

PART ONE

I. The Announcement in the New York Herald

“Yes, my dear Marcel,” said Jacques, placing his elbows on the table and putting his head in his hands, “You see in me the most unfortunate of men, and I really don’t know whether it wouldn’t be wiser for me to go dive head first into the Seine than continue to drag out a miserable and henceforth aimless existence. That’s what I was thinking, seriously, when you ran into me just now and brought me in here.”

“What! You’re reduced to that, my old Jacques? Two years ago, when I left for the Rocky Mountains, I left you so valiant and confident in the future, and now I find you as desperate as this! After brilliant medical studies crowned with countless successes in your examinations, along with a personal fortune—which doesn’t hurt—that gave you time to build up a clientele, you were able to envisage life without anxiety, and now you’re defeated in advance without having battled!”

“Oh, you don’t know how I’ve suffered. Listen, and see whether I’ve got reason to be absolutely discouraged. You know that, having been an orphan since I was fourteen, I was brought up by my guardian, my mother’s brother, the French scientist François Mathieu-Rollère, known throughout Europe for his astronomical work and his famous paper on the satellites of Uranus. But what you don’t know is that I was brought up in his house with his daughter Héléne, my cousin; that we lived together in close proximity, and that from that pleasant communal life a sentiment was born that gradually became an ardent and profound love. We swore ourselves to one another. It’s in that hope that I’ve lived, and it’s to assure Héléne of a future worthy of her, in order that she could be proud of her husband, that I’ve devoted myself to dogged labor, and that I wanted to become one of the foremost physicians of the new school.”

“But it seems to me,” Marcel put in, “that you’ve succeeded rather well.”

“Yes, perhaps—but what good has it done me? When I made my request of Héléne’s father, he looked at me with a surprised expression. ‘My dear boy,’ he said, ‘I’ve devoted my life to science; my daughter will only ever marry a man who has as a dowry some striking discovery of an astronomical order.’ I was amazed by that declaration; nothing had led me to anticipate such an obstacle. Utterly preoccupied by my love and my future, I hadn’t realized that my uncle’s passion for science was gradually turning to obsession and mania. Now it was all-consuming; the disease was incurable.

“In vain, the woman I loved and I tried to change his mind; his resolution was as immutable as the course of the stars he observes. Weary of my persistence, he banned me from his house and told me not to appear before him again until I’ve fulfilled the condition that his scientific egotism had imposed on me. Too meek to resist paternal authority, Héléne could only weep before the obstinate refusal that broke her heart. I left her desperate, not knowing whether she’d ever be allowed to see me again.”

“And you haven’t made any attempt to satisfy the intractable scientist?” asked Marcel, with an expression that seemed to be pierced by a slight irony.

“What could I have done? Devoted to the study of a science to which I’ve devoted myself entirely and to the extreme limits of which I’ve advanced, how could I have started a life of study over again, with a different goal? To reach the point where a mind can extend the boundaries of a science and realize some great conquest of the unknown, it’s first necessary to have absorbed all the knowledge that humankind has stored up in that order of ideas. That required ten years of ardent study, with no guarantee of success. No, the struggle is impossible; I renounce it, and abandon myself to my unfortunate destiny.”

“Man of little faith,” said Marcel, smiling, “I thought you were braver and more resolute. How love can weaken a soul and soften courage! Well, I can bring you salvation.”

“You?” exclaimed Jacques.

“Yes, me. Look.”

And he unfolded before his eyes the fourth page of an American newspaper dated 1 June 188*, which he took from his pocket, and on which the following announcement was made with a headline in gigantic letters:

*NATIONAL SOCIETY
OF INTERSTELLAR COMMUNICATIONS
SALE BY PUBLIC AUCTION FOLLOWING BANKRUPTCY*

Sir Francis Dayton, receiver in the bankruptcy of the National Society of Interstellar Communications, incorporated in Baltimore (Maryland), has the honor of informing the public that he will proceed, on 10 February next, in the main hall of the Baltimore Auction Rooms, with the sale by auction of:

1. The gigantic cannon known as the Columbiad, founded and established by order of the Gun Club of the said city of Baltimore, which served to send to the Moon the projectile in which the celebrated voyagers Barbicane, Nicholl and Michel Ardan took their places on 4 December 186;*

2. The aluminum projectile, cylindro-conic in form, equipped with portholes, protective plates and bolts, and interior padding, which enabled the aforementioned voyagers to effect the said voyage;

3. The hangars and various constructions erected in the vicinity of the Columbiad, having served as storage facilities and workshops during the first experiment;

4. The lifting-apparatus—blocks, pulleys, cranes and chains—having served for the loading of the said shell, still in a perfect state of conservation, as well as the electric batteries, piles, coils, conductive wires, etc., employed for the deflagration of the Columbiad's charge.

The aforesaid sale will be made in a single lot, with a reserve price of two hundred thousand dollars.

The sale will take place under the surveillance of the honorable Harry Troloppe, legal commissioner.

Jacques returned the newspaper to Marcel.

“What’s the meaning of this joke?”

“It’s not a joke,” Marcel relied, “and if you care to listen, I’ll explain it briefly.

“I left, as you’ll recall, at the beginning of 187- for the Rocky Mountains. I thought I had recognized significant deposits of copper on a previous voyage to the northern territory of Missouri. I had resolved to verify those initial observations and, if my anticipations were not mistaken, to attempt a large-scale exploitation.

“To that end, equipped with adequate authorizations, I organized a small expedition to complete the work. I spent two years of the harshest existence in that arid and mountainous country, in the middle of a desert, incessantly obliged to fight for my life against the Indians in the midst of whom I was camped, who accused me of violating the sacred lands of the ancestors with my endeavors. At every moment, in fact, my drilling operations were sabotaged and my assaying workshops destroyed; I had to start over continually.

“I would have died of boredom if the mountain of Long’s Peak hadn’t risen up some twenty miles from the deposits I was exploring—twenty miles is nearby in that scarcely-inhabited area.

“You doubtless haven’t forgotten that during the famous attempt made in 186* to reach the Moon, the Baltimore Gun Club had constructed on that summit, one of the highest in the mountains, a giant telescope designed to follow the audacious explorers in their flight.¹ A friendship was established between the astronomers at the observatory and me. In that remote station, 4,350 meters above sea level, they didn’t often encounter anyone to talk to, and gave me the most gracious and attentive welcome. All the free time that the explorations I had undertaken left me, I spent with them. I usually stayed there for several days in succession, during which I considered myself not as a guest but as one of the observers attracted to the astronomical post.

¹ The mountain of Long’s Peak is real, but the observatory constructed there in *De la Terre à la Lune* is fictitious.

“I had felt a very pronounced liking for the science of the heavens awakening within me, and soon, the manipulation of meridian circles, reflecting and refracting telescopes had become familiar. My imagination was excited by memories of 186-, and I couldn’t tear my eyes away from the ocular of the big telescope. That admirable instrument brought the Moon to a closer distance than the most powerful optical instruments previously constructed.

“I observed our satellite for a long time, and was able to rectify several areas of the map made by Beer and Mädler, which was then reputed to be the most complete and the most exact. I was able to make new observations that seem to me to present all the characteristics of an exact certainty. Thus, I was able to establish that the recent astronomers who have written about the Moon were mistaken when they observed on its surface the presence of a certain quantity of water. It’s now established, so far as I’m concerned, that it isn’t water but air that they’ve seen; that’s what can be induced from the appearance presented by certain slightly blurred contours and ridges at the edges of the lunar crescent.

“For me, the large depressions that exist on the surface of our satellite, such as the one called the Sea of Cold,² enclose in their lowest parts a layer of air whose thickness is doubtless exceedingly slight, but sufficient in my opinion to maintain, at least in those regions, the life of animate beings. And then, who knows? In the rapid enlightenment that permitted them to glimpse the portion of the Lunar disk that is always invisible to us, didn’t the Gun Club voyagers think that they perceived water, wooded mountains and profound forests? Weren’t the fulgurant gleams of the bolide that almost pulverized them reflected from the surface of vast oceans? That would be in accordance with the hypothesis of those astronomers who maintain that what remains of the lunar atmosphere might have condensed on the invisible part of its disk. That would be, in any case, a matter for verification.

“In brief, I sensed growing within me the desire to accomplish what the Americans had attempted, with the hope, this time, that no unwelcome bolide would arrive to throw me off course and prevent me from attaining the goal.

“An unexpected event hastened my resolution.

“I had for an assistant in my endeavors an Englishman named John Parker, in whom I had every confidence. Ingenious and adroit, fertile in resources, he had been a great help to me in carrying out my operations and directing the workmen I employed for drilling and assaying. It was to him that I left the supervision of the workshops and to whom I confided my plans and notes when I went away on my explorations.

“I had always found him so faithful and reliable that I had got into the habit of prolonging my absences.

“One day, 27 July of last year, on returning to my station after spending a month at the Lon’s Peak Observatory, I was surprised to find workers that I didn’t know installed there, and an administration functioning under the name of the Great Western Copper Mining Company. When I demanded explanations, they replied by showing me a legal document, duly drawn up, granting the exploitation of mines throughout the region I had explored to the new company. I tried to protest, but they laughed in my face; I got carried away and cried theft, but the barrel of a revolver aimed at my chest told me that I could expect nothing from the new occupants.

“I soon had an explanation of the mystery. The day after my departure, John Parker had run off, taking all my plans and sketches, my notes, my assay reports and my specimens—everything, in short, that established the reality of my discovery. He had gone to New York and sold it all to the Great Western Copper Mining Company, whose director, with links to influential members of Congress that he had liberally bribed, had stolen the concession in a matter of days. My workers had been dismissed, with a severance payment, and new workers brought in—and as the results I’d obtained were conclusive, the preparatory work of exploitation had begun immediately.

“I had been vilely robbed, but what could I do? To what jurisdiction could I address myself? How, above all, could I establish the priority of my claim now that I’d been completely stripped?

² I have translated the author’s French names for lunar features into English, although scientific parlance usually retains the Latin names, in this case Mare Frigoris.

"I might perhaps have attempted to obtain justice; I might at least have searched for that wretch John Parker in order to blow his brains out, if I hadn't been tormented by the thought that I mentioned just now. I had soon made my decision, therefore, and having gone to some trouble to recover from my thieves certain objects that were of no value to them, and which I'll show you shortly, I resolved to devote myself entirely to the realization of the project by which I was haunted. A few days later I was in Chicago, where the announcement I've just shown you fell before my eyes, and my project began to take on substance."

"That's all very well," Jacques put in, with a smile, "But thus far I can't see anything that permits you to affirm that our satellite is inhabited, and given that, I can't see that, even if you succeed in reaching it..."

"Listen," said Marcel, lowering his voice. "In a little while you're going to come home with me to the Rue Taitbout, and I'll give you undeniable proof not only that the Moon is inhabited but that its inhabitants have attempted to enter into communication with us. You can adopt an expression of incredulity if you like, but you'll be forced to yield to the evidence."

"Well, so be it," said Jacques. "Let's see now how you count on realizing this enterprise, which, until there's proof of the contrary, appears to me to be utterly extravagant."

"My plan is quite simple," said Marcel, "and I've been in France for a week precisely to realize it. I'm going to found a company, under the name of the Anonymous Society for Astronomical Exploration, with a capital of five million francs, divided into a thousand shares of five thousand francs each, for our enterprise mustn't have anything commercial about it, and the people who associate with me must only be motivated by a disinterested love of science. I have no doubt that I'll succeed promptly in France, where every generous and noble enterprise finds numerous adherents, in obtaining the modest capital necessary to us. There's even a well-known financier in Paris who has a passion for science, who has already given striking proof of his interest in astronomy, and to whom that science already owes important foundations. I'm sure that when he knows the details of my project, he'll judge it practicable, and won't refuse considerable cooperation. As soon as the funds are subscribed, I'll leave for Baltimore, buy the Columbiad, its shell and all its accessories, which certainly won't be disputed by many enthusiasts; I'll repair it all, complete my preparations and, on 15 December next year, we'll repeat, but this time with complete success, the attempt made by Barbicane, Ardan and Nicholl."

"Damn!" exclaimed Jacques, laughing in spite of his friend's enthusiastic assurance. "You're going a bit quickly—I haven't decided yet."

"Doubter!" said Marcel. "Come home with me, and you'll be convinced. Waiter—the bill!"

The conversation we have just reported took place in Paris, in the Café Anglais, on a fine morning in August 188*. The two young men who were talking with open hearts were almost the same age, between twenty-eight and thirty, but they were different in stature and appearance.

Marcel de Pouzé, tall and broad-shouldered, with supple and robust limbs and a head covered with a dense forest of reddish blond hair, had a highly-colored face divided by a long moustache. His big blue eyes, wide open, radiated frankness and cheerfulness. His slightly thick red lips expressed a slightly disdainful bounty. One might have thought that he was just a good and joyful fellow, always disposed to look at life on the bright side, if the glint that sometimes animated his gaze and the crease that hollowed out his forehead had not denoted an energetic determination at the service of a keen intelligence capable of the highest conceptions.

Jacques Deligny offered a striking contrast with his companion. Not as tall in stature, but elegant and well-built, he seemed to realize a type of rare distinction. His delicate and intelligent face, framed by jet-black hair and a beard, offered the mat pallor of those whom patient and difficult studies have kept enclosed in a study or a laboratory for long periods of time. His slightly tight-lipped mouth seemed to have forgotten how to smile. His high forehead was that of a thinker, and his rather deep-set eyes were ordinarily veiled by a hint of melancholy.

They had known one another since childhood, when they had sat next to one another at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand.

Later, when Marcel had gone on to the École Polytechnique while Jacques had followed the course at the École de Médecine, they had never lost contact with one another, and the bonds that united them, formed by an element of protection on the part of Marcel and a great confidence on Jacques' part, had only become tighter. Then life had separated them. Jacques had remained in Paris, pursuing his laborious studies for his examinations and his internship, while Marcel had gone to another continent in search of a vaster field in which to exercise his exuberant activity.

Marcel was an orphan, and his personal fortune permitted him to travel and await without too much impatience the success of one of the great enterprises that his ardent imagination was always caressing.

When they parted, they had promised to write, and had indeed corresponded for some time. The letters had soon become rarer, however, and then had ceased entirely. The two friends had often thought about one another, however; the separation had not weakened their affection, and when chance had brought them together again, it was with a veritable joy that they had fallen into one another's arms. As they had many confidences to exchange, they had gone into the first place they had come upon and had chatted while savoring the delicious lunch that they had just finished.