PART ONE

I. The Meteorometer and the Telephot

"Father, dear, what will the weather be like in a fortnight's time—which is to say, on the third day of the second moon?"

"I'll tell you, my dear Sinusia. Let me consult the meteorometer."

These words, which might seem strange, were exchanged in the workroom—or, rather, the laboratory—of Professor Spherides Altair, in one of the most beautiful dwellings of Jovian Avenue in Kentropol, in the year 9978 of our era.

It is necessary to add that, since the year 9000, Kentropol had become the principal city of the refugee conurbation, following the terrible cataclysms of the year 8960 on the shores of the Mediterranean, especially the African coasts. Because of the significant cooling of the Earth, it was there that the life of the human race, or at least its most civilized representatives, was concentrated.

Kentropol was located in the territory once known as Tunisia, and was home to the most knowledgeable engineers, mathematicians and astronomers of the new century, which merited more than ever the name of the Age of Science. There were also other great cities, however, which all accommodated very remarkable men: Heraklopol, in what had once been Morocco; Colombopol, the sole relic of the Americas; Australopol, in which Australia survived; Gangopol, the capital of India; and Sinopol, a vestige of the ancient empire of the Mandarins. The planet's population had diminished considerably, but the survivors were almost all people of genius, eminent and very cultivated minds.

Meanwhile, Professor Altair had consulted the exceedingly delicate instrument called a meteorometer, which served to predict the weather.

"There'll be a little rain in the morning," he declared, "but fine weather in the afternoon and for the next two days."

"Ah! So much the better—for I'm planning to take a pleasure trip to the ruins of Paris and London with my friends Aphelia and Parhelia Elliptine, their brother Helikos, and Triagul Parabolis."

"Very good, child—but be careful! Even for such a short journey, you must consider the possibility of accidents. Our aircraft are marvelous and safe, but their very perfection makes them precision machines, whose functioning can be interrupted by something trivial."

"Don't worry, Father dear. Helikos, as you know, is a first rate engineer, Monsieur Parabolis is a very serious and very clever fellow and I'm quite strong in pure and applied mechanics."

"I'm not unaware of that, Sinusia; I'll always be proud when I think that the Worldwide Academy of Sciences awarded you one of its grand prizes for your essay on *Some New Domestic Applications of Electricity*."

"I profited from your scientific teaching."

"No matter—take care to equip yourselves with your individual gliders and your portable radiophones, to call for help if necessary. It will be easy for me to come to your aid in my light airplane, although it scarcely travels at a thousand kilometers an hour."

"Have no fear, Papa. Think instead about taking a rest from your absorbing labors, and if you want to please me, come to the drawing-room in a little while to have a tube of perfume. I'll do the housework."

It is necessary to explain at this point that the custom of "having a tube of perfume" corresponded, in Kentropol, to what was once—in the barbaric times of the 20th century, for example—that of having a cup of tea. These perfumes were not only exquisite but just as nourishing and soothing for the nervous system.

While the professor returned passionately to his calculations, his daughter busied herself, as she had said, with household chores. For a long time, everything had been done mechanically, thanks to electricity, which every house received and transformed into power at will, by means of very simple machines, without any intermediary channeling. This electricity was emitted inexhaustibly, like rain, by numerous generating stations, some of which were established on the shore of the Atlantic Ocean, whose tides they employed, and others in the Sahara, where they collected solar heat. These were two gigantic energy-sources, which, according to every appearance, would only run out with the life of our globe itself. These electrical waves, incessantly transmitted through the air, powered all the engines in factories, and even those in aircraft. At the flick of a switch, the electrical torrent flowed, activating the most powerful machines as easily as the most delicate instruments.

For all the services that electricity could not render, there were domestic servants, but they were not members of the human family. They were great apes of a particular, highly intelligent species, with which one could even use a rudimentary language. Thus, Sinusia's maidservant was a robust and clever she-ape named Josette.

Sinusia began by sweeping the apartment, as it were. This operation was accomplished very comfortably, by means of a few electrical discharges, which had the effect of detaching all the dust-particles, wherever they

might be and collecting them in a special receptacle, where they were subsequently volatilized by a more powerful discharge.

Then the gracious mistress of the house busied herself with dinner. That was very easy, for the gross nourishment with which human beings had contented themselves for so many thousands of years were now unknown. The progress of chemistry would have permitted an extremely nutritious aliment to be condensed into a single small pill, but the physicians had recognized that such a solution would be perilous, for it would have led to the atrophy and then the disappearance of the stomach and intestines. In preference, therefore, pastes and liquids had been adopted, which had the further advantage of offering to gourmet palates tastes that were as exquisite as they were varied. Chemist-chefs had made a veritable art of this preparation, comparable to music.

Thus, Sinusia chose with great care from her alimentary pharmacy the pastes and liqueurs that would make up the evening meal. They were combined in view of the season, the prevailing weather, and the age and state of health of individuals. Each daily menu was thus calculated and measured out. Model factories manufactured the pastes in perfectly hygienic conditions, which were delivered in the form of small cubes like caramels or fruit-pastilles, and the liqueurs, in bottles of every shape and size. Housekeepers could then easily realize the most ingenious mixtures of tastes at their convenience.

The young woman also took care to brush the clothes—or, rather, pass them through the roller-cleaner, an expeditious machine that removed all dust in a matter of seconds as it passed over them with a hot iron. Kentropolitan costume was simplicity itself: a closely-fitted tunic, shorts and leggings. Women dressed like men, except that they also wore short kilts like those of Highlanders, which displayed slightly more concern for elegance. They were, in general, pretty—even flirtatious—without ever falling into the extravagances of what had once been called “fashion.”

After rapidly concluding her chores, Sinusia went to the drawing-room, where she prepared a few tubes of perfumes for her father. These tubes were flared at their extremity, artistically modeled in the form of a flower; in order to make use of them it was sufficient, having pressed a button, to breathe in from the corollas, made of a substance as pure as crystal but lighter and less fragile.

Professor Altair soon appeared.

“Aren’t you tired, Father, dear?” the young woman asked.

“A little, my child, but the work I’m doing is so rewarding: a communication to our brothers on the planet Mars on the subject of a new interplanetary alphabet, even simpler and clearer than the one that has been in use for a century.”

“It’s certainly an exciting subject—but you also need to look after your health. Here, breathe in this anti-neuralgic and tonic perfume!”

“Thank you, my dear Sinusia. That is indeed doing me good.”

“But it’s getting dark—we can scarcely see. I’ll go light the microbes.”

“If you wish.”

The young woman turned a switch and the whole room filled with a greenish light that was both brought and soft. This marvelous lighting was furnished by phosphorescent microbes enclosed in tubes and bulbs fixed to the walls of the room. These micro-organisms, however, which had been carefully selected over the centuries, only became phosphorescent when stimulated by an electric spark. Another spark, opposite in polarity, made them darken again.

“My dear daughter,” the professor said, tenderly, “You’re an accomplished woman, as was your poor mother, who was taken from us so prematurely by a fatal short-circuit.”

“Alas, poor Mama!”

“That’s why I can’t recommend too much prudence. Our modern existence surrounds us with redoubtable forces that are still somewhat mysterious. Let us be fearful of the revenge—doubtless unconscious, but terrible—of Nature. However, that’s not what I want to talk to you about, my child. Aren’t you thinking about getting married? Once, one dared not even raise that subject with daughters, which was formerly mixed up with a factor long since vanished from our mores—love. Fortunately, we’re less barbaric nowadays.”

“Dear father, yes, I something think about getting married. I don’t know what the love of which mention is made in old books can have been; it must have been insane and injurious. However, I’ve determined by calculation the personality of a spouse mathematically harmonious with my own—and thus obtained, very nearly, the personality of Triagul Parabolis. I think that he has made the same observation on his own part.”

“I doubt that, Sinusia. He’s a distinguished young man, gentle and noble in character—but I fear that he’s not very knowledgeable.”

“That is, indeed, his weak point, and I admit that it’s a grave fault nowadays, but it can be easily corrected. I’ll take care of it. Besides, he’ll be compelled to complete his education, since, according to Kentropolitan law, no man can marry without passing a strict examination designed to prove that he’s a good mathematician, physicist, chemist and astronomer.”

“Yes, our wise laws demand that extensive knowledge of those who wish to found a family. It’s no longer possible to live without the aid of Science, the precious treasure of which increases every day—but that very

wealth makes it increasingly difficult to learn; it's therefore necessary that intelligence becomes increasingly powerful.

At that moment, a roseate light filed the room, neutralizing that of the lighting microbes.

"A telephonic communication," said Sinusia.

It was, indeed, by such signals that the ancient bells had been replaced. There was no longer any apparent receiver or transmitter; it was sufficient to speak in the direction of the ceiling. The voice was reproduced by a loudspeaker.

Almost immediately, a geometric figure became visible on the ceiling: a parabola, within which a triangle was inscribed.

"It's him!" exclaimed the young woman, joyfully.

That symbol was, indeed, the luminous seal of Triagul Parabolis. It soon disappeared, and was replaced by the cinematographic projection of the young man's face, transmitted by the marvelous apparatus known as the telephot, the perfect realization of television.

"Hello!" he said. "Professor Spherides Altair?"

"In person," the scientist replied, activating his own telephot to send his image to Triagul. "I'm listening, my dear Parabolis."

He saw the latter bow ceremoniously, and heard these words: "Professor Spherides Altair, I have the honor of asking you for Mademoiselle Sinusia's hand in marriage."

II. Which features the bibliophone, the metro-shell, political economy and love

It might be helpful to complete what has been said already about life in Kentropol.

You have doubtless noticed that the cited names are derived from terms borrowed from science. That was an absolute rule. Family names and forenames were required, without exception, to be derived from mathematics, physics, chemistry, mechanics, astronomy, etc. The choice of termination was optional, in order to produce more variety, which was necessary to avoid homonyms. There were, in consequence, Sphera, Spheris, Spheros, Spherides, Spherois, Spheroni, Spherium, and composites with prefixes or suffixes: Anaspheris, Cataspheros, Paraspherul, Spherizonis, Spheroeides, Spherikara, and even Hypospherizonos, Apospherigonides, etc. You can see that this lexicology is derived primarily from the Greek. The letters of the Greek alphabet were also employed, as astronomers do in regard to constellations, and Arabic names borrowed from the stars.

Appellations of the same sort were used for thoroughfares. There were Jovian, Martian, Saturnian and Solar Avenues; Iron, Copper and Aluminum Streets; Galvanometer, Electromagnet and Dynamo Squares; Zodiac, Comet and Nebula Roads; Atom Lane and Hydrogen Junction.

Triagul Parabolis lived in Zirconium Street, in a modest but pretty house; in fact, he had what we would call artistic tastes—something held in very low esteem in Kentropol, for the arts and poetry had very nearly disappeared, or, at least, were considered subordinate to Science. Thus, a short while before, the Worldwide Academy had given an award to a poem "On the Glory of Triphasic Electrical Currents" and had commissioned a painter to produce a decorative mural representing "Electrical Induction Domesticating the Scattered Forces of the Universe."

Triagul was an enthusiastic reader. He had a library of old books, which he devoured passionately and tirelessly, thanks to an apparatus now universally in use, the bibliophone. It was a kind of phonograph that read aloud all the texts engraved for that purpose. This invention was all the more useful by reason of the visual fatigue caused by assiduous study, almost everyone being very myopic and needing to protect their weak eyes.

For the moment, as his mind was entirely occupied with the charming image of Sinusia, he was making the ancient instrument read ancient poems and stories of love to him, and trying to understand what that sentiment was.

Oh, he thought, *I'd give a great deal to know what was meant by that bizarre word, which sounds so harmoniously in my ears—and more than anything else, to experience for myself the sentiment which al hearts once sought so avidly! Love must be a delightful thing….*

Soon reclaimed by more practical considerations, however, he shut off the bibliophone and got ready to go out, to consult his friend Quadrilos Spirol on the subject of the requisite conditions for marriage and wedding ceremonies.

Quadrilos Spirol was very well qualified to give sound advice on this point, for he was a member of the Legislative Assembly.

In Kentropol, the political system was as follows: laws were made by the said assembly and the Council of Elders, constituting the Upper Chamber. There was also a Council of Women, which specialized in questions concerning women, children and public morality, which was similarly controlled by Elders. Executive power was exercised by three Consuls—a young man, an old man and a woman—and by a Minister of the Interior. Administration was insured by responsible directors with fixed positions. There was no army, war having disappeared a long time before. People no longer thought without horror of such barbaric epochs as the twentieth century, when thousands of men charged one another in order to kill, but there was a powerful Public Security Legion armed with frightful engines whose secret was closely guarded. This police force was designed to suppress any popular aberration, as well as to identify and punish criminals. Its work was easy, because there had not been the slightest disturbance for a long time; as for crimes, they were only committed by people whose minds had lapsed into insanity.

All citizens of both sexes could vote, on condition of having passed an examination and furnished convincing references. In the same way, no one could be a candidate for legislative functions without having demonstrated worthiness for that honor. Those elected did not receive any salary, but were lodged, fed and entertained at State expense. They were not appointed for a determined period, but retained their mandate indefinitely, only losing it by virtue of resignation or revocation. The electors met annually to confirm or withdraw the powers of their representatives.

The three Consuls were elected by the three respective assemblies for a year. The Minister was chosen by the Consuls. This system functioned to everyone's satisfaction. It is necessary to add that the Kentropolitans were incomparable citizens, who always conducted themselves according to reason, in view of the general interest, instead of heeding their passions and pursuing their particular interests.

The money in circulation was made of a radioactive metal, which it would have been very dangerous to hoard, by virtue of its harmful emissions. Thus, one could no longer be miserly without risking one's own life

and those of one's neighbors. Banknotes of the same metal were in common use, not guaranteed by precious metals but by the domains of the State. Strongly progressive taxes, sumptuary laws and a whole series of measures as sage as they were severe, prevented the amassing of large fortunes. Human equality, a chimerical goal, had not been realized, but at least there was no more poverty, thanks to the organization of welfare through work. As for heavy labor and domestic services, they were performed, as you know, by great apes: orangutans and chimpanzees of much-improved species. Not only were they perfectly trained, but had even been taught, as previously mentioned, a sort of elementary language.

The law determined that our friend Triagul Parabolis, in spite of his wealth, did not have the right to own a private aircraft. He had to content himself with the aerotaxis that incessantly ploughed through the streets, or use communal means of transport: an aerobus or metro-shell. As it was raining, it was the last-named that Triagul chose in order to visit his friend, the parliamentarian Quadrilos Spirol.

The metro-shell was a kind of subterranean railway, extremely rapid and comfortable, analogous to the pneumatic tubes that were once used for telegrams in the remote centuries of history, but the shell was, of course, electrical. It consisted of long carriages in the form of double-pointed artillery-shells, which slid through a tube made up of large solenoids—which is to say, coils—like those of electromagnets. A series of attractions and repulsions projected the shell through the tube—the walls of which it did not touch while in motion—like a missile fired by a blowpipe. It was very simple and very practical.

Spirol lived in Equilibrium Square, the center of active life, in one of the houses that the State put at the disposal of its elected representatives. Before going in, Triagul automatically went past a "Lion's Mouth," as an orifice of that approximate form was called, by means of which the *Official Newspaper* of Kentropolis announced the latest news in the square, using a powerful loudspeaker.

Parabolis was listening distractedly when he heard these words: "News has arrived from the coast that strange meteorological phenomena have recently appeared, reminiscent of the aurora borealis but of an entirely new kind. A commission will travel westwards to study the phenomena."

Bah! the young man said to himself. *As events go, that's hardly sensational!* And he went into Spirol's house.

As soon as he had been introduced by the orangutan Jim, to whom he made a small friendly gesture, he said: "My dear Quadrilos, I've come to ask your advice."

"At your disposal, my dear Triagul. What about?"

"I want to get married."

"Oh! That's serious."

"And I want to know the precise syllabus of the examination I have to pass in order to take a wife."

"That's easy." The parliamentarian took a brochure from his bookshelves, which he gave to his interlocutor.

"Thank you," said the latter. "I'll prepare for the test conscientiously."

"I wish you the best of luck."

"Much obliged. I fear, alas, that I might not be strong enough in mathematics."

"Take lessons and work hard."

"That's certainly my intention. I want to render myself worthy of my future father-in-law, Dr. Spherides Altair."

"Ah! It's Mademoiselle Sinusia who's your intended bride? My compliments."

"Yes, calculation has convinced me that we're made for one another. It's scientifically incontestable. Now, my dear Spirol, may I ask you a question that might seem strange?"

"Ask away, Triagul."

"Well, do you, who are so knowledgeable, know what was once meant by the word *love*?"

"My word!" exclaimed Quadrilos. "That certainly is a strange request. Only a dreamer of your sort could think about the follies of barbarian ages. You have me at a disadvantage, I admit. Such a question requires profound study. I know what marriage is, but love…what funny ideas you have, my dear friend! Aren't you a little…off color?"

"Not at all, but I'm curious by nature."

"Well, I'll try to get back to you in a few days. In the meantime, work for your examination—that's much more important, believe me!"

"I won't neglect it."

Left alone, parliamentarian Quadrilos Spirol lay back in his woven aluminum armchair, roaring with laughter. "Love? Poor Parabolis is quite mad!" Addressing himself to his simian manservant, he said: "Hey, Jim—do you know what love is?"

Grimacing horribly, the devoted servant replied with a grunt signifying *no*.