

THE FIRST HEAVEN: THE MOON

Chapter I The Character of the Lunarians

We finally departed on Zachiel's wings. As we rose into the air, our Earth gradually shrank, soon appearing to our eyes as a dot similar to a comet. The genius, ever attentive to our education, first made us admire the perfect symmetry with which the stars were arranged.

"Look," he said to us, "at the Milky Way, in which the stars seem to be heaped up without order upon one another."

We discovered it to the right and the left, seemingly emerging from the depths of the firmament, which I could scarcely perceive as yet. My imagination launched forth in that direction, so to speak, in order to scan all the worlds, of which I formed a delightful idea; it seemed at the same time to be engulfed in the vast concavity of the heavens; already I was savoring the delight produced by the contemplation of an object that occupies the entire soul, but without fatiguing it.

The genius enabled us see distinctly all the beauties that nature has dispersed to ornament the thousand various worlds; we saw the suns shining and moving that appear to us to deploy around them the banner of the skies; I thought then that nature, newly hatched, was embellishing herself with the freshness of spring, in order to paint all the beauties of the first day of the world.

Monime and I were gripped by admiration at the sight of so many marvels, whose grandeur, fecundity and variety fixed our attention by turns. Zachiel, continuing his flight with greater rapidity, made us traverse a part of the immeasurable desert of the void, which excited a horrible fear in us.

When we approached the large silver ball that some ancients called the sun of the night, we began to discover the form of the Moon that appears to our Earthly eyes sometimes as a cheek and sometimes a nose, with an eye or a ear to the side, or sometimes as an entire face, which our imagination surely composes, and which our most famous astronomers regard as patches that are nothing other than chains of mountains, large rocks or great cities.

Unaccustomed as we were to traveling in those high regions, the vivacity of the air had almost suffocated us; we were scarcely breathing when the genius descended on the rocky peak whose summit rose up as far as the clouds. After having reanimated us both with a divine breath, which had the same effect on us as heavenly dew when it dampens a newly-blossomed flower, the genius invited us to admire the fertility of the country.

"This world," he said, "contains all the follies of the others, and it seems that all opposites are united here. You shall see reigning, at the same time, the most sumptuous opulence and the most deplorable poverty, science and talents often debased, ignorance and stupidity always recompensed."

"They doubtless have astronomers," said Monime. "Tell me, my dear Zachiel, what they think of our Earth, and whether we have acquired among them the brilliant quality of a star; whether they regard us as a luminous body, and whether we appear to their eyes as the Moon appears to ours."

"I give you my word," said Zachiel, "that your Earth becomes a planet for the Moon, in the same way that it is one for us. As the planets can only be luminous because they are illuminated by the Sun, which imparts its light to them in proportion to their distance, that which the Moon receives is sent back to illuminate your nights, and the light that you receive directly from the Sun, which makes your most beautiful days, is sent back in its turn by the Earth in order to render the Moon the same service. Although they do not see the Earth describe a circle around them, it appears to them nevertheless to perform the function of stars regularly enough."

“I suspect,” said Monime, “that our Earth, instead of showing itself to the astronomers of the Moon in the form of a crude face, might only appear to them as a backside, in which, applying their noses and eyes thereto, they seek continually to make new discoveries and serious discoveries, as ours do with the patches on its face.”

“It appears to me,” said Zachiel, smiling, “that the air is already influencing your reflections; I would not have imagined that in speaking of such serious things, they could inspire such follies.”

“I don’t know why you’re condemning my reflections,” said Monime. “They appear quite natural to me. But I’m docile, and don’t like dispute, so I’ll abandon my thesis, and, in order not to displease you, will resume a grave tone in order to beg you to explain to me of what substance that great vault of the heavens is composed.”

“I ought not to reply to you,” said Zachiel, “but as I do not want Seaton to bear the burden of your extravagance, it is to him that I shall address myself, to tell him that a few lunar philosophers have explained the movement that the celestial bodies make above the sky that you see, some by establishing crystalline heavens that impart movement to the inferior heavens by passing light through all the crystals.”

“In truth,” said Monime, “I can no longer hold back; you’re giving me a horrible fright; my heart is palpitating and my senses are troubled when I think that if, by some unforeseen accident, all those heavens were to break, the universe would collapse and the poor inhabitants of all the worlds would be sliced into pieces.”

“Be reassured,” said Zachiel. “Their thesis is quite false, since the heavens are formed of a fluid material like the air; but as the empire of the moon is not conducive to science or philosophy, I shall transport you to the bottom of this mountain, in order to enable you to learn the mores and customs of the Lunarians.”

The genius then took us down to a plain enameled with flowers, where he caused us to adopt other fantastic bodies similar to our own. Gnomes were summoned at that time to serve us and procure us all the things that might be necessary to us. The genius always used the same resources in all the worlds we visited, while giving us intelligence of languages.

An admirable caleche was ready; we climbed into it and Zachiel took us along one of the most beautiful highways in the empire of the Lunarians. The roads seemed to us to be very pleasant, by virtue of the variety, the beauty and the fertility of the countryside; I admired the richness of their fields, covered with the precious gifts of Ceres and those of Pomona. Further on we saw vineyards, whose grapes were almost ripe, preparing and abundant harvest for the growers.

The landscapes were varied by pleasant houses, which, in truth offered nothing to our eyes but pretty houses of cards. The houses had no depth, they were all doors and windows, but the windows were ornamented by blinds or shutters, some painted blue, others green or red—which, in the midst of trees, had the most delightful effect in the world. At first, Monime took them for decorations of perspective that the Lunarians had placed there with the intention of ornamenting the roads to spare travelers from tedium.

On the slope of a hill we encountered a young courtier who was going to one of his trains. He was in a kind of filigree armchair drawn by a horse, which he was guiding himself, which seemed to me to be flying like a bird, and I could not help asking Zachiel why the young man was risking himself like that in a vehicle that the slightest shock might reduce to dust.

“What can oblige him to such imprudence? Are the inhabitants of the Moon formed of a different matter than those of our world? Or do they have enough presumption to be convinced that nature ought to respect her work in regard to them? Speak, my dear Zachiel, explain to me the reason for their temerity.”

Without replying, the genius showed me the young man crashed, his vehicle shattered, his horse fallen and the domestic who was at the rear thrown by the impact astride his master’s shoulders.

Monime, sensitive to that misfortune, uttered a piercing scream, and we ran to help him.

It was fortunate for the young man that he had encountered us on the same road. After he had been given all the necessary assistance, Monime came forward graciously to tell him that she was sorry for his misfortune and asked him whether he was injured.

“I am very grateful, my Lady, for your obliging concern; I believe that I only have a few bruises; my fall will not have any unfortunate consequences.” To his domestic, he said: “Frontin, the pendant of my ear-ring has become detached; it’s absolutely necessary to find it. Give me a lick with a comb. Do you have a brush? My coat is covered in dust, my beauty-spot has fallen off and I’m in a horrific state of disorder. In truth, my Lady, I’m devastated by the necessity of appearing before you in this state; go back to your carriage, I implore you.”

“Nothing prevents me, sir, from offering you a place therein and taking you wherever you intended to go.”

“You are heaping me, my Lady, with offers too precious for me to be able to refuse them; will you only permit me to search for my ear-ring? I have a singular interest in finding it.”

“I can’t see it, sir,” said Frontin, “but here’s one of the trinkets that was hanging from the chain of one of your watches. I don’t know whether it’s the left one or the right. It’s a little windmill, very prettily worked.”

The young man, whose name was Damon, delighted to recover that bauble, hastily pulled out his two watches in order to see which one was lacking; we observed that the chain was attached to an infinity of little trifles, including a weather-vane, a key, a cabriolet, a trowel, rings seals, little birds, a monkey, a Moor, cassolettes, grotesque faces and a thousand other puerilities, which seemed to be the attributes of their characters.

Damon then took out a traveling case full of little bottles filled with essences of different odors. He rubbed some on his head and hands, and sprinkled some on a white handkerchief, took a beauty-spot out of the box and placed it on his face, simpering. And, after having been combed, rubbed, wiped and brushed, he climbed into our carriage, where we were waiting for him, and Frontin on to the horse that had been pulling the little armchair, which Zachiel called a cabriolet, and we set off for Damon’s manor.

Monime, judging from the scrupulous search that he just made for a trivial item the chagrin that he must feel over the ruination of his cabriolet, asked him whether it might not be possible to repair it. “I’m touched by the loss of those lovely paintings with which it was ornamented. Could they not be made to serve another, by touching the up with new varnish?”

“Fie!” said Damon. “It’s a horror; it had done its time. You wouldn’t believe that it had served me for more than a month; I didn’t dare to appear in it in town any more, and I had destined it for my little trips to the country. Oh, if you had seen that of Baron Farfadet! It was radiant. It appeared yesterday on our ramparts, to the delight of all persons of taste; I’ve ordered one that will be delightful!”

When we arrived at Damon’s manor house, he invited us with a singular grace to spend a few days there, while an apartment was being prepared for us in his house in the city. “You are foreigners,” Damon added. “It would be ridiculous, after the obligations I have to you, for me to suffer that you should lodge anywhere else but with me. It’s the sole means I can find to procure myself the advantage of expressing my gratitude.”

We could not refuse such a kind offer.

I was delighted by the open manner of the young lord. It is true that the Lunarians allow themselves to be penetrated easily; they exhaust the efforts of artistry in supplying their tables, in their furniture, their adornments, their pleasures and their ostentations, without conserving anything that might conceal their thinking from a stranger. Doubtless they believe that it is not worth the trouble of hiding today a sentiment that they might longer have tomorrow, for it is certain that they have an ever-active reinforcement in their language much more rapid than thought.

During our sojourn with Lord Damon we learned to know him; he was one of those fops who is affected by nothing except pleasure and dissipation. Damon had no other employment than that of pleasure, no other thought than that of amusing himself, no other taste than that of novelty. He possessed to the highest degree of perfection what passes as the art of being “good company” among the Lunarians—which is to say that he had as many fashions of presenting himself and as much variety in his expressions as is necessary in that society not to appear uniform among the various lords that admitted him to their society.

He combined with all those talents a repertoire of little stories, curious or malicious, and, in his terms, struck in good coin. He claimed to be informed of everything that was happening at court and in the city, and even boasted of being significantly involved in all those adventures. It was easily appreciable that with such extensive acquaintances, he was the first to acquire all the new songs, verses, epigrams and pamphlets, of which he made an indigestible heap, to which he added all the minutiae and bagatelles that appeared, as well as having the most profound knowledge of fashion.

We were occupied the day after our arrival in visiting Damon's manor, which appeared to us to be very well constructed. Monime could not help admiring the magnificence of the furniture, the variety of its gardens and the vast extent of its park; nothing so beautiful had yet been offered to our eyes. Monime thought that it was only polite to tell him how pleasantly surprised she was by the countless beauties that she encountered at every step.

"Fie!" said Damon, interrupting her. "It's easy to see, beautiful lady, that you still conserve the taste of our nation, but if all countries resembled one another, it wouldn't be worth the trouble of traveling. Know, then, that this manor has an utterly Gothic appearance; it's true that my father had it built at great expense, but I've come here with the intention of giving orders to have it demolished; my architect has given me a new plan, which is divine and much better imagined; you'll surely applaud it when I've explained it to you.

"Firstly, on the site of my manor house I'll have beautiful avenues planted, which will abridge my route when I got to court by almost half a league; I'll build another where my flower-beds are, from which I also count on getting a forecourt. To the right will be my stables, to the left a similar building where I shall lodge my dogs and my servants. I also want to fell all the trees in my park in order to pierce new pathways, which will give a much more extensive view from my apartments.

"Consequently, it will be necessary to change my furniture, which, although quite rich, has entirely lost the taste of novelty; those massive designs are no longer fashionable; they'd be taken for items of jewelry. My upholsterer has given me some new ideas, which are seductive. You'll agree, when I've had the pleasure of your company for some time, that there is no land in which the sublime in every genre is assembled as it are here; here, everything is of the most perfect excellence, everything is miraculous and divine; one spends one's life in the midst of luxury, one moves through pleasures and enchantments; a thousand agile and elegant hands are incessantly occupied in working with a ravishing dexterity one everything that might flatter the taste."

Surprised that so much extravagance could enter the mind of a thinking being, who ought to be make use of the reason supplied by heaven, Monime could not help saying so to Damon, by means of a sensible discourse, but which made no impression on the young lord, whose petulance and vivacity caused us to regard him as a Proteus capable of taking on different forms. The fecundity of his imagination regarding his new projects, the contrast of his passions, the inconsequence of his conduct and the rapidity of his movements made us believe that the influences of the air must act with much greater force on him than others.

When Damon had recovered from the contusions caused by his fall, we left together for the capital city. The roads that led to that city were charming; hills, plains and woods rendered the view very agreeable. We traveled along a beautiful highway garnished with a double row of trees that formed beautiful avenues.

The environs of the city were ornamented by beautiful manor houses with gardens that seemed to have been designed by enchantresses, forming a delightful spectacle. The gardens offered double terraces to the view in the form of amphitheaters; to the sides were beautiful trees shaped into parasols or fans; trellises sculpted by expert hands, well-designed; beautifully winding hornbeam hedges; bowling-greens of every form; yew-trees shaped into dragons, pagodas, marmosets and various kinds of monsters; and flower-beds in which the flowers were enclosed in filigree baskets, with designs represented by variously colored sands. To the ornamentation of the flower-beds large bronze vases and beautiful marble statues had been added; cascades and pools of water surrounded them, whose surfaces presented crystal mirrors in order to double the view.

“It seems to me,” I said to Damon, “that taste reigns everywhere here; these gardens are a charming visual feature; but I see nothing useful. For myself, instead of those little pines so carefully sculpted I would plant good fruit trees; instead of the horse-chestnuts, I would plant walnuts; and instead of those sad yews that cover the walls one could establish espaliers.”

“Fie!” exclaimed Damon. “I can’t stand it any longer. It would be a horror; fortunately, that folly has never entered anyone’s head; it would be the ultimate in ridicule to put in gardens what one finds in the country; one does not tolerate plants or shrubs here; one only sees porcelain flowers and marble fruits.”

“I cannot see,” I said, “that it would be so foolish to mingle the useful and the agreeable, and I would find it very pleasant to be able to pick a fruit to refresh myself while out for a walk.”

“In truth, my dear sir,” said Damon, “your reasoning has a coarseness that aggravates me; it revolts good taste. Fruit trees in a garden, picking them and eating them! Never praise such burlesque ideas. But you don’t know, my dear Milord, that in order to be fashionable one should only esteem that which comes from far away, even if it only a vegetable, in order to find more taste therein. One ought to least to obtain it from more than fifty leagues away.”

“You do not, it appears,” said Monime, “have the pleasure of eating fresh produce.”

“As fresh as your complexion, beautiful lady; it is a matter of a day.”

“Tell me,” I asked Damon, “What prevents your lands being equally cultivated; I have seen several of them that appear to me to be fallow.”

“That,” said Damon, “is because our peasants have long sensed the abuse to which they were once subjected of staying in their villages to work there with the sweat of their bodies without being able to profit from the fruits of their labor. By working in the cities they are almost always sure of living there in repose and comfort, and well-fed, because it befits the dignity of a lord to have a large retinue of domestics, whom he maintains at great expense, the majority of whom only serve to ornament his antechamber. It is a custom established among us, which everyone wants to imitate, even at the expense of his fortune.

“You see, my dear Milord,” Damon continued, “that one is forced by custom to work for one’s own ruination, and if one has any talent, it will soon be annihilated. You might believe, by examining my exterior, that I am the most fortunate man of the world; I confess to you nevertheless that I am not without chagrin. My family persecutes me incessantly in urging me to choose a profession; they want to prescribe me the tedious role of a sensible man. It is not that I cannot flatter myself with being able to succeed in that as well as the next man; but I’m rich. I confess that I have a marvelous inclination for the sciences, but I would never dare to indulge it. I read nothing but novels and comedies, for fear of passing in society for a pedant.

“It’s true that one would perish of boredom if it were necessary to imitate the majority of scholars, who exhaust themselves in the ancient authors; those men, bristling with dead languages, cannot please us. They work laboriously in the wellsprings of science; more skillful than them, we find it complete in newspapers and dictionaries, which one can even dispense with reading, since one has the assistance of almanacs, which represent all the sciences to us in miniature; add to those resources our bureaux of intelligence, where it is distributed almost for nothing.

“With that I have as much erudition as I would need to fill twenty positions; I have ambition, hopes founded on my birth and my talents, and I flatter myself on having a fine figure. I’m very popular at court; more than twenty women protect me there, to whom I try to prove my profound veneration; in truth, if I renounced such sure pretensions, my creditors would think me ruined and I’d have no more credit. I’m therefore forced to make great expenses in order to sustain it, gambling and spending nights with women, in order to keep myself in their favor. You can see, my dear Milord, that honor would require me to sacrifice the greater part of my wealth to attain any considerable position; and do I not still have the resource of an advantageous marriage? That, however, is what the Gothic common sense of my aged parents cannot comprehend; they dry me up with ennui and disgust with their antique reasoning, so I try to keep as far away from them as I can.”

“I would not have thought,” I said “that one ought to complain about listening to the counsels of reason. I would have thought, on the contrary, that in taking it for the guide of our actions, it enables us to enjoy interior satisfaction, which ought to be the source of sovereign wellbeing.”

“Oh, what folly!” Damon exclaimed. “One can scarcely pardon those people, as insipid as possible, who find themselves reduced by their tedious reason no longer to being able to live with themselves. Fie! I’d a hundred times rather conserve my uselessness and be in fashion. In any case, if I wanted to waste a few moments in the study of laws and government, it would be stealing them from pleasures, and on my honor, I am not the master; I’m never left to myself; I’m incessantly embarrassed by the choice of the invitations made to me, and I’ll tell you in confidence that I’m tyrannized by women; they vie for the pleasure of possessing me.”

“I congratulate you for that,” said Monime, with a malicious smile. “After the story that you’ve just told us of your good fortune, I believe that one can, without displeasing you, compare you to those new jewels that caprice brings into fashion and curiosity causes to pass from hand to hand in order that it might be examined more closely. Thus, in this world, it seems to me, according to your account, there is little difference between being a fine monster and a handsome man; both are mechanisms with springs, very easily put out of order, whose merit lies entirely in their form and movement.”

Far from being annoyed by this mockery, Damon made a lively exclamation. “It’s inconceivable,” he said, “how striking, clear and luminous that definition is; its cuts to the quintessence and extracts the subtlety of everything. Do you know, beautiful lady, that you are adorable, and that you inspire in me a very serious taste for your charms? But I shall reserve for another occasion instructing you as to the impression you have made on me.”

“Oh, I dispense you from that,” said Monime. “You’re far too busy to attempt to please me.”

While Damon and Monime continued to converse, my curiosity caused me to look around. The city was already visible, when Zachiel pointed out several partly-constructed houses that had been abandoned by virtue of the inconstancy of the populace. I saw half-built edifices, here a manor house only lacking a roof, there various building in the process of demolition to give them a new form. Elsewhere, a prodigious quantity of workers were laboring to dig up a road in order to make another ten feet further away along the same line.

That examination brought us insensibly into the city.