Off on a Comet! a Journey through Planetary Space

Jules Verne

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OFF ON A COMET or HECTOR SERVADAC

WORKS of JULES VERNE

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Professor of English, College of the City of New York; Author of “The Technique of the Novel,” etc.

[colophon omitted]

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INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME NINE

_Among so many effective and artistic tales, it is difficult to give a preference to one over all the rest. Yet, certainly, even amid Verne’s remarkable works, his “Off on a Comet” must be given high rank. Perhaps this story will be remembered when even “Round the World in Eighty Days” and “Michael Strogoff” have been obliterated by centuries of time. At least, of the many books since written upon the same theme as Verne’s, no one has yet succeeded in equaling or even approaching it.

In one way “Off on a Comet” shows a marked contrast to Verne’s earlier books. Not only does it invade a region more remote than even the “Trip to the Moon,” but the author here abandons his usual

scrupulously scientific attitude. In order that he may escort us through the depths of immeasurable space, show us what astronomy really knows of conditions there and upon the other planets, Verne asks us to accept a situation frankly impossible. The earth and a comet are brought twice into collision without mankind in general, or even our astronomers, becoming conscious of the fact. Moreover several people from widely scattered places are carried off by the comet and returned uninjured. Yet further, the comet snatches for the convenience of its travelers, both air and water. Little, useful tracts of earth are picked up and, as it were, turned over and clapped down right side up again upon the comet's surface. Even ships pass uninjured through this remarkable somersault. These events all belong frankly to the realm of fairyland.

If the situation were reproduced in actuality, if ever a comet should come into collision with the earth, we can conceive two scientifically possible results. If the comet were of such attenuation, such almost infinitesimal mass as some of these celestial wanderers seem to be, we can imagine our earth self-protective and possibly unharmed. If, on the other hand, the comet had even a hundredth part of the size and solidity and weight which Verne confers upon his monster so as to give his travelers a home--in that case the collision would be unspeakably disastrous--especially to the unlucky individuals who occupied the exact point of contact.

But once granted the initial and the closing extravagance, the departure and return of his characters, the alpha and omega of his tale, how closely the author clings to facts between! How closely he follows, and imparts to his readers, the scientific probabilities of the universe beyond our earth, the actual knowledge so hard won by our

astronomers! Other authors who, since Verne, have told of trips through the planetary and stellar universe have given free rein to fancy, to dreams of what might be found. Verne has endeavored to impart only what is known to exist.

In the same year with “Off on a Comet,” 1877, was published also the tale variously named and translated as “The Black Indies,” “The Underground City,” and “The Child of the Cavern.” This story, like “Round the World in Eighty Days” was first issued in “feuilleton” by the noted Paris newspaper “Le Temps.” Its success did not equal that of its predecessor in this style. Some critics indeed have pointed to this work as marking the beginning of a decline in the author’s power of awaking interest. Many of his best works were, however, still to follow. And, as regards imagination and the elements of mystery and awe, surely in the “Underground City” with its cavern world, its secret, undiscoverable, unrelenting foe, the “Harfang,” bird of evil omen, and the “fire maidens” of the ruined castle, surely with all these “imagination” is anything but lacking.

From the realistic side, the work is painstaking and exact as all the author’s works. The sketches of mines and miners, their courage and their dangers, their lives and their hopes, are carefully studied. So also is the emotional aspect of the deeps under ground, the blackness, the endless wandering passages, the silence, and the awe._

OFF ON A COMET OR HECTOR SERVADAC

BOOK I.

CHAPTER I. A CHALLENGE

“Nothing, sir, can induce me to surrender my claim.”

“I am sorry, count, but in such a matter your views cannot modify mine.”

“But allow me to point out that my seniority unquestionably gives me a prior right.”

“Mere seniority, I assert, in an affair of this kind, cannot possibly entitle you to any prior claim whatever.”

“Then, captain, no alternative is left but for me to compel you to yield at the sword’s point.”

“As you please, count; but neither sword nor pistol can force me to forego my pretensions. Here is my card.”

“And mine.”

This rapid altercation was thus brought to an end by the formal interchange of the names of the disputants. On one of the cards was inscribed:

Captain Hector Servadac, Staff Officer, Mostaganem.

On the other was the title:

Count Wassili Timascheff, On board the Schooner “Dobryna.”

It did not take long to arrange that seconds should be appointed, who would meet in Mostaganem at two o’clock that day; and the captain and the count were on the point of parting from each other, with a salute of punctilious courtesy, when Timascheff, as if struck by a sudden thought, said abruptly: “Perhaps it would be better, captain,

not to allow the real cause of this to transpire?”

“Far better,” replied Servadac; “it is undesirable in every way for any names to be mentioned.”

“In that case, however,” continued the count, “it will be necessary to assign an ostensible pretext of some kind. Shall we allege a musical dispute? a contention in which I feel bound to defend Wagner, while you are the zealous champion of Rossini?”

“I am quite content,” answered Servadac, with a smile; and with another low bow they parted.

The scene, as here depicted, took place upon the extremity of a little cape on the Algerian coast, between Mostaganem and Tenes, about two miles from the mouth of the Shelif. The headland rose more than sixty feet above the sea-level, and the azure waters of the Mediterranean, as they softly kissed the strand, were tinged with the reddish hue of the ferriferous rocks that formed its base. It was the 31st of December. The noontide sun, which usually illuminated the various projections of the coast with a dazzling brightness, was hidden by a dense mass of cloud, and the fog, which for some unaccountable cause, had hung for the last two months over nearly every region in the world, causing serious interruption to traffic between continent and continent, spread its dreary veil across land and sea.

After taking leave of the staff-officer, Count Wassili Timascheff wended his way down to a small creek, and took his seat in the stern of a light four-oar that had been awaiting his return; this was immediately pushed off from shore, and was soon alongside a pleasure-yacht, that was lying to, not many cable lengths away.

At a sign from Servadac, an orderly, who had been standing at a respectful distance, led forward a magnificent Arabian horse; the captain vaulted into the saddle, and followed by his attendant, well mounted as himself, started off towards Mostaganem. It was half-past twelve when the two riders crossed the bridge that had been recently erected over the Shelif, and a quarter of an hour later their steeds, flecked with foam, dashed through the Mascara Gate, which was one of five entrances opened in the embattled wall that encircled the town.

At that date, Mostaganem contained about fifteen thousand inhabitants, three thousand of whom were French. Besides being one of the principal district towns of the province of Oran, it was also a military station. Mostaganem rejoiced in a well-sheltered harbor, which enabled her to utilize all the rich products of the Mina and the Lower Shelif. It was the existence of so good a harbor amidst the exposed cliffs of this coast that had induced the owner of the _Dobryna_ to winter in these parts, and for two months the Russian standard had been seen floating from her yard, whilst on her mast-head was hoisted the pennant of the French Yacht Club, with the distinctive letters M. C. W. T., the initials of Count Timascheff.

Having entered the town, Captain Servadac made his way towards Matmore, the military quarter, and was not long in finding two friends on whom he might rely--a major of the 2nd Fusileers, and a captain of the 8th Artillery. The two officers listened gravely enough to Servadac’s request that they would act as his seconds in an affair of honor, but could not resist a smile on hearing that the dispute between him and the count had originated in a musical discussion. Surely, they suggested, the matter might be easily arranged; a few slight

concessions on either side, and all might be amicably adjusted. But no representations on their part were of any avail. Hector Servadac was inflexible.

“No concession is possible,” he replied, resolutely. “Rossini has been deeply injured, and I cannot suffer the injury to be unavenged. Wagner is a fool. I shall keep my word. I am quite firm.”

“Be it so, then,” replied one of the officers; “and after all, you know, a sword-cut need not be a very serious affair.”

“Certainly not,” rejoined Servadac; “and especially in my case, when I have not the slightest intention of being wounded at all.”

Incredulous as they naturally were as to the assigned cause of the quarrel, Servadac’s friends had no alternative but to accept his explanation, and without farther parley they started for the staff office, where, at two o’clock precisely, they were to meet the seconds of Count Timascheff. Two hours later they had returned. All the preliminaries had been arranged; the count, who like many Russians abroad was an aide-de-camp of the Czar, had of course proposed swords as the most appropriate weapons, and the duel was to take place on the following morning, the first of January, at nine o’clock, upon the cliff at a spot about a mile and a half from the mouth of the Shelif. With the assurance that they would not fail to keep their appointment with military punctuality, the two officers cordially wrung their friend’s hand and retired to the Zulma Cafe for a game at piquet. Captain Servadac at once retraced his steps and left the town.

For the last fortnight Servadac had not been occupying his proper lodgings in the military quarters; having been appointed to make a local levy, he had been living in a gourbi, or native hut, on the

Mostaganem coast, between four and five miles from the Shelif. His orderly was his sole companion, and by any other man than the captain the enforced exile would have been esteemed little short of a severe penance.

On his way to the gourbi, his mental occupation was a very laborious effort to put together what he was pleased to call a rondo, upon a model of versification all but obsolete. This rondo, it is unnecessary to conceal, was to be an ode addressed to a young widow by whom he had been captivated, and whom he was anxious to marry, and the tenor of his muse was intended to prove that when once a man has found an object in all respects worthy of his affections, he should love her "in all simplicity." Whether the aphorism were universally true was not very material to the gallant captain, whose sole ambition at present was to construct a roundelay of which this should be the prevailing sentiment. He indulged the fancy that he might succeed in producing a composition which would have a fine effect here in Algeria, where poetry in that form was all but unknown.

"I know well enough," he said repeatedly to himself, "what I want to say. I want to tell her that I love her sincerely, and wish to marry her; but, confound it! the words won't rhyme. Plague on it! Does nothing rhyme with 'simplicity'? Ah! I have it now:

'Lovers should, whoe'er they be, Love in all simplicity.'

But what next? how am I to go on? I say, Ben Zoof," he called aloud to his orderly, who was trotting silently close in his rear, "did you ever compose any poetry?"

"No, captain," answered the man promptly: "I have never made any verses, but I have seen them made fast enough at a booth during the

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