

LETTER I

Correspondence from Richmond. An unprecedented discovery. Widespread rumors in America. In which a search is made for oil and a mummy is discovered. A buried aerolith. Excitement in the scientific world. A petrified man. Where has he come from? A fossiliferous tomb. Four planets and a conclusion. An inhabitant of another world.

A scientific discovery of capital importance has been made in the Arapaho region a few miles from James Peak.¹ A rich landowner in the neighborhood, Mr. Paxton, had begun digging for oil. One morning, the pick-axe rebounded from an extremely hard rock; the alluvial deposit having been traversed, a carboniferous layer had been reached and the work was continuing in the paleozoic stratum.² It was thought that a metal seam had been reached and a drill was brought into play; it sent back a sort of conglomerate formed of traprock, porphyry, quartz crystals and metallic composites.

Mr. Davis, a highly distinguished geologist from Pittsburgh, begged Mr. Paxton to follow this accumulation, and, after a fortnight's work, the upper part of an enormous slightly ovoid mass had been stripped bare. Its composition is distinct not only from that of the neighboring rocks but from any specimen discovered on our globe until now.

The mass measures about 85 yards in its largest diameter and 30 in its smallest. Enormous saccharoid fractures are visible within it, making anfractuositities and doubtless indicating the places where fragments of it must have been explosively detached. The entire mass is coated on the outside with a sort of black enamel of variable thickness comprised of metallic silicates. Beneath this coat, according to Mr. Davis, the rock is formed of alkaline and earthen silicates of iron, manganese, nickel, cobalt, tungsten, copper, tin, arsenic, sulfur, alkaline chlorides, ammonium chlorohydrate, traces of silver chloride, traces of cesium and large quantities of graphite, with a gaseous layer interposed at a depth of one meter, comprising nitrogen, carbon dioxide, hydrogen sulfide and hydrogen arsenide.

The extremely peculiar composition of this mass left the geologists in no doubt. The mass encountered at the foot of James Peak is not of terrestrial origin; it is an aerolith, and certainly the most curious ever seen, firstly by virtue of its composition and its large volume, but more especially because of its situation. Never before has it been possible to discover any kind of aerolith in the succession of ancient strata.

It is rare for strokes of good luck to occur singly. A second discovery was bound to follow the first, and its importance is such that, at the time of writing, it is causing an even greater stir among the country's intelligentsia. The war has almost been forgotten, and curiosity-seekers are flocking to the Arapaho region.

A commission has been established in the neighborhood to examine the Paxton/David aerolith; it had the good idea of piercing the mass along the axis of its larger diameter. At a depth of four meters the composition changed noticeably. Up to that point, the rock presented traces of fusion; in its course through our atmosphere, the bolide had heated up and its surface had melted. Beyond that depth, however, the material became porphyroid, with very large crystals, about the size of an egg, composed of amphibole,³ quartz or feldspar. This was followed by quartzite, with veins of iron and copper. At seven meters, the composition changed to granite with silver crystals.

¹ James Peak is in Gilpin County, Colorado. Parville has "Arrapahys" rather than Arapaho, the former being a French version used in some early 19th century reference books.

² Parville: "So-called because it is the first in which traces of organisms are discovered."

³ Parville: "A mineral of variable color, formed of silica, magnesium, calcium carbonate and ferrous oxide."

At 20 meters, the drill was advancing slowly through ophite⁴ when the bit suddenly screeched and rebounded. It simultaneously lost purchase and jumped, making a hollow sound, ending up a few meters further down. A jet of unbreathable gas emerged, reaching the workmen.

The hole made by the drill was enlarged and a shaft was hollowed out. It took no less than ten days—ten days of waiting and unsatisfied curiosity!

Finally, Mr. John Paxton, the son of the landowner, and Mr. Davis went down to the bottom of the hole. There were a few minutes of hesitation before they came back. They were both very pale. Mr. Paxton was carrying a sort of stout amphora made of white metal—silver and zinc—pockmarked with little holes and bizarre designs.

Whence came this vase? What was it doing at the bottom of the shaft? Those were the questions pressing on everyone's lips.

"At the bottom of the hole," the two explorers reported, "we found the amphora embedded horizontally in the ophite; the drill-bit had touched it and partially detached it; about six feet lower down, our feet came to rest on a metal sheet, which resonated dully and seemed to be encased in the rock. Above it and to the left, but too deeply embedded in the rock for us to be able to extract them, we made out several more metal amphorae, with yellow rods of some sort."

Too much curiosity had been excited for the matter to rest there. The hole at the bottom of the shaft was enlarged until the metal covering was fully exposed. It was dented all over, granulated, oxidized, black in places and even melted. They worked all night, but it was not until the evening of the third day that the metal plate became detachable. They proceeded carefully, for fear of inflammable gas, but there was no explosion when the lamps were sent down. Two workmen and Messrs. John Paxton, Davis and Murchison removed the heavy plate, which was about six feet wide.

The lamps shone a yellowish light into the excavation and illuminated it. The watching men could not restrain a cry of astonishment. Before their eyes was a rectangular space about three feet deep and six feet wide, most certainly hewn out of granite. The empty space was heaped almost everywhere with calcareous concretions, something like stalagmites, which sparkled in the lamplight. In the center, a human form of short stature, seemingly enveloped in a calcareous shroud, was clearly visible. He was lying down, fully extended, and measured scarcely four feet in height. His slightly-raised head vanished into a cushion of calcium carbonate and his legs also disappeared beneath the calcareous envelope.

It was very difficult to extract this stony tomb from its granite walls, and it was necessary to enlarge the shaft to bring it up to the surface. The calcium carbonate had molded itself to the gap and had undoubtedly been precipitated there chemically. It was corroded by acid; it was evidently siliceous chalk similar in every respect to terrestrial chalk. It was cut through horizontally and transversally; by this means a veritable mummy—admirably preserved, although a trifle carbonized in places—was successfully laid bare.

The feet, which were very small, could only be extracted in a badly damaged state. The head came out very nearly intact: devoid of hair; skin glossy and crumpled, having passed into a leathery state; brain-cavity triangular in shape; singularly hatchet-faced, with a sort of trunk emerging almost from the forehead instead of a nose; a very small mouth with only a few teeth; two orbital holes, from which the eyes had doubtless been extracted, since the cavities were full of calcareous concretions. The arms were very long, hanging down beyond the thighs, the hands five-fingered, of which the fourth was much shorter than the others. The general appearance was slender. The skin, slightly charred all over, had undoubtedly been reddish-yellow.

A cast is being made of this singular inhabitant of another world, and we shall soon be able to send drawings.

⁴ Parville: "A variety of rock formed of feldspar and silica, calcium carbonate, magnesium, iron oxides and manganese."

He had nothing with him—no weapon, no ornamental object. The only other thing that was found in the fossilized space was a little metal disk covered in silver sulfate, with several lines deeply engraved in its surface.

It was impossible for the excavators to doubt that they had before their eyes a creature analogous to earthly humans, which had come from space in an extremely remote era, since the aerolith must have fallen in a very ancient geological period. But where had this planetary man come from? It could not be seriously imagined that he had come from the Moon. Aeroliths arrive with a velocity that precludes a lunar origin.

The discussion had already been going on for some time when Mr. Murchison, on examining the lines that furrowed the inner surface of the metal plate—which had finally been descaled—recognized a very clear depiction of a kind of rhinoceros, then one of a palm-tree, and, far away in the opposite corner, a neat representation of a star, similar to the Sun as drawn by a child.

The metal, which had been blackened by chemical reactions, was examined more closely; on cleaning it, the commission discovered another, smaller star beside the one that seemed to represent the Sun. Then they found another, more distant, then a third, and, finally, more distant still, a globe drawn much larger than the Sun. On measuring the distances between them, they were found to be manifestly in proportion to those separating the planets Mercury, Venus, the Earth and Mars from the Sun.

This was an indication entirely adequate to clarify the question. Was it not permissible to conclude, in fact, that the animal of which a specimen had been found under such strange circumstances knew the planets and was in consequence a thinking being, and therefore a man? Did not the entirely honorific size granted to the planet Mars, to the detriment of the others, demonstrate the pride of an inhabitant, and, at the same time, the mental limitation of the interplanetary human species?

In all probability, therefore, the aerolith must have originated from the planet Mars—which is, moreover, our nearest neighbor. We may consider it beyond doubt that the planets really are inhabited, and that there are creatures thereon very similar to those on Earth.

Scientifically, of course, it is the environment that seems to determine the species. Mars has very nearly the same biological conditions as Earth; oceans, continents and mountains of ice can be seen there.⁵ There is therefore, nothing so admissible in principle than to suspect the presence there of humans closely analogous to ourselves. If the type that has just been discovered is slightly different, it is necessary to remember that, biologically, Mars is more advanced than the Earth; that the aerolith fell thousands of years ago; and that its inhabitants in that period in its life might have been different from the present earthly species. It is unnecessary to deduce from this that Mars has never had, or does not presently have, inhabitants exactly similar to those of Earth.

How did the aerolith come to Earth, though, and how did it get away from the gravitational field of Mars? There are many points that are difficult to understand and must be submitted to modern scientific research. The aerolith brought with it a portion of ground, containing what is undoubtedly a tomb—which permits us to know how the dead are buried on that planet. A hole of the appropriate size is simply hollowed out in granite and the body is preserved by fossilizing it, with the aid of a bath loaded with calcium salts, just as your Saint-Allyre fountain near Clermont does with objects plunged into its waters; the corpse metamorphoses into calcareous stone.

Yet another step has been taken in science—and what a step! A quarter of a century ago, people refused to believe in stones that fell from the sky. The French Académie, the English Royal Society and its German equivalent would not have conceded the point unless their members had been struck down on the spot by aeroliths! What will they say, now that an entire human being, perfectly preserved, has fallen to Earth from Mars, coming in person to reveal to us the admirable harmony that presides over the evolution of worlds!

⁵ The famous Martian “canali” (channels) had yet to be “discovered” in 1864, so there is no mention of them in the account of the planet given here.