

PART ONE THE SATURNIANS

Chapter One

In which humans see something never seen before

It happened on the eighteenth of June. The first man to see the Fiery Wheel was a captain in the Spanish frontier-guards named José Mendès.

Preceded by his daughter Lolla and his manservant Francisco, who was carrying a heavy suitcase on his shoulder, he was calmly coming down from the fort at Montjuic toward Barcelona. The three of them were going to the railway station del Norte to catch the four-fifty train to Saragossa. The road, steep and picturesque, passes through the gardens of Miramar, overlooks the sea and the coal docks of the merchant port from a height, and then falls abruptly to the bottom of the hill, where it becomes an insanitary street.

It was three o'clock in the morning. The sun had not yet emerged from the eastern sea, but the stars were beginning to pale in the brightening dawn twilight. Captain José Mendès was smoking one of those wretched cheap cigars that the French praise in their ignorance and Spaniards of good taste never touch, and going down the steep slope slowly. He stopped momentarily to detach a tenacious bramble that had clung on to the bottom of his trouser-leg. When he resumed walking, Lolla and Francisco were several strides ahead of him. Plump and short-legged, he did not hurry to catch up with them, thinking that they would wait for him at the bottom of the hill.

Suddenly, a peculiar throbbing caused him to raise his head, and what he saw rocked him back on his heels, stiff and motionless. He dropped his cigar and opened his eyes wide in amazement.

Imagine an immense wheel of fulgurant light. It was spinning in the sky with vertiginous rapidity. Its hub was a black ball pierced with holes, from which beams of green light were projecting. The dazzling wheel was moving from west to east. According to the estimate subsequently made by the captain, it might have been five hundred meters above the Castillo de Montjuic.

Suddenly, it stopped, veered at right angles and set off in the direction of Montaña Pelada. The captain thought that it must have been over the Gracia quarter when he heard a noise like multiple thunderclaps.

Instinctively, he looked at where his daughter should have been, and could not believe his eyes as he saw Lolla and Francisco lifted from the ground, raised into the sky and drawn into the Fiery Wheel. Immediately, an intense light dazzled him; something struck him forcefully on the forehead, and he felt flat on the ground, where he remained, unconscious.

When he came round, he found himself in a hospital bed. The doors of the ward were wide open and stretchers were continually being brought in laden with wounded people whose moans responded to the lamentations of the orderlies, who seemed more distressed than the injured themselves.

José Mendès felt a sharp pain in his head. He put his right hand to it and touched a thick bandage. Then he remembered.

"Lolla!" he cried. "Lolla!"

No one paid any attention to him.

"Lolla! My ninã! My darling!" His eyes welled with tears, and, turning his head to the right and the left he stammered: "Where is she? Taken away by that terrible fiery thing in the sky!" And he shouted again: "Lolla! Lolla!"

"Silence!" said a passing orderly.

Was the order addressed to him? Perhaps not—but the captain understood that it would be better to shut up, to think, to observe and to wait. He choked back his tears, mastered his distress, and, after a momentary pause, looked at his neighbors. One was breathing hoarsely, his head swathed in bloody bandages. The other, sitting on his bed, met the captain's gaze with a smile. He was a pale young man with bizarrely red hair.

"What happened?" the officer asked.

“What—you don’t know?”

“No. I saw a fiery wheel in the sky, and as it flew away toward Montaña Pelada the earth shook and I was knocked unconscious...”

“A stone hit you on the head.”

“A stone? Yes, perhaps...”

“I was with friend. We were at the corner of the Paseo de Gracia and the Grand-Via-Diagonal. We were coming back from a friend’s house, where we’d been drinking and singing since dinner. Suddenly, we saw a wheel of fire heading, as you said, toward the Montaña Pelada. And we heard a terrible roar and...but you won’t believe me!”

“Yes, yes! Speak!”

“Well, we saw, a hundred meters away, an entire block of big houses rise up from the ground, violently torn away, and fly up to the wheel like lightning...and disappear into a vast flame...”

“Like my daughter!” cried José Mendès.

“Your daughter was with you?”

“Yes, my daughter Lolla and my valet Francisco. They’ve been stolen, devoured...oh, it’s terrible!”

“Calm down,” said the young man, a trifle brusquely. “It’s not just Lolla and Francisco who’ve been stolen last night in Barcelona! At any rate, a big stone hit me in the legs and I fell down unconscious, like you. My injury’s not serious, though.”

“Houses, you said?” stammered José Mendès.

“Yes, houses sucked up like dead leaves by a passing train...”

The captain felt weak again, and fell back inertly on his pillow.

That same day, at five o’clock in the morning, the prodigy was observed at Christiania in Norway, where the wheel sucked in a courtroom and a convent, leaving two immense holes at least a hundred meters deep.

Finally, at seven o’clock, at Astrakan on the Caspian Sea, at the mouth of the Volga, the infernal wheel lifted up a bridge like a vacuum cleaner lifting up a wisp of straw.

The telegraph and the telephone spread these items of news around the world, so effectively that, the following day, most of the major newspapers in the Old and New Worlds alike reported the incredible facts in precise detail.

On the twenty-first of June in Colombia, in a café resounding with the noise of numerous loud voices, three men were sitting silently side by side on one side of a table insulated in a corner. They were reading a newspaper dated the nineteenth. Two of them were Americans, Arthur Brad and Jonathan Bild, and the other a Frenchman, Paul de Civrac. As they read the astonishing news, they felt the fear growing within them that was beginning to make the whole world tremble.

For twelve days, having been traveling in the interior, they had not seen a single newspaper. So, after having read one in with the adventure of the Spanish captain José Mendès was related, they spent the day scanning all the public papers on sale in Bogota. They learned nothing new, although an illustrated magazine that had appeared the day before, had a photograph of Lolla Mendès, transmitted by telegraph. The young woman was pretty, with an amusing expression of audacity.

During the nineteenth and the twentieth, the Fiery Wheel had not put in any further appearances or perpetrated any further ravages. Consulted by reporters, astronomers had proffered the opinion that the phenomenon was moving through interplanetary space and probably would not return to the terrestrial atmosphere. The astronomers of Bogota agreed with those of other observatories.

Then, at four o’clock in the afternoon, newspaper-vendors spread through the streets at a run, howling: “Fiery Wheel seen in America, in South Carolina. Half the city destroyed! More than thirty thousand victims!”

The vendors were brandishing sheets of red paper, printed with the latest news received by telegraph twenty minutes earlier. The public were snatching them out of their hands.

Then there was an indescribable terror in the town. The Fiery Wheel would come! What could they do? Where could they hide? Women ran through the streets in groups, clutching children in their arms and wailing. Men committed suicide. Others ran away with valises on their shoulders. Where were they going? A wind of madness was blowing through people’s brains.

In the evening, the Stock Market, where telegrams were being posted on the walls that had arrived from New York and all over the world, was invaded. A dispatch from Paris announced that the Wheel had excavated an enormous ditch in Orleans, parallel to the Loire. A village on the outskirts of Berlin had just been annihilated. The port of Hong Kong had been ravaged. The luminous Wheel had snatched up forty-three boats with their crews as it passed. All that, including the American visitation, in four hours.

An obvious question arose: could a single Wheel, even as powerful as the one seen in Barcelona, go from France to Germany, then to China and America, or were there several of the extraordinary bolides scattered around the terrestrial globe?

The terror that was galloping around the surface of the globe was detectable in the laconic dispatches. There was no possible defense against the mysterious calamity. How and with what could it be attacked? So many irritating questions, unanswerable and, in consequence, all engendering horror and panic! What was the luminous wheel, in reality? Why did its hub, black amid the brightness, not turn with the wheel? What did the black ball contain? Inhabitants of a planet? Saturn, perhaps, or Mars? What were they like? What did they want? Were they even aware of the havoc they were causing on Earth? Of the horrible war in which no resistance was possible?

And the crazed terror of humans increased as they sought reasons for courage and composure.

Paul de Civrac, Jonathan Bild and Arthur Brad spent the night of the twenty-first and twenty-second wandering around the city. At three o'clock in the morning they felt hungry. A brightly-lit restaurant, with all its doors open, appeared before them. They went in.

It was deserted: no owner, no waiters. A dinner had been set out on a table, which no one had touched. They sat down.

When the food and wine had refreshed them—they had drunk more than unusual and their ideas were not entirely clear—Jonathan Bild said: "It's stupid. We've been leading an imbecilic life for twenty-four hours."

"True," said Arthur Brad.

"What does other people's terror matter?" Jonathan went on. "If the Martians, or the Saturnians, or the Selenites..."

Paul de Civrac interrupted to say, rather naively: "It must, in fact, be inhabited, the airship..."

"You mean the wheel!"

"Let's call the thing the Fiery Wheel, like everybody else, shall we?" said Jonathan, incisively, "and for the sake of convenience, let's suppose that they're Martians..."

"It would first be necessary to admit," Brad objected, "that the planet Mars is inhabited..."

"It's admitted!" exclaimed Bild.

Paul agreed; Brad smiled.

"Well," Bild resumed, "if the Martians are coming here, what do they want? The best thing is to be rational..."

"I'm with you, Jonathan," said Paul, gravely.

"However," said Brad, "we mustn't abandon ourselves to Muslim fatalism. I've noticed that it's never been reported that the Fiery Wheel has sucked up water. Remember the bridge at Astrakan—only the bridge leapt up, with all its arches. Not a drop of water from the Volga!"

"That's true...that's true..."

"In that case," said Brad, triumphantly, "the only safe place is on water!" And the stout man lit a cigarette.

"What are you getting at?" asked Bild, ill-temperedly.

"Yes?" said Civrac, intrigued.

But Arthur Brad's only reply, to begin with, was an enigmatic smile. Then, after taking four drags on his cigarette, he repeated: "Incontestably, the only safety is to be found on water. While the world's trembling, let's go down to the Magdalena and get on a boat as soon as it becomes navigable. At Savanilla, we'll charter a ship and sail the Ocean from port to port until we hear no more mentions of these Saturnians..."

"Martians," Bild corrected.

"Damn it! Martians, Saturnians, Venusians, Selenites—what does it matter? In truth, Jonathan..."

"What about the wheel?" Paul exclaimed, in order to prevent the imminent dispute.

“What if it comes?” Brad resumed, calmly. “As soon as we see it, we jump into the sea. Dive, swim, dive, swim again...and trust me, there’s every chance that...”

“Agreed!” said Jonathan, striking the table with his fist.

The three friends seemed quite excited, shaken by a continual desire to laugh.

They got up. As they were leaving, four ragged individuals came into the room and started collecting up the cutlery as they went to break open the cash-register.

“There are looters in Bogota!” said Brad, laughing.

“And firing squads!” said Bild.

Indeed, gunshots rang out, mingled with the howls of a frightened population. There were occasional houses on fire in the streets through which they passed. Civrac thought briefly about the valises they had left at the hotel. They only contained clothes, however; all of the three friends’ money was in letters of credit.

A trivial loss, Paul thought. At least we have free hands—a good way to travel.

He dropped behind momentarily to light a cigarette, and then ran to catch up with his friends, at the sight of whom he could not help laughing. Jonathan Bild prided himself on being thin, bony and tall; Arthur Brad, by contrast, was short and stout.

They were going across a vast deserted square on the edge of the city when the sky, feebly illuminated by the dawn twilight, suddenly lit up violently.

Paul looked up. “The Fiery Wheel!” he cried.

The terror that ran through his body rendered his mind absolutely lucid. Bild and Brad came to a stop, after moving closer to him, looking up into the sky in bewilderment.

It was indeed the luminous wheel with the black hub described by Captain José Mendès. It was descending, directly above the three men. They stood shoulder to shoulder, trembling.

And suddenly, to his horror, Paul found himself lifted from the ground, into the air, drawn upwards. He perceived, vaguely, that Bild and Brad were rising up with him...

There was a blinding light, and he lost consciousness.