

When they passed over the spot occupied by the comet's inhabitants again on the following day, they soon perceived that things on the ground had changed. Servadac and his companions having employed their time productively, a construction had been rapidly erected on the hillock. Twenty men had busied themselves felling large trees in a neighboring forest under the direction of a staff-officer, and the enormous beams had been formed into scaffolding of sorts, of gigantic proportions.

"Do they intend to scale our sky?" asked Désolant, in surprise.

"It certainly seems that way to me," replied Farandoul. "And look—they've calculated our course accurately; we're passing directly over the top of their construction without any means of avoiding it."

There was, indeed, no means whatsoever to effect any change in the path of their star; it was necessary to follow the same course, repeatedly passing over Servadac's position.

The construction advanced rapidly, the constructors working with feverish rapidity. Fifteen days sufficed for them to bring their scaffolding to two-thirds of the height necessary to reach the minaret. Servadac, installed on the top floor, urged the workers on. Palmyrin Rosette, an old astronomer also carried away by the comet, had ceased his calculations and abandoned his telescope, and did not blush to place his science in the service of the minaret's persecutors.

And yet, the situation was grave. No other astronomer had ever had such an opportunity to sound the depths of the planetary realm, to study its mysteries at close range! He alone could determine exactly how many kilometers the comet had dragged those few inhabitants of the Earth. Carried away with a few fragments of the terrestrial globe and escorted through the void by a vagabond star, the men had already been able to see several of the solar system's planets—Mars, Venus and Jupiter—at close range. Now, in its mad course, the comet was heading straight for Saturn, increasing in size on the horizon with its three rings and its eight moons of different colors. Except that, Farandoul and Désolant anxiously thought, the comet seemed to be heading to its doom. If no change of course occurred, it would inevitably break up shortly before arriving on the surface of that marvelous Saturn.¹

Servadac had opened negotiations some time before. At each passage of the satellite, he was at the summit of his scaffolding, and engaged Farandoul in a rapidly-interrupted conversation.

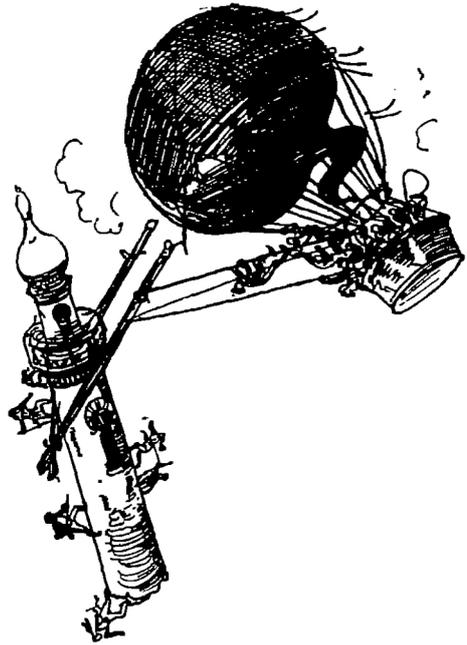
"Make arrangements to descend, or we'll shoot you as you pass by!" Servadac shouted one morning—and when no one replied, he gave a signal, and four snipers posted on the scaffolding opened fire on Farandoul and Désolant with muskets.

Finally, the scaffolding attained the required height; its summit had reached the course followed by the minaret. An immense net mounted on long poles was deployed to catch it as it passed, and...

As Farandoul perceived these preparations he could not help but smile—but what he saw at the foot of the scaffolding froze the smile on his lips. The people of the comet were not aiming to capture their satellite in the net; much less did they want it to break their scaffolding. Their plan was quite different. A little balloon, still tethered to the ground, was linked to the net by a cable. The minaret would carry away the net, and with it the balloon—in the gondola of which were ten or 12 men, armed to the teeth.

The minaret's inhabitants had hardly had time to deduce Servadac's plan when it was put into execution. The minaret ran straight into the net and bore it away into the sky.

In addition to the men in the gondola, a few redcoats hanging on to the cords were attempting to reach the minaret. The balloon, hauled by strong arms, quickly came within 15 or 20 meters of the net, but it could not advance any further, retained there by a pole carried away with the filaments. To reach the minaret it was



¹ In Verne's version, the comet reaches its aphelion 220 million leagues from the Sun, well short of the orbit of Saturn, having taken a year to get that far. In Robida's version, its already mind-boggling velocity seems to have been increased by at least two further orders of magnitude; given the scant attention he pays to the law of gravity and its likely effects on the weight of the spacefarers, however, there is nothing particularly surprising in this.

necessary to cross the 15 or 20 meters on the slender pole, but Farandoul, Désolant and Niam-Niam were in defensive positions, dug in on the balcony, rifles in hand.

The assailants held a council in the gondola of the balloon. Servadac wanted to attempt a decisive assault. "Let's go!" he said. "It's futile to let ourselves be picked off one by one; let's all attack at the same time! Within two minutes, we can be masters of the minaret. Are you with me? Charge!"

He had scarcely pronounced this word than a frightful change of circumstances occurred. The balloon had just been turned upside down, spilling some of those who were manning it into the sky. The balloon was still attached to the minaret, but the latter suddenly changed direction, abandoning the comet and hurtling through the air at increasing velocity, with terrible whistling sounds.

"Saturn!" yelled Servadac in his companions' ears. "We're falling on to Saturn!"

At this speech, Palmyrin Rosette recovered his scientific ardor. He forgot the white and black queens and uttered cries of joy mingled with terror.

Aboard the minaret, not a word was spoken. They were hardly breathing, in the expectation of terrible complications.

That anxiety lasted three hours. Saturn was coming nearer with fearsome rapidity. They had passed between the planet and its ring some time before. At the beginning of the third hour, the ground appeared to be no more than a few leagues away; the fatal moment was imminent.

Another few minutes, as long as centuries, went by; eventually, a storm of screams rose up beneath the unfortunate balloon—screams that had not been uttered by the balloon's occupants. Farandoul got to his feet.

The screaming was coming from Saturn!

The minaret, showing down considerably, was no floating less than 20 meters above the planet, slowly drawing nearer to the ground.

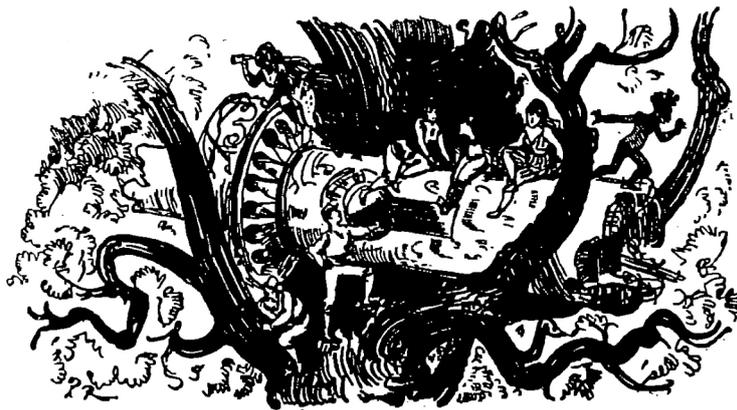
The frightened Saturnians were still screaming. Some distance ahead of the minaret, large buildings of an elegant architecture raised their slender bell-towers into the air. Farandoul saw them in time; his companions quickly went back inside the minaret; he was the last to slide in through a window.

Two seconds later, the minaret crashed noisily into one of the edifices he had glimpsed, broke a huge window, went through a few partition walls and came to a halt, after having gone all the way through the building into the branches of a gigantic solitary tree, planted in the middle of a marvelous flower-garden.

The impact was relatively soft; the only accidents occasioned by the transit were the fainting of three of the four queens and a prodigious nose-bleed on the part of Niam-Niam, who had fallen on that facial ornament.

The balloon carrying Servadac and his friends had remained on the far side of the edifice, in the façade partly caved in by the minaret. Loud shots were audible, and the sound of comings and goings. Désolant was about to climb down the tree and run to fetch a little water from a magnificent fountain, in order to throw it in the faces of the queens who had fainted, when Farandoul stopped him with a gesture.

The Saturnians were running out in a crowd, shouting incoherently and making threatening gestures. In the midst of them, already in chains, Servadac and his friends were marching with heads bowed.



"Look out!" exclaimed Farandoul. "The inhabitants of Saturn don't seem very friendly. How strange! Look at their conformation! Look—wings, a trunk, and flippers!"

On recovering consciousness, the queens had put their heads out of the window and could not retain exclamations of astonishment.

"Silence!" Farandoul murmured. "They're not looking in our direction. They didn't see us fall, and the foliage is hiding us."

Indeed, none of the Saturnians seemed to suspect the presence of a minaret in their tree; all eyes were on the prisoners—Servadac, his batman Ben-Zouf, Palmyrin Rosette, six Spaniards, two English officers and seven soldiers—who had fallen with the balloon and had almost been flattened.

The unfortunates, already clad in chains were rigorously interrogated by Saturnians of military bearing. All that Servadac could do was to raise an arm loaded with chains into the air and point to the sky.

In response to a sign from the leader indicating the far end of the garden, the prisoners were rapidly dragged off in that direction.

This is an opportune moment to talk about the bizarre conformation of Saturn's inhabitants. Like Terrans, the people of Saturn have arms and legs, terminating, admittedly, in palmate hands and feet, or flippers. Thus far, nothing very strange; with boots and gloves they would not appear excessively odd—but here is something else. The Saturnians have two wings on their back similar to those of flying fish!

Let us now consider their faces; the nose, atrophied in us, is fully-developed, swaying in the middle of their faces like an elephant's trunk. This immense nose has various functions, and we can see these various functions being carried out in the crowd filling the garden. A few Saturnians of high rank are carrying parasols with this nose; others are picking flowers from the flower-beds. Further away, a few are flying overhead, and their deployed noses function as a third wing. Finally, young Saturnians are paddling in the large pools of the park; for them, the multifunctional nose has become a flipper and a sort of rudder for changes of direction.

And the female Saturnians, you ask? They are, quite simply, charming. The gentle sex is well-represented in the crowd. These ladies possess almost the same ornaments as the males, with the difference that the feet and hands are more elegantly webbed, the wings more delicately hemmed and the trunk, slimmer and more flexible, undulates more gracefully as it follows the rhythmic sway of the march. Trunks à la Roxelane² are quite common, especially among females of the pink variety; for we have neglected to say that on Saturn, the feminine genus includes seven varieties—white, pink, green, blue, yellow, violet and dark brown—each forming a distinct species.

Seven female species, as opposed to one male! As you can see, Saturn is an advanced planet.

Every Saturnian male, at an age fixed by law, which varies according to latitude, is supposed to espouse a specimen of each of the varieties, determined by drawing lots. It is both a free and obligatory marriage, a wise institution that the Saturnians had possessed for centuries—admittedly, after having fought for a long time against the obstinacy of reactionary and retrograde minds to obtain it.

Servadac and his companions, brutally dragged outside the park, had been imprisoned in a room at the bottom of a tower guarding the main entrance to the palace. There, they had been left to their own reflections for six hours. The reflections of these unfortunates were not rosy; still bruised by their fall, and put in irons, they were tormented by apprehensions of treatment more barbarous still.

Finally, as the seventh hour began, the doors opened and jailers armed to the teeth came forward exceedingly cautiously to fetch the prisoners out. A numerous assembly, civil rather than military, was waiting for them outside. There were still a few former members of the armed forces, but in the great majority of the audience Palmyrin Rosette undoubtedly recognized colleagues: scientists, almost all of them bald, just like Terran scientists, and similarly ornamented with spectacles, green eyeshades and acoustic trumpets.

A glimmer of hope came into the mind of the poor astronomer.

These scientists, we can reveal, made up a commission urgently appointed by the Saturnian academies to examine the supernatural beings fallen miraculously from the sky, to decide whether they should be judged as criminals or considered as simple phenomena—a difficult question to resolve.

² The description “*nez à la Roxelane*” was often used in 19th century French literature with reference to turned-up noses; it presumably derived from a portrait of the redoubtable wife of the Ottoman emperor Suleiman the Magnificent.



One by one, the prisoners filed before the commission, with Servadac at the head. They were examined from a distance, and prudently. They were turned around and around, and made to walk back and forth. Attempts were made to make them fly. Their hands were examined with curiosity, their noses with disdain.

Palmyrin Rosette, used to the methods and customs of scientific societies, followed the discussions and almost understood the speeches; he saw from the pantomime that a proposal had been made, which was put to the vote and adopted almost unanimously.

Finally, one of the Saturnian scientists said a few words to the soldiers and, taking the lead in the procession, went back into the park with the prisoners. In the middle of an immense throng arrived from the town, they were taken into a part of the garden separated from the remainder by railings and a ditch. A large inscription placed above the entrance gate intrigued the prisoners considerably.

What did it mean? Was this a prison or an abattoir?

The answer was not long in coming. A broad pathway dividing the garden was bordered along its entire length with small solidly-railed enclosures and cages of various sizes sealed with thick bars. The enclosures and cages were almost all occupied by animals as strange as the Saturnians. There were equivalents of our elephants, tigers and lions, and numerous animals impossible to classify, hybrid beings with birds wings on the bodies of mastodons, six-legged beasts and even two-headed ones, huge birds with beaks armed with long tusks, etc., etc.

Reaching the mid-point of the path, the procession stopped. Two cages, the largest of all, were empty. The doors were opened and the prisoners pushed into them, after their chains had been removed.

“A zoological garden!” cried Palmyrin Rosette. “We’re part of a menagerie! The wretches! What an insult to a colleague!”

And all the prisoners, furious at this treatment, hurled themselves at the bars of their cage and shook them furiously. The crowd gathered outside recoiled in fear, but the menagerie’s keepers appeared then, passing long poles between the bars and vigorously belaboring the shoulders of the most furious.

O rage! O dolor! How shameful for an astronomer like Palmyrin, officers like Servadac and the Englishmen! To be locked up in a menagerie like mere animals! To be beaten by brutal keepers before the eyes of an imbecilic crowd!

And to put the cap on the humiliation, the time to distribute nourishment having arrived, keepers bearing large baskets full of blackish meat appeared, throwing bloody morsels into all the cages! The neighboring beasts released long howls; in the cages opposite those of the unfortunate Terrans, members of a bear-like species climbed tree-trunks and swung stupidly back and forth to earn their pittance.



Finally, the baskets reached the Terrans. The crowd parted and the keepers, placing large pieces on the ends of their long forks, passed them very carefully through the bars.

Servadac could not stand it; he leapt on a bone and threw it forcefully at the face of a stupidly-staring gawker in the front row. The unfortunate Saturnian released a horrible scream and fainted in the arms of his seven wives; he had had his nose—or rather, his trunk—broken.