

Part One: Saint-Clair the Nyctalope

I. Arrival at Argyre Island

When she woke up, Xavière de Ciserat remained dazed for a moment, and was then suddenly possessed by a frightful and maddening terror.

She wanted to cry out, but her throat would not let anything pass but a hoarse croak. In her confusion, she felt that she must have fainted or gone mad. With a desperate effort, the young woman fought to calm her rapidly-beating heart, her jangling nerves and the horrors possessing her flesh. She collected herself momentarily, recovering her habitual coolness and the lucid courage with which nature had endowed her.

The first effect of this mental dominion was that Xavière was able to speak.

“Where am I?” she cried.

The sound of her voice further strengthened her will to live and to know. The mist that veiled her bulging eyes dissipated, and Xavière was able to look around.

The young woman immediately perceived that she was bound by the waist, arms and legs to the back, arms and feet of a bizarre shiny metal armchair in which she was seated. In front of her, beyond a sort of bulbous crystal carapace, was the immensity of a nocturnal sky. Innumerable stars shone therein, but directly in front of her there was an immense red star, visibly increasing in size, seemingly approaching her rapidly with vertiginous speed.

Was it a nightmare? No!

Again Xavière felt herself invaded by fear: a tortuous, mortal fear; the nameless terror that overwhelms and kills...

“Oh! No, no! I don’t want to!” she cried.

A new battle began between her mind and the weakness of the matter from which human flesh is kneaded, from the limbs that act to the brain that thinks. Xavière emerged from that battle exhausted, but again victorious. She immediately fixed her gaze on the red star. It had increased in size again, become closer. Sidereal space extended all around it...

Xavière turned her head slightly to the left, then—and she saw a man: a strong man, dressed in white, wearing a colossal helmet, shod in soft tan leather boots. The man was sitting motionless on a metal armchair beside Xavière’s, and he seemed to be asleep. The young woman stared at him, dazedly. Then, moved by instinct, she turned her head to the right—and saw another man, dressed exactly like the first, with the sole difference that a sheet of cloth, whose color was indefinable in the bloody light emanating from the red star, covered the sleeves of his white jacket. This one was not asleep. His open blue eyes were attentively observing a compass fixed to a thin stalk of rigid metal that was mounted in front of him, immediately within the crystal carapace, and his hands, which were pale, elongated and muscular, were gripping a steering-wheel very similar to that of an automobile.

There was no noise, no vibration... but the steering-wheel gave rise to an idea of direction, and hence of motion. Nevertheless, Xavière had a sensation of absolute immobility. Was it the red star that was coming closer, or were they going towards the red star?

Thoughts whirled furiously in the young woman’s mind; there was chaotic disorder in her disturbed brain.

My God, she said to herself, calm down, calm down! I need to find out what’s happening.

She was still looking at the man to her right, who did not seem to have heard her, or even to be aware of her presence.

This is obviously madness, she thought. If I’m dreaming, I must wake up.

Mechanically, she tried to make a gesture, to touch the man, to touch herself—but her arm was pinned. She looked at the restraint. It was a broad band of black leather; the buckle and its tongue were gleaming.

No, I’m not dreaming! Resolutely, she continued, addressing the man to her right: “Monsieur! Answer me, Monsieur! Where am I? Who are you?”

Was she expecting the man to disappear as soon as the appeal was made, as sometimes happens in dreams? She felt a shock of surprise in seeing the man turn his head calmly towards her, and say, in a firm and polite tone:

“You’re in Radioplane Six, on its way to the planet Mars. I’m Koynos, Commander of the Fifteen.”

For two minutes, the stupefied Xavière was a living statue. Radioplane, the planet Mars, Commander of the Fifteen—what did it all mean? She certainly wasn’t dreaming! She wasn’t dead, having been transported into some unimaginable afterlife. She was alive! How much time had passed since she had gone to sleep in her bedroom, after having been kissed on the forehead, as she was every evening, by her father, Admiral Ciserat, the Minister of Marine?

She remembered it clearly now. There had been a formal dinner followed by a reception. She had danced, then walked in the garden, in the beautiful September evening, with her fiancé, the explorer Leo Saint-Clair, the son of a ship’s captain who had died ten years before: Saint-Clair the Nyctalope, as he was called in maritime circles, because of the rare faculty that he had of seeing in the dark better than in broad daylight. All that was real, solidly real, to the point that, as she thought of her fiancé, her beloved Leo, Xavière felt her heart beat more rapidly and painfully.

She had gone to sleep in her elegantly-furnished bedroom overlooking the gardens—the Ministry of Marine was no longer in the Rue Royale; it had recently been transferred to the former seminary of Saint-Sulpice. She had gone to sleep, happy to be young, to know that she was beautiful, beloved, worshipped... but here she was, having woken up in the unknown, evidently the prisoner of two men, one of whom had said: “You’re in Radioplane Six, on its way to the planet Mars. I’m Koynos, Commander of the Fifteen.”

She was going mad, dying of despair and horror...

How could the tumultuous thoughts and impressions that were assailing Xavière’s mind be described? The situation was so exorbitant, so far beyond all imagination, that her intelligence was even more disorientated than her sensibility was tortured—but the elder daughter of Admiral Ciserat, although delightfully feminine, had inherited her father’s strong mind; with a powerful effort of will, she dispelled the disordered thoughts, the heart-rending memories and the painful regrets, and got a firm grip on the unexpected implausibility of present reality.

“Monsieur,” she said, in an assured voice, “I should like to know at once whether I ought to suffer and despair, whether I have quit the life that was mine, in which I had found happiness... Answer me, Monsieur! I want to understand, and I shall measure out my questions. I am evidently your prisoner, by virtue of means that I shall discover later; I have been abducted from my bed, borne away without being aware of it... Was my sleep so very profound, then?”

“The orangeade you drank at the end of the soirée contained a powerful narcotic,” Koynos replied, bluntly.

“Good! Why have I been abducted?”

The response was dry: “You shall know that later.”

Xavière shrugged her shoulders mechanically.

“Look ahead of you,” Koynos went on. “That star which is increasing in size by the second is the planet Mars...”

“Where are you taking me?”

“I just told you: we’re on our way to the planet Mars.”

“But that’s insane!” cried Xavière. “I’m the victim of some hoax! I’ve read Flammarion, like everyone else, and I know how many leagues separate the Earth from...”

Koynos was smiling. He interrupted the young woman. “Fourteen million leagues, exactly, Mademoiselle. The radioplane in which we’re sitting is propelled by an uninterrupted propagation of Hertizian waves, at a speed of 300,000 kilometers per hour. The duration of the journey between the Earth and Mars is, therefore, seven days, seven hours and seven minutes, give or take a few minutes.ⁱ We are at this moment in the 48th hour of the journey. It is, however, four days since you were abducted from your bedroom.”

“Four days! I’ve been asleep for four days!”

“Yes, Mademoiselle—because it required two days for me to transport you from Paris to Central Africa, where the radiomotive station communicating with Argyre Island is situated.”ⁱⁱ

“Argyre Island? Where’s that?”

“On Mars.”

There was a silence. Again Xavière felt the whirling tumult of disordered thoughts in her brain. She braced herself, resolved to move forward one step at a time in coming to terms with these stupefying facts.

“Monsieur,” she began, “are you...?” With a start of horror, though, her hands clenched the arms of her chair and her entire body went rigid. “Help! Help!” she cried, instinctively.

What had she seen?

Outside, to the right, a flaming mass was hurtling through the Heavens, heading for the radioplane with unimaginable speed. Xavière imagined being struck, crushed, enveloped in a fiery whirlwind.

“Don’t worry, Mademoiselle,” said Koynos, placidly. “It’s a bolide.”

He studied the incandescent mass, calculated its trajectory and turned the steering-wheel, which modified the radioplane’s course. The fiery bolide passed into the distance in a flash... and there was calm again in the interplanetary space.

Xavière remained still for a few minutes, as if unconscious. Then her strength and self-possession returned by degrees. She resumed the train of her thoughts, mistress of her senses; eager to show that she had triumphed over her fear, she returned to the question that the bolide’s passage had interrupted.

“Monsieur,” she said, “are you the one who abducted me?”

“Yes, Mademoiselle.” The answer was straightforward, devoid of irony or harshness—a simple yes, as if in response to some banal question—but the young woman shuddered and studied her kidnapper.

Tall and broad-shouldered, he gave the impression of great physical strength, while his clean-shaven face—square chin, prominent cheekbones, a beak-like nose, no hint of a moustache, masterful black eyes—revealed a powerful mental energy. Koynos was handsome, but Xavière was horrified by him; she felt a profound and increasing hatred for him, in which there was no revulsion, but rather a sentiment akin to dread, dominated by a determination not to weaken.

A struggle was joined between the prisoner and the kidnapper; Xavière studied him carefully. “Whatever the motive might be for your abduction, Monsieur,” she said, with controlled wrath, “I hate and despise you.”

Koynos made no response.

The young woman thought then about her father, her younger sister Yvonne and her fiancé Leo Saint-Clair, of the entire happy existence that was now lost. The future offered nothing to her heart and mind but horrible appearances: the planet Mars. But no! Once again, that was insane. She wanted to fight against reality, to awake from this frightful nightmare. She was bound to a white metal armchair, in a crystal carapace, hurtling at vertiginous speed through interplanetary space, and a red star outside was growing larger and larger... This was the reality that she could not escape!

An inexpressible anguish gripped her heart and constricted her throat; three long nervous tremors passed through her, shaking her entire body—and she fainted, letting her lovely head fall back on the back of the armchair.

“Alpha,” said Koynos, calmly, “give her the elixir, so that she’ll sleep until we land. Feed her every four hours with the prescribed injections.”

The man on the left bowed, opened a box and took out a little flask; then, gently parting Xavière’s lips with a spatula, he let a few drops of elixir fall upon her tongue. Then he took a wad of cotton wool from the box, which he dipped in ether before rubbing the young woman’s forearm with it, vigorously. By means of a syringe, he injected a few milliliters of another liquid into the sterilized flesh.

Three minutes later, the glow of life and health returned to Xavière’s cheeks, and her pretty lips opened slightly to allow the regular passage of a gentle breath of respiration.

And the hours and days went by.

Three times, Alpha replaced his master Koynos at the steering-wheel of Radioplane Six. By way of nourishment, they gave one another hypodermic injections every four hours, and while one stayed awake, the other slept.

Propelled by the Hertzian waves flowing uninterruptedly from the radiomotive station installed in Central Africa, Radioplane Six advanced towards Mars.ⁱⁱⁱ Behind it, in a beeline, 14 more radioplanes were also gliding through the ether, each one containing a two-man crew and a sleeping young woman.

Such facts surpass the imagination, and one might imagine that they have emerged from the feverish brain of a novelist—but nothing is more real, nothing is more solidly real, than these extraordinary facts. They are taking place in the 25th year after the one in which the “Hictaner” of prodigious memory turned the world upside-down.^{iv}

Wireless telegraphy and telephony, and the remote control of Gabet’s radio-automatic torpedoes, successfully tested on the Seine at Maisons-Laffitte near Paris on the August 31, 1909,^v had only been the commencement of radiotechnological invention, of which the radioplanes of the mysterious Society of XV constituted one of the most logical examples.

On the other hand, no one in the civilized world was ignorant of the discoveries of astronomers, summarized and annotated by the French scientist Camille Flammarion, regarding the planet Mars and its habitability. The entire world was still excited by the Martian invasion of which England had been the

theater, which the English historian H. G. Wells had scrupulously detailed in his book *The War of the Worlds*—in the wake of which the American astronomer W. H. Pickering had attempted, unsuccessfully, to communicate with the inhabitants of Mars by means of an optical telegraphic system.^{vi}

Now, 25 years after the aforementioned year in human history, the year of the Hictaner, a mysterious society unknown to men, the XV, had extrapolated the consequences of the historical events and scientific discoveries listed above—and whatever appearances of unreality there might be in the circumstances in which she suddenly discovered herself, four days after her enigmatic abduction, it is nonetheless true that, along with 14 other young women, Xavière was being transported by a recently- and secretly-invented radioplane through interplanetary space to the land of those prodigious but very real Martians so precisely described by the savant historian and physiologist H. G. Wells. That description coincides, moreover, with the specimen of the Martian race preserved in alcohol at the Natural History Museum in London.

As Koynos had told Xavière, the journey from the Earth to Mars required seven days, seven hours and seven minutes. At the sixth hour of the seventh day, Koynos had ordered a cessation in the use of the elixir, and Xavière woke up.

It required a few minutes for her to recover consciousness of herself and her surroundings. This time, aided by memory and the repetition of identical impressions and sensations, she did not doubt the reality. Despite her mental resilience, she was suffering atrociously in being separated—forever, she thought—from her father, her sister Yvonne, her fiancé Leo and everything that she loved, everything that gave her joy and happiness on Earth.

To either side of her, Koynos and Alpha remained impassive, the former at the steering-wheel, the latter with his arms folded across his breast, as stiff as a well-schooled footman.

Finally, the well of tears ran dry and the poor child with the instinctive will to survive that every human being has, gradually recovered her moral energy. As regards her physical strength, she was surprised to find it intact and further augmented; she did not know about the XV's hypodermic injections, marvelous supporters and vigorous accelerators of natural health.

Her mind full of dolorous thoughts and desperate regrets, but nevertheless calm, mistress of herself and her senses, she immediately looked around.

Perhaps you have been aloft in a balloon as the Sun rises?

Outside, as if she were in the gondola of a balloon floating at a height of 3000 meters, Xavière saw gilded fires light up in the orient of an unknown world. The sky was a pure blue, without a cloud. Beneath the sky, almost confounded with it, a bluish silver sea extended, in the midst of which a reddish patch of land stood out: a large island, almost circular in shape. Suddenly, at the limit of the horizon, a fiery ray sprang forth, then another, and yet another, and the actual disk of the Sun appeared, setting fire to the sky and the sea, tinting the plains of the isolated isle bright red, illuminating the world with a glorious incandescence.

Xavière was unable to suppress an exclamation of admiration and surprise.

"In an hour, Mademoiselle," said a grave voice to her right, "we shall arrive. We are presently 3000 meters above the planet Mars. I have gradually decelerated the radioplane in order to effect a soft landing. That island you can see is Argyre Island, which the Fifteen have captured from the Martians. The sea surrounding it is the Austral Sea. If you have read Flammarion, you ought to remember the map of Mars he has published—a rather inexact map by our standards, but admirable nevertheless, given the feeble means of planetary investigation at the disposal of terrestrial astronomers."

Xavière trembled with emotion. It was true, then! The speculations in which people sometimes indulged, in her father's drawing-room, the half-joking, half-scientific conversations, were becoming realities. She would soon set foot on Mars! Why, alas, did it have to be in such painful circumstances, by virtue of an odious abduction that had torn her away from her family, from the profound and tender love that she bore in her heart?

"Monsieur!" she stammered. "Monsieur..." No! She hated him, that man! She would not speak to him.

Koynos looked at the young woman, and followed the obscure progress of her thoughts in her frown and in her eyes. She was surprised by the strange gentleness in his voice when he said: "Mademoiselle, don't rebel against that which is. A new life is beginning for you—a life of powerful dominion in a prodigious world, which we are going to conquer in its entirety, and from which we shall do battle across space with Earth. You shall participate in that glory..."

What a strange voice, gentle and solemn at the same time! Who was this strange man, then, this kidnapper of young women, who spoke of conquering a planet with such august simplicity?

By virtue of an obscure necessity of rebellion, though, she attempted to mock. “Conquer Mars!” she said. “Are the Martians all of the same species as those who invaded England ten years ago? In that case...”

“Mademoiselle,” Koynos interrupted, gravely, “the Martians are terrible creatures, with an intelligence more advanced than ours—but the very invasion of which you speak revealed a part of their strength to us, permitting us to elevate our intelligence and our science to their level. Victory will not be won without terrible dangers to the Fifteen—dangers in which you will often share—but I know that you have sufficient courage.”

He was not mocking. He said no more, although she was still listening, so vibrant with his voice with conviction and internal authority. When she noticed that he was no longer speaking, though, she had a sudden thought. Why was she, Xavière, sitting beside this man?

She saw then that she had been untied, that her limbs were free. She turned abruptly to face Koynos, and said in a passionate voice: “Why me? Why not someone else? Why have you kidnapped me, Xavière de Ciserat, and not, for instance, one of my friends? Why impose this new life of which you speak on me, instead of the life I had chosen for myself among my family and my fiancé?”

She forgot about the astonishing journey and the planet Mars, close at hand. She stood up, a human individual proud of her liberty and the integrity of her living soul, acting in the capacity given to her at birth. She rebelled, as a woman stolen away from the man she loved.

Before replying, Koynos looked at the young woman. Ah, how beautiful Xavière was! In all the splendor of her 20th year, simply clad in the white tennis-dress she had taken off, on the afternoon of September 21, in order to put on her evening-gown, and in which he had dressed her before abducting her, her figure was both elegant and vigorous. She was muscular, of medium height, brunette, with lovely hair, scarcely covered by a white mantilla. She had large black eyes, full of fire, shapely lips, the color of carnations, a long, supple neck, and skin of a voluptuous smoothness...

How beautiful Xavière was! Koynos admired her; then, gravely, his dominating eyes fixed on the passionate eyes of the young girl.

“Mademoiselle,” he said, “it is you and not another who is here with me, because it was you alone that I noticed...”

She felt as if she were suffocating. “You noticed me?” she breathed.

“Yes. Cast your mind back to last July 14, during the military review. The American officer who was standing behind you on the official platform, and who returned the opera-glasses that you had dropped...”

“That was you? You?”

“That was me.”

The silence was long and pregnant. Xavière was calm, however, even cold, when she said: “Indeed, I recognize you now. I hardly glanced at you... I didn’t even look at you...”

What an admirable and resilient creature a woman is! By the simple admission of premeditation in the choice of a young woman to kidnap—an admission that was akin to a declaration of love—Koynos had handed the initiative to his adversary. Xavière, now, was no longer a young woman abducted with an indeterminate purpose, but a woman upon whom passion had exercised its choice. Any woman who is loved, or merely desired, has a barrier to raise against the person who loves or desires her. Xavière seized her advantage, and floored her opponent with a word: “No! I didn’t even look at you...!”

Koynos, however, was of the same powerful species as Xavière. He smiled. “I see, Mademoiselle,” he said, softly, “that you are having some slight difficulty breathing. In order that our lungs might be progressively adapted to the Martian atmosphere, I have opened a porthole, by way of which the terrestrial air we are breathing is being gradually replaced by Martian air—but you’re asking yourself how we were able to breathe during the journey through the vacuum of the immense interplanetary space?”

“No,” she said, as if in a dream.

“Turn your head slightly—there, behind me, do you see those two little items of coupled apparatus? One is the carbon-absorber, the other the oxygen-generator. They have provided us with the air necessary for aspiration and have absorbed the carbon of expiration. And you’re asking yourself how we were able to withstand the mortal cold of the etheric regions?”

“No,” she said again.

“It’s because we have beneath our feet a special electric radiator, which transforms an infinitesimal part of the Hertzian waves propelling us into heat.”

Koynos bowed, turned a little tap attached to a metal canister installed between the wings of his chair, and got to his feet.

“There—you’ll feel the difference in the air more acutely. A touch of oppression, which will soon pass, because the Martian atmosphere, although different from Earth’s in several respects, is almost identical to ours with respect to human respiration...” He stopped speaking, looked at the young woman, and remained silent for a moment—then, changing its tone, the grave and slightly emotional voice resumed: “You said just now, Mademoiselle, that you had not even looked at me...”

She shivered, and turned questioning eyes towards him, while a certain pulmonary difficulty left her a trifle breathless.

“Certainly,” he resumed, “I did not hope for such an honor then—but the time and circumstances were inappropriate for me to solicit it. I had seen you, and since then, I would have renounced my enviable destiny entirely, rather than not have you share in it. I could not do that as a matter of choice, time and circumstances being opposed to it, so I did it by force—please excuse me, Mademoiselle, and do not condemn me for the past before having sounded out the future...”

That was perfect; Xavière could not think of anything to say. There was another silence. Then, a trifle pale with exasperation, thrown back into the tumult of thoughts that the extraordinary combination of circumstances provoked, she said, dryly: “Well, Monsieur...!” She was strong now, though. She sat back in her armchair and contemplated the new world to which Koynos had brought her—and in the depths of her soul, the obstinate voice of hope murmured to her:

Wait! Fight! Don’t weaken! These mysterious Fifteen are men. Other men exist, as intelligent, as strong, as courageous. Your fiancé would give his life for you; your father is powerful and rich. They will search for you. They will find this radiomotive station in Central Africa from which interplanetary radioplanes depart—and you will be able to vanquish Koynos entirely, as you have already vanquished his heart!

And while these words resounded in the depths of her soul, with a thousand variations, her eyes and her mind allowed themselves to be captivated by the prodigious spectacle that the aspects of Mars presented to her terrestrial senses. She was a trifle short of breath, but felt no pain, and the spectacle that presented itself to her soon rendered her insensible to that discomfort.

The Sun was entirely above the horizon. By squinting, Xavière could look it in the face. It seemed smaller than when seen from Earth. The air was extraordinarily transparent, without a cloud or the least hint of mist. The Austral Sea now seemed pale silver, and Argyre Island, low and sandy around its shores, formed a great stain of vivid red, marked in the middle by features of the terrain whose nature the young woman could not discern.

Soon, though, they were no more than five or six meters above the ground. The radioplane’s descent was very gradual. Koynos turned the steering-wheel slightly, the radioplane veered, and Xavière saw then that the unevenness in the terrain was nothing but a sort of entrenched encampment constructed in the exact center of the island, in the middle of which buildings were huddled. The red coloration of the rest of the island originated from fantastic vegetation of an unknown nature.

Five minutes later, without a jolt or a shudder, the radioplane set down on the vast terrace of one of the buildings.

Alpha pressed a switch; an almost-invisible door opened in the crystal carapace, at almost the same level as the terrace.

Koynos had got to his feet. A single step took him outside. He presented his left hand to Xavière, saying: “Welcome to Mars, Mademoiselle!”

Her heart beating with a thousand contradictory emotions, Xavière resolutely supported her right hand on Koynos’ arm and leapt on to the terrace. The oppression in her lungs had disappeared. She felt as light as a dragonfly. The little jump she had made to get out of the radioplane would have carried her much further forward if Koynos had not held her back. She was bewildered. He smiled.

“You’ll get used to your body’s lightness and that extraordinary facility of movement,” he said. “Excuse me for mingling figures with my words, but you must know that on Mars, bodies weigh a third as much as they do on Earth. The muscular force that you develop in your movements is three times more active in consequence. A single step will carry you three times as far, and you will be able to leap several meters without effort—but all these anomalies will soon be familiar to you...”

He stopped. Xavière was no longer listening, because a spectacle that was simultaneously surprising, consoling and painful had offered itself to her.

Other terraced buildings surrounded the one where they had come down, and on each of the other terraces, Xavière saw a radioplane descending, each with a crystal carapace flanked by wings, composed of

a long chassis stretched by metal wires. Each carapace was, in addition, surmounted by a short mast linked to the wings by stays, similarly composed of metal wires.

Xavière counted 14 radioplanes—and from each one, in succession, she saw two men emerge, either guiding a resolute young woman, sustaining a tottering young woman, or carrying a young woman who had fainted.

“Ah!” she cried. “So I’m not alone!” Immediately, though, she held out her arms. “Yvonne, Yvonne!”

She had just recognized one of the unconscious young women as her sister Yvonne. She was on the neighboring terrace, separated from the one on which Koynos had landed by a fairly wide street. Xavière wanted to leap forwards, but Koynos held her back.

“Mademoiselle,” he said, “your sister will be in your arms in a few minutes.”

At that instant, moreover, Yvonne and her two guards disappeared into a red staircase set in the middle of the terrace.

“Quickly, quickly, Monsieur!” Xavière cried, transported by a combination of instinctive joy and dolorous apprehension. “My sister has fainted, Monsieur! I want to see her immediately! Oh, my God—she might die!”

Tears sprang from her eyes. Koynos drew her along. Lightly and rapidly they descended a staircase, passed through large rooms, went into the street, and immediately entered another house... where Xavière saw Yvonne lying on a divan.

Immediately, Xavière noticed the pink color of her sister’s cheeks, the serene calmness of her attitude, the regularity of her respiration.

Standing next to the divan was a man dressed like Koynos. “Mademoiselle,” he said, in a guttural voice, “your sister is only sleeping by virtue of the effect of the elixir. She will wake up in a few minutes. Shall we leave these demoiselles alone for the moment, Koynos?”

“Gladly, Alkeus.”

And, as she asked herself whether she might not be in some insane dream, Xavière saw the two men bow to her respectfully, resume their upright stance, turn their backs and go out, each through a different door. She fell to her knees beside her sleeping sister and, in a silence in which she could hear the precipitate beating of her heart, she looked at Yvonne for a long time, through the tears that were misting her eyes.

ⁱ A metric league is four kilometers, so the distance Koynos is quoting is 56 million kilometers. Earth and Mars do, in fact, come that close to one another during some oppositions, although Earth’s mean distance from the Sun is approximately 150 million km and Mars’ mean distance from the Sun is approximately 228 million km. The duration of a 56 million km journey at 300,000 km per hour is actually 186.67 hours, or 7 days 18 hours and 40 minutes, but that arithmetical quibble pales into insignificance when one remembers—as La Hire apparently does not—that the Earth and Mars are moving objects whose distance is constantly changing, extending to more than 350 million km when they are on opposite sides of the Sun. There could not, therefore, be any standard journey time for the trip, and it would vary much more greatly than La Hire eventually concedes that it might, if the journey were possible at all (the hypothetical method he employs is absurd).

ⁱⁱ The region of Argyrus still features on modern maps of Mars, where the Latin form of the name is conventionally used, but it is no longer reckoned to be a sea, so it cannot accommodate an island. I have translated La Hire’s *île d’Argyre* into English, and have done the same with all his other terms—which are borrowed, with due acknowledgement, from Camille Flammarion’s maps—because they refer to an essentially imaginary Mars rather than the real one whose map still duplicates some, but not all, of Flammarion’s labels.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hertzian waves—i.e., radio waves—could not possibly flow “uninterruptedly” from a station on Earth to a spaceship in flight because the Earth is rotating on its axis; for approximately half of each day, the mass of the Earth would interrupt the signal. Mars also rotates at much the same axial velocity, so the transmissions from a Martian station propelling radioplanes in the opposition direction would be similarly interrupted. As with other inconvenient facts, La Hire ignores this, presumably in order that his story should not become inconveniently complicated.

^{iv} The “Hictaner” was a man adapted to breathe under water, who provided the central motif of the novel to which *Le mystère des XV* is a sequel, *L’homme qui peut vivre dans l’eau* [The Man Who Could Live

Underwater], serialized in *Le Matin* in 1908. The significance of the term is dubious; the same spelling is also used in the Ferenczi paperback edition of the earlier novel but Jess Nevins renders the term “Ichtaner” in an essay on the Nyctalope contained in his web guide to superheroes and “Icthaner” might make more sense, as a contraction of Ichthyander (“fish-man” in Greek). The statement that the present story is taking place 25 years after its predecessor is subsequently contradicted, in several different ways, causing a confusion that is discussed in some detail in the afterword.

^v The paperback text misquotes this date as 1900, probably because of a typographical error; I have substituted the year in which Monsieur Gabet actually demonstrated his “*torpille radio-automatique*.”

^{vi} William Henry Pickering (1858-1938) played a crucial part in the evolution of the myth of the Martian canals; his observations of Mars during the opposition of 1892 included allegations regarding “lakes” and “clouds” that greatly encouraged the hypothesis that the planet was habitable and were extensively cited by Percival Lowell in support of the thesis that the planet was home to an advanced civilization. Pickering’s suggestion that interplanetary signals might be exchanged by means of an optical telegraph did not give rise to any actual project in our history, but such an endeavor had been featured in Gustave Le Rouge’s *Le prisonnier de la planète Mars* (1908; tr. in the Black Coat Press edition of *The Vampires of Mars*), which La Hire had probably read.