

Samuel T. Payne: *The Seeds of Cassiopeia*
(Part One)

Axel's initial enthusiasm for the ambitious journey had diminished as soon as the group had entered the depths of the crater of Sneffels Jokul. Descending ever deeper into the bowels of the Earth's crust, he felt nothing but a dull and hollow ache in his gut. Some animal instinct, a lingering remnant from the earliest period of ape evolution, impelled him to turn on his heel and make for the sunlight and the air and the sound of birds twittering on the surface.

Yet, Axel didn't backtrack, nor did he signify his fear to the group. He simply focused on the two men ahead of him; traipsing awkwardly over the slippery, wet rocks imbedded throughout shallow downward path, which led into obscurity.

The bearded and burly guide, Hans, headed the group with a merited confidence and subdued authority which seemed to diminish Axel's fretfulness. The great man's eyes, narrowed in concentration and hidden amongst his straggled hair, were focused on the path ahead. Beside him, Professor Lidenbrock hopped precariously between the potholes muttering to himself excitedly, which unquestionably sheared the fibers of Axel's nerves to a pulp. As he treaded further, feeling the walls narrow against his shoulders and the subterraneous pressures become intolerable to his ears, Axel foresaw his own destiny; face down, in a pool of freezing water; buried alive, deep in the bowels of the Earth...

I glanced up from the slightly yellowed pages of text. I'd started reading fiction again after a break from my violin playing. Since my travels with Doctor Omega, my interest in the work of Jules Verne and his contemporaries had grown; they astounded me for plausibility and unnerving scientific accuracy. As such, my stunningly priceless Stradivarius soon began to play second fiddle, if you will, to my growing collection of fantastic novels of epic adventure.

The escapist journeys into the conjectural realm of science fiction began to entrap me in a universe of adventure, which *I* knew; whatever was alluded to on the page could indeed happen in the future, or on some far and distant sphere. A fiction built upon science and conjecture became, for me, the most fascinating avenues to explore in prose. It was fiction, I might add, that was prophetically closer to the truth than Verne himself probably realized. Here was an author who understood more about the possibilities the future offered than scientists of the day could scarcely predict. I, for one, had seen with my own eyes the unlimited scope of technology, when engineered by the right minds. Verne had the capacity, the foresight, to look beyond the limits of the present and trace the lines of today's advances towards tomorrow's, to predict, what the Doctor coined as a "realistic representation of what will eventually be achieved, up there!" as he had proclaimed, laughing, pointing to the Moon and the stars.

It was while I was mentally digesting, as it were, my mental journey through the pages of *Voyage au Centre de la Terre*, that I found myself roused by the muffled sound of voices somewhere outside the study. I recognized one of them instantly as having the tone of my butler's.

"Marcel?" I called, closing the book and placing it on a small table next to my journal.

The distant, dulled exchange seemed to end abruptly and the door opened. Marcel shuffled into the study.

"Apologies for my intrusion Monsieur Borel," he said kindly. "I've been speaking to Nicolas, the gardener. He has just this moment passed me a message of the utmost urgency."

I stood from the chair in alarm; concerned immediately at the possibility that somebody had come to some terrible harm. The butler remained silent for a moment.

"Well, what is it Marcel?"

"I am not sure Monsieur. The message is from Doctor Omega. As you can see, it isn't sealed."

"Ah, what does it say?" I breathed, suddenly relieved it was only from the Doctor. Knowing him, his idea of "utmost urgency" was likely needing me to help him collect some laboratory hardware from the city. Marcel glanced down at the unfolded note, stretching it out to focus on the print.

"It simply says: 'Come my house without delay. Doctor Omega.' That's all, Monsieur. A gentleman dropped it with Nicolas as he passed by after delivering some goods at the Doctor's property."

I was already sliding my arms into my green riding jacket and making towards the lobby before Marcel could finish. He called after me with a perturbed expression.

"Shall I arrange transport for you, Monsieur?"

"No thank-you, Marcel. It will be quicker for me to walk than for Nicolas to cart the horses," I replied. "I probably won't be back in time for my meal tonight, so be sure to have it for yourself."

"It's only mutton cutlets, sir."

"Just as well I'm missing it then," I replied, laughing. "The last serving of that was so tough I was chewing it until the next morning. Farewell, Marcel."

With that I closed the door and made for the gates, closing them firmly behind me. Nicolas and Marcel would lock up the property that night as usual and I only had to use my keys to regain entry. I made the usual left turn down the main road, which seemed almost tunneled through foliage due to the high standing oaks which lined the green embankments. The last of the early evening Sun streamed through the leaves, projecting a shimmering pattern on the surface of the road, while squadrons of circulating mosquitoes formed into spinning, undulating balls that hung curiously in the center of the road.

The air felt close and humid, undoubtedly the passive precursor to a storm which would rage that night. Perhaps I should have returned home and dressed accordingly, but it was done; I had not the time to turn back. I increased my pace, taking in the serenity of the season, yet steadfastly conscious of the need to progress towards the wooded hollow at the far end of the village—the Doctor's notorious abode.

His collection of irregular buildings and workshops were the locus of several experimental explosions in the past. Needless to say, our Normandy village understood that our local "Doctor" was unlike any other. This learned gentleman practiced solely in the experimentation of science and technology, often with noisy and cataclysmic results. Several of the more vocal parishioners had complained that his activities not only disrupted the serenity of the countryside, but also endangered everybody's lives in the village. He'd declined to agree with these accusations, of course, often waving a disregarding hand and proclaiming it was all in the name of scientific research and technological advancement. As such, he'd fallen out of favor with the majority of the community by blankly declining, with closed eyes and stubborn hand expressions, to cease his experiments, just as he'd once furiously refused to deliver the ninth child of the expectant Madame Voisin after her simple-minded farrier-husband, in the throws of hysterical confusion, had promptly transported "the wrong Doctor" to her howling bedside.

I thought of the Doctor for a moment, of that mysterious man who had taken me on a series of adventures, often dangerous, but always thrilling. He was, without doubt, one of my closest friends, yet also one of the most aloof strangers you could ever imagine. We'd shared some extraordinary experiences, often risking our lives to save each other, yet I knew so little about his past or his people. He spoke French and English as fluently and lyrically as a poet, often using words I'd never heard, but neither were his native tongue as far as I could tell. He was a mentor, a genius and a gentleman (most of the time), who transcended class distinctions and racial prejudices in favor of an unwavering passion in his work and research. Politics and money rarely interested him, unless it was to fund his endeavors, though the arts were something which would divert his attention and, on that subject, we conversed a great deal. It struck me, however, that our discussions regarding symphonies or impressionism, for example, failed to preoccupy his thoughts anywhere as much as his endeavors in physics and chemistry. His work and research, above all else, were the most important factors in his life. These traits, I knew through the close friendship I shared with him. As for his past, his heritage and people, I confessed to know very little, save for the fact he had an attractive, yet somewhat elfin, granddaughter who was studying in Paris.

I followed the left fork in the road, maintaining my pace and recalling a conversation I'd overheard whilst I was strolling through the town on market day, less than two weeks since. Two old women had stood in front of a vegetable stall with their arms folded beneath their bosoms. I had caught a mention of Doctor Omega's name, spat with venom.

"What happened to Jean?" one woman had to the other, concerned.

"I have no idea," the lady had replied, licking her lips and glancing sideways through narrowed eyes. "He loitered around for a tip from the Doctor without any luck, so he entered the place to see where the old boy had gone only to find something hideous in the house. Of course, he ran like a rabbit and didn't stop to look back"

"Dear lord! What did he see?"

"As I say, nobody knows, Christine! The poor lad won't speak of it and refuses to deliver any more stock to that godforsaken house."

"It can't have been a good thing."

The woman had tightened her arms closer to her chest, seemingly rolling the fat farther up her neck and face. "He's a villain, doing unspeakable, unchristian things in that place. They say a woman from Combourg once *died* up there."

I moved on, refusing to listen to the prattling tongues of washerwomen for a moment longer. What they'd said, however, stuck with me until I reasoned that the terrified errand boy had possibly stumbled into the little refugee called Tiziraou, a short, pale and bald gentleman whom Doctor Omega had adopted from a war-torn Mars the previous year. Without his disguise, which he wore on excursions around the village, his unearthly appearance could easily shock the layman who wasn't well informed of his true origins—something we had prudently kept secret from the general public since his arrival.

I'd been walking for nearly 20 minutes, feeling the air cool as the Sun descended on the horizon, when I spotted a silhouette of a diminutive figure padding towards me. Shading my eyes from the amber sunlight, I could just about make out that the person was wearing a wide brimmed hat and long riding jacket. It had to be Tiziraou, as nobody else of that tiny form and guise would be walking from that area. I waved my arm high in the air.

"Tiziraou?" I called, squinting into the sinking sunset.

The figure tipped its hat and began to trot towards my path to meet me.

"I thought it was you," I said, pleased to meet my friend again and shaking his little paw-like hand. "I was just making my way to see you. Apparently the Doctor requires my assistance immediately. I have his letter here, in fact."

Tiziraou nodded a little breathlessly. I could hardly discern his features as he stood beneath me at the elbow, his hat masking most of his face.

"We must hurry," he urged in his clipped foreign accent, turning on his heels and tugging my jacket onwards. "We must hurry!"

The little gent eagerly marched me down the road towards the gloomy buildings afore the grassy drive, constantly pulling at my jacket like a child, reiterating the urgency of our arrival. I buttoned my jacket together as I felt the sudden chill of the evening descending around us. Fortunately, it wasn't long before we'd crossed the grassy drive and arrived at Doctor Omega's gates.

The Sun was now almost set, half submerged on the panoramic, rust-tinted horizon. Dew was clinging to clumps of unruly, uncut grass around the Doctor's site, making the insides of my shoes uncomfortably damp. We passed through the creaking iron gates and crossed the yard towards the little front door. As usual, the Doctor's yard was like an industrial jigsaw; littered with a mix of worn out engines, components and industrial parts he'd salvaged from old machines or traded at the market. I avoided the awkward black shapes as best I could, stepping between them clumsily and noticing how their ugliness had been transformed into an abstract form of beauty when dressed in the incandescent reds and oranges of the sinking Sun. Glancing skyward at the irregular rooftops of this place, I noticed a fine stream of smoke snaking into the cherry-hued sky from a thin chimney pipe. I could feel the tension in the air, the storm brewing. Transfixed, I wondered what the Doctor wanted me for so urgently. Could this bloody aura be some sort of omen?

"Red sky at night, shepherd's delight?" I mused under my breath.

Tiziraou turned his key into the squat door, forcing it inwards and urging me to enter. I rubbed my hands together and stooped through it, glad to be inside. I quickly made my way down the dimly lit corridor, which exhibited some very strange things. Several weird artefacts floated lazily within large pickle jars, mounted on shelves the length of the hallway, exhibiting creatures of the strangest breeding. Some had large, unblinking, dead eyes that peered through the oily liquid and the glass, as if shocked at my presence. These morbid specimens made my flesh creep and I averted my gaze as best I could until I found myself in the little lounge.

It was dark, with books and journals arranged in piles around the room. The flames from the fireplace and a small oil lamp gave the room its only illumination. There were a few old armchairs in front of windows which were drawn with heavy crimson drapes. A few landscape paintings were hung on the walls, perhaps to give a sense of space to the otherwise claustrophobic surroundings, but these couldn't be well distinguished in the dusky light.

I heard something draw breath, and turning, noticed a faint outline of a figure leaning against the fireplace. Faintly outlined in amber by the firelight, the person had reposed one arm upon the mantelpiece, holding something in a wrinkled hand. The other arm was moving slowly towards the little lamp. Delicate fingers adjusted it, brightening the room somewhat to reveal its identity. It was the gaunt, pallid and undernourished form of Doctor Omega. He placed a chipped cup on the top of a leaning tower of papers and crossed the room towards me, his undernourished hand extended.

"Borel," he said quietly, shaking my hand. "I'm glad you're here. Give your coat to Tiziraou and sit yourself down."

Tiziraou duly carried my jacket away, leaving the room as I sat down in the chair, my feet angled towards the grate of the fire. The Doctor similarly stretched himself out in the chair opposite and began to stoke his pipe.

"We've got a problem," he hissed through clenched teeth as he struck a match to light the tobacco. He paused a little while he puffed on his pipe, the deep lines in his face sharpened by the blazing flame. Perhaps he was contemplating what he was going to say, I don't know. There he sat, in his usual outfit composed of black frock coat and grey pinstripe trousers, which hung very visibly from his skinny, skeletal frame. A white shirt, tied with purple silk scarf tucked beneath a black waistcoat, completed his archaic style of dress. Atop his head flew an upright sweep of white hair like a flag, almost baby-like in appearance. I often wondered if this style was more accident than design. Either way, the unmatched style complemented his equally eccentric personality.

I leant forward. "Well?"

"You remember Professor Helvetius?" he said, eventually.

"From Cambridge?"

He nodded.

"How could I forget, Doctor?" I sighed, vivid memories of my earliest encounter with the Doctor racing in front of my eyes. Professor Helvetius had come to our rescue when we'd found ourselves stranded and endangered in a hostile place with little hope of return home. He'd also rescued Tiziraou from a life of enslavement on his home planet. I looked at the Doctor, sensing he was reading my thoughts. "A man I owe my life to," I added.

The Doctor's lowered his brow as he arched his back like a bow in the chair, stretching into his pocket to remove a folded piece of paper. He flattened it on the surface of one of the shorter stacks of journals and then slid the hefty arrangement between us. He looked at me briefly then tapped the paper with his finger.

"Read it. It arrived by telegram this afternoon," he said, before biting on his pipe. The pungent smell of tobacco filled the room, infesting the furnishings. I glanced down upon the printed sheet. It read as follows:

JUNE 19, 1907

THE LONDON HOSPITAL REGRETS TO INFORM DR. OMEGA THAT PROF. HELVETIUS, OF CAMBRIDGE, ENGLAND, WAS ADMITTED ON JUNE 18 AFTER SEVERE INJURIES DUE TO EXPOSURE TO AN EXPLOSION.

PRIOR TO COMA, PROF. HELVETIUS REQUESTED THAT DR. OMEGA, OF NORMANDY, FRANCE, BE MADE AWARE OF HIS EXPOSURE, QUOTE: "DURING STAY LIGHT (SIC?) SYNTHESIS".

ALL RESTORATIVE MEASURES HAVE BEEN EXHAUSTED. CURRENT PROGNOSIS IS POOR. MULTIFOCAL TUMOR STAGING THROUGHOUT THE UPPER BODY IS MASSIVE. IT IS ADVISED YOU DEPART IMMEDIATELY IF YOU WISH TO VISIT THE PATIENT, AS HE IS UNLIKELY TO SURVIVE THE NEXT FOUR DAYS. SPECIAL PRIVILEGES HAVE BEEN MADE SHOULD YOU WISH TO VISIT AT ANY TIME, DAY OR NIGHT.

REGARDS,

DR. A. WYNDHAM

LONDON, ENGLAND.