

Book One ON THE PLANET MARS

I. A Great Event!

“Where are you off to in such a hurry, Mr. Grok?”

“I’m doing what everyone else is doing, of course, Monsieur Durand—going to the *Athenaeum*.”

“Well, that’s a coincidence—I’m on my way to the famous lecture myself.”

“Let’s hurry, then. It’s almost impossible already to find room in the fifty electric elevators going up to the great hall.”

This dialogue was exchanged between two individuals who were correctly shaved, in the Yankee fashion, and wearing smoking jackets. The former was none other than the great American industrialist Joe Grok, the wealthy owner of copper mines. His interlocutor was Professor Justin Durand, a French chemist passing through New York. The two men had met the previous evening in one of the most exclusive drawing rooms on Fifth Avenue. They exchanged a cordial handshake and drew together in the midst of the dense crowd that was pouring in continuously from the staircases of the aerial railway, ferry-boats, electric cars and other public and private vehicles with which the Yankee capital is so abundantly provided.

That crowd, rumbling, whistling and roaring like a stormy sea, was about to unfurl between the walls of the vast building of the Athenaeum. It was engulfed, with formidable eddies, beneath the fifty monumental arcades, each of which terminated in the cage of an elevator able to accommodate fifty people.

Jostled, confused and bruised, Joe Grok and his new friend nevertheless succeeded in taking their place in the steel basket of one of the vast electric elevators. The operator pressed the button.

The elevator rose up to the thirtieth floor of the gigantic building with the reckless rapidity of which one can have no idea unless one has visited America.

“Do you at least have a ticket?” the professor asked his companion, who was wedged, as if in a vice, between an Englishman with a poppy-red complexion and a kind of Canadian giant with a red beard.

“Of course,” said Grok, ill-temperedly. “But I couldn’t get one for less than five hundred dollars.”

“Damn!” said the professor, admiringly. “That’s steep! I have a ticket too, but I confess that it didn’t cost me anything. It was a gift from the lecturer himself. If I’d had to part with five hundred dollars, I’d have deprived myself of the pleasure of attendance, attractive and sensational as it promises to be.”

“Well,” said the millionaire, in a tone of conviction, “personally, I’d have paid a thousand if need be. Serge Myrandhal’s lecture will be the great event of the season.”

“I can understand your enthusiasm,” the Frenchman replied, enthusiastically. “Just think of it! An engineer who claims to have found a means of condensing psychic fluids, storing them, and using the prodigious latent force enclosed within them—and is talking about nothing less than reaching distant planets by that means!”

“It’s a dream,” murmured the skeptical billionaire. “A beautiful dream, worthy of Edison, but...”

“Who knows?” the chemist interjected, excitedly. “In any case, our Edison—you’ll soon have the tangible proof of the fact—has already completed half of his program. He’s invented an engine capable of utilizing the imponderable forces in question, including that of will, the most powerful of the ‘animic energies.’ Since the day he published his first book, *Psychic Mechanics*, translated into twenty languages, he hasn’t ceased working on his great project—and today, if I’m not mistaken, my friend’s goal is within reach.”

“So,” the American scoffed, “you think we’re going to see your compatriot rise up before our eyes and launch himself toward the stars like the prophet Elijah, in a chariot of fire?”

“We’re not there yet. The engine—or, more precisely, the amplifier—that will function before you is only an experimental model: a laboratory model, as we say. To construct the definitive apparatus, capable of launching a projectile through sidereal space, money, and more especially the fluid agent, is necessary. Think of the colossal quantity of animic energy required to vanquish terrestrial gravity for a projectile weighing several tons. It’s in order to procure that fluid that my compatriot is traveling from one continent to another and lecturing.

“Already, on his way across the world, he’s recruited four remarkable producers of energy—four ‘human piles’ as Annabella Carpenter very aptly calls them in her article in this morning’s *Herald*—who have caused a sensation, as you can see from the crowd that’s pressing around us. You know that your learned female reporter, the gracious Annabella, has taken the invention under her wing.”

“And the inventor too,” the American added, in a tone full of implication. “So it’s said, anyway. What’s certain—and it’s not the smallest attraction—is that she’ll be in the press ranks at the lecture. Take note that it’s the first time that the haughty young lady—who was worth a dowry of twenty million not so long ago—has appeared in public in the exercise of her new profession. That must flatter your compatriot, no matter how little conceit he has...”

“Serge Myrandhal is the most modest man I know,” protested Justin Durand, sharply.

“Pardon me,” the Canadian giant interjected, “but who is this Annabella whose name is on everyone’s lips? Is she the daughter of the billionaire whose bankruptcy was in all the papers, along with his picture, the other week?”

“That’s right,” said the American. “Miss Annabella Carpenter. It’s this evening, as I was saying, that she’s ostensibly making her debut in the career of reportage—in front of the whole of New York society, which will have all eyes fixed on her. She’s a proud and courageous young woman! She wrote several astronomical novels when she was rich, in an amateur way, for her own pleasure. She thought of utilizing her writing talent without wasting another day. The editor of the *Herald*, who had been one of her father’s friends, didn’t hesitate to hire her, at a decent salary. Everyone knows that, and as many people have come to see her as the lecturer. And don’t forget that there’s going to be another celebrity in the hall as well!”

“What celebrity?” asked the Canadian.

“Neither more nor less than the mysterious Ely,”¹ Joe Grok relied, proudly. “The Maharajah Indraghava and his son, the handsome Prince Djalor.”

On hearing those names, the chemist had pricked up his ears. “I’ve heard a great deal about Prince Indraghava,” he said. “He’s one of those rare sovereigns of the peninsula who’s been able to keep his independence intact under the English protectorate. He’s famous for his fabulous wealth...and for something else: a rather strange legend.

“It’s said that every time His Britannic Majesty’s sepoys have tried to penetrate into his domains, they’ve been forced to retreat almost immediately, for reasons that have never been entirely clarified. There’s been talk of inexplicable epidemics that suddenly strike all the officers, the ill will of the soldiers, and mysterious phenomena that stop the expeditionary forces at the Rajah’s frontier.

“As a result, Prince Ely Indraghava is famous throughout the Orient. He’s reputed to be one of those who have conserved the pure doctrine of the Buddhist religion, at the same time as the gift of operating certain prodigies that modern science is forced to admit, although it hasn’t yet been able to explain them.

“Will my friend and compatriot Serge Myrandhal be more fortunate and stronger than these fakirs, whose age-old secret—the means of commanding matter—he claims to have usurped by purely scientific methods? I hope so, ardently. I’d even say that I’m counting on it, knowing the great intelligence of the lecturer. I don’t believe that I’m going too far in telling you that we’re going to see experiments that will amaze us at the Athenaeum.

¹ The author might mean this word as a title—in the Biblical sense of “high priest,” although that appellation is more usually rendered in English texts as Eli—rather than as a proper name. Either way, it eventually vanishes from the text.

“But let’s not anticipate, and get back to the Rajah. As I was telling you, he’s a strange individual. When he travels, he does so in the greatest luxury; his richly-costumed crews and servants give him the appearance of one of those fairy-tale princes that one only finds in India or the Arabian Nights. On the other hand, I’m told that in his own kingdom, he sometimes lives for months in the ascetic and vagabond fashion of the yogis who beg for bread on the roads and at the crossroads in cities. Many of his subjects have never seen him, and even go so far as to claim the Indraghava, Rajah of Kampour, and the Great Lama, the all-powerful Buddhist pope, are one and the same person.”

“You seem very well-informed,” Joe Grok put in.

“Yes, I spent some time in the vicinity of his small kingdom during my last mineralogical expedition.”

“If all that’s true, he’s a very fantastic individual!” said the Canadian.

“There’s a great deal of truth in it, at least.”

“What’s certain, said the billionaire, who did not want to be left out with regard to rare and precise information, “is that Rajah Indraghava is causing quite a stir in New York. Everyone is talking about his fabulous generosity, his eccentricities and the mystery that surrounds him. It appears that since yesterday, his servants have been busy preparing a private box for him in the Athenaeum, where we’re going, made of cloths of unusual magnificence.

“An hour ago, his litter, carried by ten slaves—ten statues of black bronze—went through the city, heading for the Athenaeum. It goes without saying that the extraordinary individual in question doesn’t take the elevator but the stairs—a staircase specially enlarged for him, for which he’s had several walls knocked down! But Serge Myrandhal’s impresario—because our lecturer has an impresario, like a great tenor—doesn’t recoil before any sacrifice. He knew that the presence of the mysterious Nabob would be enough to fill the hall.

“Take note that the numerous spectators who have come here solely to see the ‘Mendicant Prince’ won’t see anything. The Rajah only goes out veiled, like a sultana! And what’s more, his box will be closed on the side of the auditorium by a triple curtain of gauze, permitting him to see without being seen.”

“It’s a box with a lid!” joked the Canadian with the carrotty beard.

“Exactly,” Grok continued. “That’s one of the conditions imposed by the Prince, who doesn’t want his august face to be soiled by the gaze of infidels. He’s said to be old and very ugly, but so far, the only person who’s seen his face in Annabella Carpenter, who made her debut in the interview game with that masterstroke.

“How was Miss Carpenter able to obtain that audience, solicited in vain by so many others, including important people? In the simplest fashion—she had a very powerful intercessor with regard to the Rajah: his own son, the handsome Prince Djalor. Since the last ball hosted by the wife of the English ambassador, you see, when he danced with Miss Carpenter, the Prince has been madly in love with her. People were even anticipating a marriage, when the girl suddenly found herself ruined. I hasten to add that Djalor, who is rich enough for two, is courting her as before, but I doubt, Prince as he is, that he’ll arrive at his goal, since he has a rival...”

The American was abruptly interrupted in his explanations, however. The elevator had just stopped at the thirtieth floor, and was rapidly unloading its cargo.

It is perhaps necessary at this point to offer a few details regarding the purpose of the Athenaeum.

It was one of those gigantic buildings that the Yankees proudly call “skyscrapers.” Its thirty stories were built with steel beams; no wood or stone was employed.

The major part of the monstrous edifice was occupied by lecture and conference rooms, and libraries open to the public night and day. The Athenaeum, which was decorated by a stature of Minerva of colossal proportions erected on the principal facade—hence its name—was a kind of grandiose “Temple of Knowledge.” Each of its ten topmost floors was devoted to a different science, but it was the last, dedicated to astronomy and equipped with an observatory, that offered the most luxurious accommodation.

Under the immense cupola with crystal panes was an amphitheater disposed in such a way as to allow more than ten thousand spectators to attend lectures on cosmography and astronomy in comfort. On the stage that occupied the back of the gigantic vessel, all the instruments designed for the study of the stars—equatorial and meridional telescopes, etc.—were deployed. Under the pressure of a simple electric lever, the immense glass dome opened, as if one were removing a quarter of the peel of an orange, allowing the vault of the heavens to be seen.

Finally, there was a powerful cinematographic apparatus, which permitted the photographic magnification and reproduction of various celestial phenomena for the benefit of the audience.

Placed at the summit of the skyscraper, that observatory was surrounded by a kind of terrace, as vast as many public squares of the Old World, which permitted the easy operation of the fifty elevators previously mentioned.

One detail worth remembering, and citing as an example to the bankers of the Old World, is that the Athenaeum had been donated by a group of powerful capitalists, each of whom had furnished one floor, in order to stimulate education in the democracy.

In that era, Annabella's father, the honorable Allan Carpenter, had been making his second billion. In order to please his daughter, rather than to obey the need for expense and ostentation that is one of the notable traits of the American character, Allan Carpenter had given the Athenaeum its topmost floor and its magnificent observatory. Needless to say, Annabella, who had always had a great enthusiasm for astronomy, had had a great deal to do with that generosity.

In the young woman's soul there was a little of the mystical poetry that sees in the stars, doubtless with reason, worlds inhabited by beings similar, and perhaps superior, to humans. She had been scarcely twenty years old when she published *The Celestial Garden*, an astronomical novel which, luxuriously published, had obtained a considerable success in the drawing rooms of Fifth Avenue. Then there had been *The Soul of the Stars*, welcomed by the world of American letters with equal success. On several occasions, Annabella had given lectures herself in the hall donated by her father, and an elite audience had come to applaud her.

Then the bad times had come. Allan Carpenter's bank had been one of the first to go bust in an American crash that claimed many victims. In forty-eight hours, Carpenter—who had reimbursed all his clients in full—had nothing left but his daughter's dowry, two hundred thousand dollars, which Mrs. Carpenter, on her death-bed, had placed on deposit in the coffers of the State, having feared—with reason—that her husband might overextend himself.

In spite of his daughter's urgent solicitations, the father had refused to touch that sum. Burning with the desire to remake his fortune, he had departed for the Far West, while his daughter, eager for the challenge and wanting to show that she was worthy of her father, had announced her intention of living solely by her pen. That resolution, and the unexpected disinterest of the young woman, no longer rich—one is not rich in American with two hundred thousand dollars—but comfortably off, had occasioned great enthusiasm in New York society.

And indubitably, that day, as the estimable Joe Grok claimed, as many people had come to the Athenaeum to see her as to hear the exciting lecture advertised by the engineer Serge Myrandhal, the future conqueror of the "Earths of the Heavens."²

The impatience of the crowd, swarming under the harsh light of electric lamps, had almost reached the point of exasperation. The impetuous were shaking the grilles serving as guard-rails. Already, a few bars had come loose. Joe Grok and his two companions were beginning to feel anxious. If one of the barriers gave way, there would be a catastrophe. Hundreds of people would fall thirty stories to be crushed on the pavement.

² *Les Terres du Ciel; voyage astronomique sur les autres mondes et description des conditions actuelles de la vie sur les diverses planètes du système solaire* [The Earths of the Heavens: An Astronomical Voyage to the Other Worlds and a Description of the Present Conditions of Life on the Various Planets of the Solar System] (1884) was one of the most sumptuous and imaginatively ambitious of Camille Flammarion's popular astronomical texts, used as a guide book by more than one *roman scientifique*.

The cries and vociferations continued to grow louder, however. At one time, a frenetic gang shoulder-charged one of the massive doors of armored steel disposed around the observatory like the vomitoria of ancient circuses, of which there were fifty, each one facing an elevator. Others attempted to smash the panes of the cupola, which still remained feebly illuminated, with revolver shots.

Cries of "Death to the Frenchman!" began to rise up.

"He's mocking us!"

A few people of good will pointed out that the advertised time of the lecture—eight o'clock—had not yet arrived, but their voices were drowned out by those of the malcontents, who were becoming increasingly excited. There is nothing as turbulent as an American crowd.

The French chemist, who had never seen such chaos, was almost repenting of having come when eight o'clock chimed on the Athenaeum's electric clock.

The eighth stroke was still vibrating when the cupola lit up with the glare of a thousand Edison lamps, abruptly switched on.

At the same time, the fifty doors slid in their grooves, thanks to an automatic switch installed in case of fire or riot—and the crowd poured through the fifty entrances, uttering howls of joy, disappearing, to the very last man.