

Chapter One POLAR MIRAGE

History will never forget the terrifying cataclysms that succeeded one another during the first years of the twenty-first century. Assailed by unexpected scourges, the world nearly perished. If it was not the end of the world, it could be thought, at least, that it was the end of humankind.

We know now what the origin was of the destructive forces that threatened the annihilation of life. No one is unaware to whom it is necessary to attribute them. Like the Roman Janus, Science has two faces, and the majority of the weapons that it manipulates can kill or cure indifferently. The same science can inspire the genius of evil and the genius of god; and it was those two geniuses that were incarnate, at the beginning of the year 2000, in the enemy scientists Professor Otto Hantzen and the illustrious Master Oronius.

The evils unleashed upon the world came from the former, just as the latter found remedies and palliatives for them.

Amid those various and gigantic upheavals, however, how can we not accord a particular mention to the formidable wave of heat that dried up the oceans in a matter of hours, and the atmospheric tidal wave that almost asphyxiated humankind by concentrating almost the totality of the respirable air at a single point of the globe?

On the evening of that superphenomenon, a flying machine, still imperfectly disengaged from the layer of solidified air that had transformed it momentarily into an aerolith, fell back to earth after having been projected to the limits of the stratosphere by the atmospheric flux.

Departed from the ancient continent of Atlantis, who could tell in which part of the globe it would fall back? The curve that it described involuntarily had certainly enabled it to travel a considerable distance at an incalculable speed.

Its crew and its passengers, all observing behind the portholes in the hull, had therefore to try to divine the place where their fall would end. Undoubtedly, as you will have no difficulty understanding, a little apprehension was mingled with their legitimate curiosity.

However, even less than the general run of their contemporaries, the humans enclosed in that steel bird did not allow themselves to be intimidated by the perspective of new adventures. Was that aerial vessel not the Halcyon-Car, the celebrated apparatus of the illustrious Oronius? A summary and habitation of all the marvels of science, was it not transporting in its flanks the wherewithal to ward off the most unforeseeable eventualities. And was it not guided by the Master himself, assisted by his pupil, the engineer Jean Chapuis, and the king of mechanics, the indomitable Bellevillois Victor Laridon?

The Halcyon-Car! Marvel of marvels! An inaccessible fortress and celestial laboratory! A protean aircraft that could, with equal facility, be sometimes a bird and sometimes a fish, an auto on the ground, and tank if necessary, an electric launch transformable into a submarine—an auto-fish, in sum, capable of rolling on the sea bed. There was no situation to which that Fregoli ¹ of modern machinery was incapable of adapting itself.

Drawn into an incalculable number of alarming adventures since the day when it had been snatched from his laboratory on the summit of Belleville, transformed into a volcano, the Master Oronius had never hesitated to confide to it what was most precious to him. The Halcyon-Car transported not merely the savant's scientific treasures but also what he cherished even more: Cyprienne, his blonde daughter with azure eyes, the intrepid and delectable fiancée of Jean Chapuis.

Two soubrettes accompanied that amazon of the air, the Parisienne Turlurette with the pert face, and Mandarinette, a young Chinese woman saved by her from a frightful servitude. The former was promised

¹ Leopoldo (Luigi) Fregoli (2 July 1867-26 November 1936) was a stage star and Italian actor. He was thought to be the greatest, most versatile quick-change artist of his day, famous for his extraordinary ability in impersonations and his quickness in exchanging roles.

to the mechanic Laridon; the latter, less advanced in sentimental terms, seemed to be interested in the Congolese Julep, perhaps because of the singularities presented by the epidermis of that worthy servant, rendered polychromatic by Oronius' experiments.

Finally, and to conclude the passenger-list of the Halcyon, there were two little papillon dogs aboard, Pipigg and Kukuss, and Tai, a singular subterranean creature brought back from the environs of the central fire.

Such were the individuals, human and animal, who were descending from the sky that evening toward the unknown earth.

They were observing through the glazed panels of the aircraft, and as that observation was facilitated by the perfection of the optical apparatus utilized by Oronius, they were able to be moved by the spectacle that they had before their eyes.

It had never been given to them to contemplate a more singular landscape. From the height at which they still were, the terrestrial ground should have appeared to them in its habitual form of a circumference circled by sky. However, the world, beneath them seemed to have taken on an elliptical form. It would no longer have been exact to speak of the circle of the horizon; it would have been necessary to say the ellipse.

Furthermore, the dimensions of that ellipse presented singularly considerable proportions. Certainly, its surface area far surpassed what ought to have been encompassed by an observer contemplating another point of the terrestrial globe from that altitude. The extent embraced might have varied from the simple to the double. On an entirely different scale, the eye would have experienced an analogous impression if, after having contemplated from a height an egg posed on its point, it had then seen it from the same height posed on its long axis. In the former case, the image perceived was a circle of restricted dimension; in the latter it was an ellipse having for its minor axis the diameter of the previous circumference, while the major axis might have been double or triple.

From that anomaly, Oronius had to conclude that he was contemplating one of the flattened faces of the Earth. Thus, he had before his eyes one of the poles, or its immediate vicinity. Which one? According to the graph of the curve described since the cataclysm that had projected the Halcyon-Car into the air, the Master estimated that fall had been executed in a southerly direction, so it was toward the Austral or Antarctic Pole that the aircraft was descending; and as he approached the ground, Oronius was astonished to find the reality so different from the supposed verities given by geographers as articles of faith.

To tell the truth, it was a very strange landscape... more than strange, hallucinatory!

The disk of the sun remained perpetually below the horizon and its rays only illuminated the polar surface indirectly. A semi-daylight therefore reigned constantly, which, without being that of clear nights, was not that of normal daylight.

At that point of the globe, theoretically pierced by the prolongation of the axis of rotation—the axle of the world—there was neither sunrise nor sunset. Whichever face the Earth presented to the solar rays, the polar center was neither more nor less illuminated. A strange daylight—or, rather, a spectral clarity, half-shadow and half-light—therefore bathed the ground on which the apparatus was about to alight.

It was approaching the pole, but it was not descending directly upon it. It was about to land on the edge of a rocky plateau describing a complete circle around a sort of round plain forming a basin. The theoretical pole ought to be at the center and the bottom of that bowl.

What eyes Oronius' companions opened! How what they discovered annihilated the most savant deductions!

The famous Antarctic circle and its ice had to be far behind them. They were flying over the zone besieged for centuries by the most famous explorers but never attained: the inviolate zone. They had crossed the last mysterious barrier, against which the efforts of so many hardy pioneers had broken.

The passengers of the Halcyon did better than glimpse the goal, divine it or brush it; they were in the *El Glacero* dreamed by all the unfortunate Orellana of the pole.² And what it revealed to them was neither the open sea nor the hypothetical desert of ice. It was the crown of rock erected by Nature as an enclosure destined to contain the secret of the magnet.

What was that pole?

For a moment—an ephemeral moment—they had it before their eyes. They thought they had it; they glimpsed it.

Illusion! The vision was so unexpected that they thought they were the victims of a mirage. The Halcyon had just landed on the top of the rock, a few meters away from the edge from which the gaze could plunge into the mysterious bowl.

Jean Chapuis opened a hatch... or rather, he tried to open it.

Immediately, however, a mortal cold spread inside the airplane, and Julep leapt backwards as if he had received a block of ice in the chest.

“Shut it! Shut it!” Oronius hastened to shout. “Do you imagine that you can confront the temperature of the Pole without preparation?”

On that point, at least, the observations and deductions of explorers were confirmed. The polar temperature opposed the presence of all animate organisms. However, cold could not stop the Master, any more than the flames of a furnace. He put on, and had his companions put on, suits with a double envelope enclosing a mattress of air heated by an electric current. Similarly heated masks were applied to faces, and protective gloves to hands. Thus transformed into living radiators, the aviators were able to go out.

One by one, they all risked themselves outside the Halcyon and set foot on the icy soil of the polar cap. It was dead soil, black and lugubrious. The cold killed all seeds there. There was no trace of even the most elementary vegetation; animal life was equally absent. A crushing silence reigned there.

“Naturally,” murmured Oronius, nodding his head. “Only death can inhabit this latitude. Our curiosity will find very little to glean here... nothing! Let us give ourselves the pleasure, however, of descending to the bottom of this bowl and placing our feet on the exact spot that is the austral Pole itself.

He turned toward the basin and approached the rim.

His companions had imitated him. The same exclamation of stupor escaped them all.

A gray mist filled the great basin. The view was quite similar to that of a sea of clouds seen from the summit of a mountain. That mist was not, however, dense enough to form a veil impenetrable to the gaze. It allowed the confused perception of the forms that it enclosed in its bosom.

The Master, his daughter, his future son-in-law and their servants were therefore able to distinguish, to their profound amazement, the silhouettes of massive constructions in the bottom of the bowl.

It might have been an optical illusion; fog distorts objects and lends them a fantastic appearance; the trunks of trees take on human appearances and bushes or a section of wall are transformed into monsters that one imagines to be alive.

The spectators would, therefore, have attached little importance to what they saw, or believed that they saw; the fog and the distance that separated them from the bottom of the immense basin and the forms glimpsed constituted a double source of error. That was sufficient to put them on their guard against the improbable vision that could not be anything but an inopportune mirage, if there had not been something else. That other thing, they could not doubt without simultaneously doubting the evidence of their senses.

Colossal towers were emerging from the bosom of the mist.

This time it was impossible to attribute the strange apparition to a deformation of the fog. In fact, the imposing masses that the stupefied voyagers discovered rose far above the sea of mist; they rose up into the relatively clear part of the atmosphere without the interposition of any curtain of vapor.

² Francisco de Orellana Bejarano Pizarro y Torres de Altamirano (1511-November 1546) was a Spanish explorer and conquistador. He completed the first known navigation of the entire length of the Amazon River, which initially was named *Rio de Orellana*. He also founded the city of Guayaquil in what is now Ecuador.

The contours and the silhouettes were, therefore, absolutely clear, and it was easy for Oronius to observe their form and nature.

Each one might have been a few kilometers away, but as their diameter certainly attained a thousand meters they still remained sufficiently visible for the eye to be sure of their reality. They were not rocks; they were indisputably edifices designed by skilful architects in accordance with all the rules of art.

Human works! An architecture at the Austral Pole, beyond the limits assigned to life!

Petrified, they all remained dazed before the enormous silhouettes dominating the sea of fog. That fantastic apparition rendered less implausible what they thought they had distinguished at the bottom of the vast bowl. They were no longer sure of being victims of an illusion in discovering there, beneath the veil of mist, the swarming of the active life of lands of factories, the agitations of human lives delivering themselves to labor. Between the constructions covering the floor of the bowl, black dots representing something like an army of pygmies were coming and going in uninterrupted chains. More voluminous forms were running over the ground. And in the air, in the very bosom of the fog, other forms, which appeared to be flying, were passing back and forth.

Factories, an industry, active beings, perhaps trains, or at least vehicles, and airplanes or aerial ferries, seemed to animate polar life! Our explorers discovered there the manifestations of life and intense activity that any mining or metallurgical country might offer. Was it not the fumes of blast-furnaces that were rising into the sky, forming that sea of clouds? Was the ground not trembling under the distant shock of pile-drivers?

None of our heroes could admit that. With Oronius, they preferred to refuse the evidence of their eyes, dupes of deformed appearances. There remained, nevertheless, the towers that were so clearly visible—the towers, and the singular destination that they seemed to have. What was that phenomenon, observed but absolutely disconcerting? Was it purely physical and natural, or had a scientific and creative will commanded it?

It was strange and inexplicable. It would have been so anywhere in the world. Oronius had never contemplated anything similar. He had never realized or dreamed of realizing under that form and on such a vast scale the miracle that he was contemplating and easily qualified as the direct captation of the energy contained in any luminous source, the deflection and decomposition of solar rays and the extraction of caloric or other forces.

For that was all that it could be: mysteriously attracted from beyond the horizon behind which the invisible sun was hidden, a luminous mass rose, curved and fell back, dividing in the process, on to the summits of the towers. It was the diffuse mass of solar rays distributed in space that, deflected from their normal course and reassembled in a beam by an unknown intervention, was being brought to the polar towers.

But already, either at the moment of capitation or in the course of the trajectory, an initial process of decomposition and elimination was effected; for it was not all of the solar light that the mysterious towers were collecting; specially stripped of their habitual dazzling luminosity, they only arrived at the goal in the form of scarcely visible radiations, which only their great mass permitted to be discerned.

Thoughtful in the presence of that colossal enterprise in the captation of the forces of Nature, Oronius evaluated the formidable reserves of heat and energy that might thus be accumulated and transformed in the reservoirs of the Babelesque edifices.

For what were those reserves being used? Or what purpose would they serve one day?

Who was capturing them?

“People have constructed those towers,” the Master murmured, pensively. “That’s indisputable. We have before us a manifestation of human genius. Who can those people be? And what are they doing here?”

With his ardent eyes he stared at the summits of the towers, on which he imagined that he distinguished human silhouettes, running, agitating and engaging in various tasks.

But abruptly, at the precise moment when he was about to bring the Cyclopean Eye to bear, night fell, sudden, total and inexplicable.

Plunged unexpectedly into thick darkness, our friends could no longer even perceive one another. They had to search for one another, groping and calling out, drawing together anxious and troubled.

The factory-towers had abruptly interrupted their work. Broken off, the luminous beams were no longer rising from the depths of the horizon. Everything was extinguished.

An anguishing silence weighed upon the polar night.

“Have we been seen? Has that night been deliberately provoked?” Oronius murmured. “Does the Pole conceal a jealously-guarded secret that seems threatened by our unexpected appearance?”

No one replied to him. He continued, for himself, the series of reflections inspired by the situation.

“There are living people there, beings of an intelligence superior, or at least equal, to ours. What we have just glimpsed permits no doubt about that. So, they’re human... in creation, what other species could possess that intelligence? But why that suspicion, so formidably manifest? Whatever they are, beings in whose hands such forces are held cannot regard the arrival of a few voyagers as a danger... so why this night? Do they want to forbid us access to the Pole? Are they its guardians and those of its mysteries? I can’t understand... incontestably, I sense, we’ve just provoked an alert... but as we can’t constitute a serious menace personally, it’s necessary to conclude that we’ve discovered a spectacle that someone desires to hide. Polar humankind, unsuspected until today, still wants its existence to be unknown. Why?”

In spite of himself and in spite of the testimony of his eyes, he expressed doubt: “What folly! Does Polar humankind exist? Can it exist? Reason says no. The towers sucking in solar energy affirm the contrary. One thing is certain: the Pole is inhabited. By whom?”

Inexplicably troubled by the mystery that surrounded them, the passengers of the Halcyon-Car huddled together in an anxious group. The silence and the obscurity seemed to contain a threat. They almost expected an attack. As Oronius said, by whom?

Suddenly—and it was a general impression, since they all shivered at the same time—they heard wing-beats above them and around them. The darkness was filed by forms that fear enabled them to divine. They felt frictions... they saw strange eyes gleaming: eyes with polyhedral facets reminiscent of the gleam of diamond; certainly not human eyes.

And yet, between the great dark wings that were beating the air, they seemed to distinguish bodies... bodies having human form.

In any case, they did not have time to deliver themselves to numerous observations, nor to ask themselves many questions. The strange swarm that had just surrounded them by favor of the darkness and seemed to want to recognize them, drew away almost immediately. The night recovered its calm. The air ceased its agitation. They were able to doubt the reality of that new phantasmagoria.

There was nothing... nothing but the night, everyone repeated to themselves. Our imagination alone populated the darkness.

The alarm was not renewed and minutes went by without bringing any further incident; they gradually became serene again.

Furthermore, the inexplicable night did not last. The veil brightened. The Polar half-light reappeared, arriving from the horizon.

The voyagers saw once again the coronal plateau on which they were standing. They saw once again the bowl and its sea of gray clouds, slightly more opaque than before the eclipse. But their eyes searched in vain for the strange towers. They no longer emerged from the fog.

They had disappeared, and all trace of life with them.