply the brakes, Marius, or you're going to ignite like a mere bolide! Pay attention! The Asiatic continent has just filed past in its entirety. Here comes the Mediterranean sparkling down below. Ships can already be seen, sailing for various shores.

The approaching meeting-point between the moving horizontal liquid surface and the vertical fall of our hero's body will certainly be on the margin, but one might make a mistake in traveling so many thousands of miles in a few seconds. Is it necessary to hold back or hasten?

The sea seems to be gaining speed. Beware of the Spanish coast, advancing down below. Quickly! It's time...

By the grace of God!

One, two...splash!