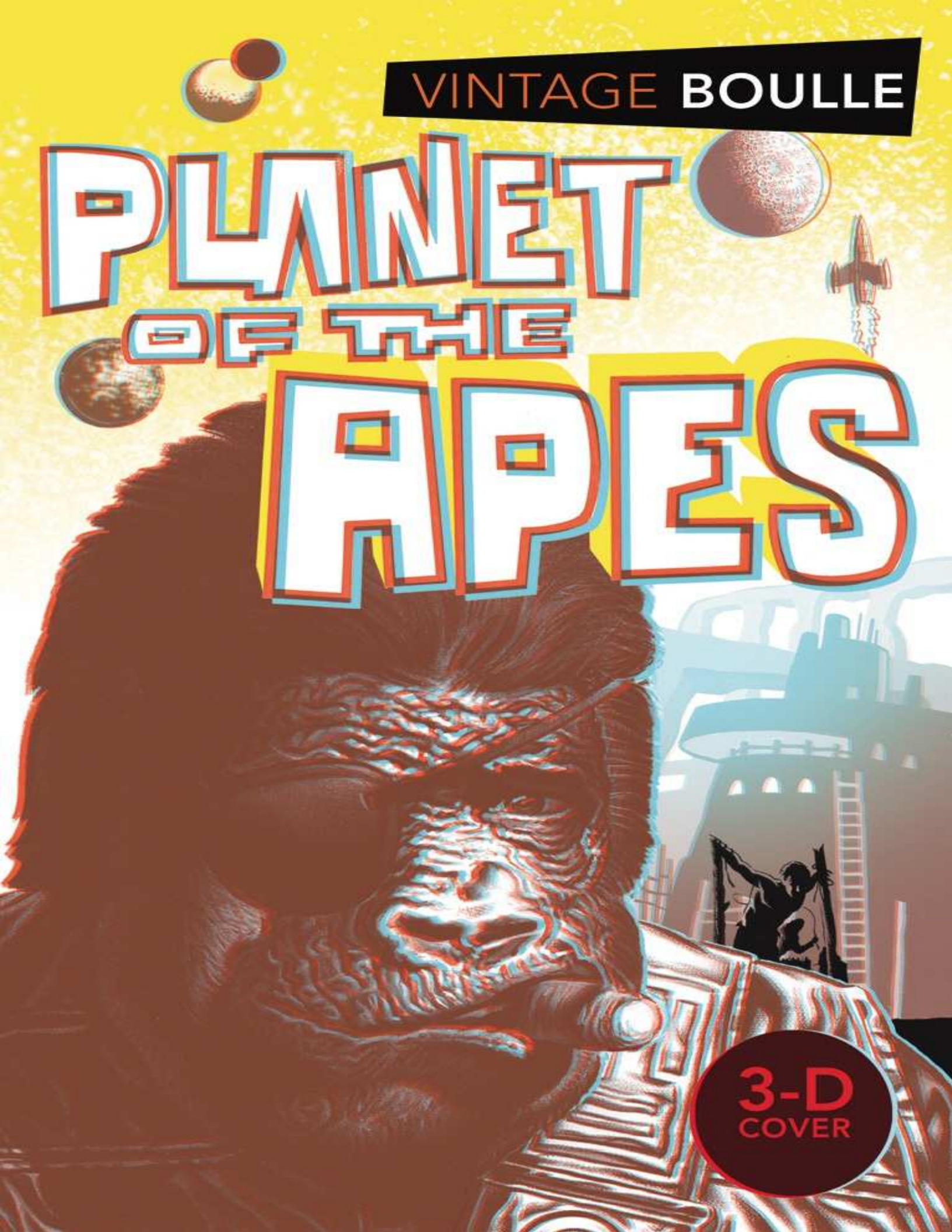
VINTAGE BOULLE

PLANET OF THE APES



3-D COVER

VINTAGE CLASSICS

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About the Book

In a spaceship that can travel at the speed of light, Ulysse, a journalist, sets off from Earth for the nearest solar system. He finds there a planet which resembles his own, but on Soror humans behave like animals, and are hunted by a civilised race of primates. Captured and sent to a research facility, Ulysse must convince the apes of their mutual origins. But such revelations have always been greeted by prejudice and fear…

About the Author

Pierre Boulle was born in 1912 at Avignon. Boulle spent the Second World War fighting in Yunnan, Calcutta and Indo-China, where he was captured by the Japanese. After the war he lived in Malaya, the Cameroons and, finally, Paris, where he settled until his death in 1994.

ALSO BY PIERRE BOULLE

The Bridge on the River Kwai

PIERRE BOULLE

Planet of the Apes

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY Xan Fielding

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Part One

1

Jinn and Phyllis were spending a wonderful holiday in space, as far away as possible from the inhabited stars.

In those days interplanetary voyages were an everyday occurrence, and interstellar travel not uncommon. Rockets took tourists to the wondrous sites of Sirius, or financiers to the famous stock exchanges of Arcturus and Aldebaran. But Jinn and Phyllis, a wealthy leisured couple, were distinguished in their cosmos for their originality and a few grains of poetry. They wandered over the universe for their pleasure – by sail.

Their ship was a sort of sphere with an envelope – the sail – which was miraculously fine and light and moved through space propelled by the pressure of light radiation. Such a machine left to its own devices in the vicinity of a star (though far enough away for the field of gravity not to be too powerful) will always move in a straight line in the opposite direction to the latter; but since Jinn and Phyllis's stellar system contained three suns which were relatively close to one another, their vessel received rays of light along three different axes. Jinn had therefore conceived an extremely ingenious method of steering. His sail was lined inside with a series of black blinds which he could roll up or unroll at will, thus changing the effect of the light-pressure by modifying the reflecting power of certain sections. Furthermore, this elastic envelope could be stretched or contracted as the navigator pleased. Thus, when Jinn wanted to increase his speed, he gave it the biggest diameter possible. It would then take the blasts of radiation on an enormous surface and the vessel would hurtle through space at a furious velocity, which made Phyllis quite dizzy. He would likewise be overcome by vertigo and they would then cling passionately to each other, their gaze fixed on the mysterious and distant depths to which their flight propelled them.

When, on the other hand, they wanted to slow down, Jinn pressed a button. The sail would shrink until it became a sphere just big enough to contain them both, packed tightly together. The effect of the light became negligible and this minute bubble, reduced to nothing more than its own inertia, seemed motionless, as though suspended in the void by an invisible thread. The young couple would spend rapturous idle hours in this reduced universe, built on their own scale and for them alone, which Jinn compared to a becalmed sailing-ship and Phyllis to the air bubble of the sea-spider.

Jinn knew a number of other tricks, considered as the height of art by sailing cosmonauts: for example, making use of the shadows of the planets and certain satellites in order to change course. He imparted this skill to Phyllis, who was now almost as accomplished as himself and often more daring. When she held the tiller, she would sometimes fire a broadside which swept them right to the borders of the stellar system, heedless of the resulting magnetic storm which started to upset the light-rays and to shake their skiff like a cockleshell. On two or three occasions, woken up with a start by the tempest, Jinn had had quite a struggle to snatch the tiller from her and, in order to run for shelter as quickly as possible, start the auxiliary rocket which they made it a point of honour never to use except in case of danger.

One day Jinn and Phyllis were lying side by side in the middle of their spacecraft without a care in the world, making the most of their holiday by basking in the rays of their three suns. Eyes closed, Jinn was thinking only of his love for Phyllis. Phyllis lay stretched out on her side, gazing at the immensity of the universe and letting herself be hypnotized, as she often did, by the cosmic sensation of the void.

All of a sudden she came out of her trance, wrinkled her brow and sat up. An unusual flash of light had streaked across this void. She waited a few seconds and saw a second flash, like a ray being reflected off a shiny object. The cosmic sense which she had acquired in the course of these cruises could not deceive her. Moreover Jinn, when it was pointed out to him, agreed with her and it was inconceivable that Jinn should make a mistake in this matter: a body sparkling in the light was floating through space, at a distance which they could not yet assess. Jinn picked up a pair of binoculars and focused them on the mysterious object, while Phyllis leant on his shoulder.

‘It’s not a very big object,’ he said. ‘It seems to be made of glass … No, do let me look. It’s drawing closer. It’s going faster than we are. It looks like …’

A puzzled expression came into his eyes. He lowered the binoculars, which she at once snatched up.

‘It’s a bottle, darling.’

‘A bottle!’

She looked at it in her turn.

‘Yes, it’s a bottle. I can see it quite clearly. It’s made of light-coloured glass. It’s corked, I can see the seal. There’s something white inside which looks like a piece of paper – a message, obviously. Jinn, we’ve got to get hold of it!’

Jinn was of the same opinion and had already embarked on some skilful manoeuvres to place the sphere on the trajectory of the unusual body. He soon succeeded and then reduced his own speed to enable it to catch up with him. Meanwhile Phyllis donned her diving-suit and made her way out of the sail by the double trap-door. There, holding on to a rope with one hand and brandishing a long-handled scoop in the other, she stood in readiness to retrieve the bottle.

It was not the first time they had come across strange bodies and the scoop had already been in use. Sailing at low speed, sometimes completely motionless, they had enjoyed surprises and made discoveries that were precluded to travellers by rocket. In her net Phyllis had already gathered up remnants of pulverized planets, fragments of meteorites that had come from the depths of the universe, and pieces of satellites launched at the outset of the conquest of space. She was very proud of her collection; but this was the first time they had come across a bottle, and a bottle containing a message – of that she was certain. She trembled from head to foot with impatience, gesticulating like a spider on the end of its thread as she shouted down the telephone to her companion:

‘Slower, Jinn … No, a bit faster than that, it’s going to pass us … Starboard … Now hard to port … Hold it … I’ve got it!’

She gave a triumphant cry and came back inside with her trophy.

It was a largish bottle and its neck had been carefully sealed. A roll of paper could be seen inside.

‘Jinn, break it open, hurry up!’ Phyllis begged, pawing the ground.

Less impatient, Jinn methodically chipped off the sealing-wax. But when the bottle was thus opened, he saw that the paper was stuck fast and could not be shaken out. He therefore yielded to his mate’s entreaties and smashed the glass with a hammer. The paper unrolled itself of its own accord. It consisted

of a large number of very thin sheets, covered in tiny handwriting. The message was written in the language of the Earth, which Jinn knew perfectly, having been partly educated on that planet.

An uncomfortable feeling, however, restrained him from starting to read a document which had fallen into their hands in such an incongruous manner; but Phyllis's state of excitement decided him. She was not so well acquainted with the language of the Earth and needed his help.

'Jinn, I beg you!'

He reduced the volume of the sphere so that it floated idly in space, made sure that there was no obstacle in front of them, then lay down beside his companion and began to read the manuscript.

2

I am confiding this manuscript to space, not with the intention of saving myself, but to help, perhaps, in averting the appalling scourge which is menacing the human race. Lord have pity on us! …

‘*The* human *race?’ Phyllis exclaimed, stressing the second word in her astonishment*.

‘*That’s what it says here,’ Jinn assured her. ‘Don’t start off by interrupting me.’ And he went on with his reading*.

As for me, Ulysse Mérou, I have set off again with my family in the space ship. We can keep-going for several years. We grow vegetables and fruit on board and have a poultry run. We lack nothing. One day perhaps we shall come across a friendly planet. This is a hope that I hardly dare express. But here, faithfully reported, is the account of my adventure.

It was in the year 2500 that I embarked with two companions in the cosmic ship, with the intention of reaching the region of space where the supergigantic star Betelgeuse reigns supreme.

It was an ambitious project, the vastest that had ever been conceived on Earth. Betelgeuse – or Alpha Orionis, as our astronomers called it – is about three hundred light-years distant from our planet. It is remarkable for a number of things. Firstly its size: its diameter is three or four hundred times greater than that of our sun; that’s to say if its centre was placed where the sun’s centre lies, this monster would extend to within the orbit of Mars. Secondly, its brilliancy: it is a star of first magnitude, the brightest in the constellation of Orion, visible on Earth to the naked eye in spite of its distance. Thirdly, the nature of its rays: it emits red and orange lights of a most magnificent effect. Finally, it is a heavenly body with a variable glow; its luminosity varies with the seasons, this being caused by the alterations in

its diameter. Betelgeuse is a palpitating star.

Why, after the exploration of the solar system, all the planets of which are inhabited, why was such a distant star chosen as the target for the first interstellar flight? It was the learned Professor Antelle who made this decision. The principal organizer of the enterprise, to which he devoted the whole of his enormous fortune, the leader of our expedition, he had himself conceived the space ship and directed its construction. He told me the reason for his choice during the voyage.

‘My dear Ulysse,’ he said, ‘it is not much harder and it is scarcely any longer for us to reach Betelgeuse than a much closer star: Proxima Centauri, for example.’

At this I saw fit to protest and draw his attention to some recently ascertained astronomical data:

‘Scarcely any longer! But Proxima Centauri is only four light-years away, whereas Betelgeuse …’

‘Is three hundred, I’m well aware of that. But we shall take scarcely more than two years to reach it, while we should have needed almost as much time to arrive in the region of Proxima Centauri. You don’t believe it because you are accustomed to those flea hops represented by the voyages in our planets, for which a powerful acceleration is permissible at the start because it lasts no more than a few minutes, the cruising speed to be reached being ridiculously low and not to be compared with ours … It is time I gave you a few details as to how our ship works.

‘Thanks to its perfected rockets, which I had the honour of designing, this craft can move at the highest speed imaginable in the universe for a material body, that’s to say the speed of light minus *epsilon*.’

‘Minus *epsilon?*’

‘I mean it can approach it to within an infinitesimal degree: to within a thousand millionth, if you care to put it that way.’

‘Good,’ I said. ‘I can understand that.’

‘What you must also realize is that, while we are moving at this speed, our time diverges perceptibly from time on Earth, the divergence being greater the faster we move. At this very moment, since we started this conversation, we have lived several minutes which correspond to a passage of several months on our planet. At top speed time will almost cease to elapse for us, but of course we shall not be aware of the slightest change. A few seconds for you and me, a few heart-beats, will coincide with a passage of

several years on Earth.'

'I can understand that too. In fact that is the reason why we can hope to reach our destination before being dead. But in that case why a voyage of two years? Why not only a few days or a few hours?'

'I was just coming to that. Quite simply because, to reach the speed at which time almost ceases to elapse, with an acceleration acceptable to our organisms, we need about a year. A further year will be necessary to reduce our speed. Now do you understand our flight plan? Twelve months of acceleration; twelve months of reducing speed; between the two, only a few hours, during which we shall cover the main part of the journey. And at the same time you will understand why it is scarcely any longer to travel to Betelgeuse than to Proxima Centauri. In the latter case we should have to go through the same indispensable year of acceleration, the same year of deceleration, and perhaps a few minutes instead of a few hours between the two. The over-all difference is insignificant. As I'm getting on in years and will probably never be able to make another crossing, I preferred to aim at a distant point straight away, in the hope of finding a world very different from our own.'

This sort of conversation occupied our leisure hours on board and at the same time made me appreciate Professor Antelle's prodigious skill all the more. There was no field he had not explored and I was pleased to have a leader like him on such a hazardous enterprise. As he had foreseen, the voyage lasted about two years of our time, during which three and a half centuries must have elapsed on Earth. That was the only snag about aiming so far into the distance: if we came back one day we should find our planet older by seven or eight hundred years. But we did not care. I even felt that the prospect of escaping from his contemporaries was an added attraction to the professor. He often admitted he was tired of his fellow-men …

'*Men!' Phyllis again exclaimed.*

'*Yes, men,' Jinn asserted. 'That's what it says*.'

There was no serious incident on the flight. We had started from the Moon. Earth and its planets quickly disappeared. We had seen the sun shrink till it was nothing but an orange in the sky, then a plum, and finally a point of light without dimensions, a simple star which only the Professor's skill could distinguish from the millions of other stars in the galaxy.

We thus lived without sun, but were none the worse for this, the craft being equipped with equivalent sources of light. Nor were we bored. The

professor's conversation was fascinating; I learnt more during those two years than I had learnt in all my previous existence. I also learnt all that one needed to know in order to guide the space-craft. It was fairly easy: one merely gave instructions to some electronic devices, which made all the calculations and directly initiated the manoeuvres.

Our garden provided an agreeable distraction. It occupied an important place on board. Professor Antelle, who was interested, among other subjects, in botany and agriculture, had planned to take advantage of the voyage to check certain theories of his on the growth of plants in space. A cubic compartment with sides of about thirty feet served as a plot. Thanks to some trays, the whole of its volume was put to use. The earth was regenerated by means of chemical fertilizers and, scarcely more than two months after our departure, we had the pleasure of seeing it produce all sorts of vegetables which provided us with an abundance of wholesome food. Food for the eye, too, had not been forgotten: one section was reserved for flowers, which the professor tended lovingly. The eccentric fellow had also brought some birds, butterflies and even a monkey, a little chimpanzee whom we had christened Hector and who amused us with his tricks.

It is certain that the learned Antelle, without being a misanthrope, was not interested at all in human beings. He would often declare that he did not expect much from them any more and this probably explains …

'Misanthrope?' *Phyllis again broke in, dumbfounded*. 'Human beings?'

'*If you keep interrupting me every other second,' said Jinn, 'we shall never get to the end. Do as I do: try to understand*.'

Phyllis promised to keep quiet till the end of the reading, and she kept her promise.

This probably explains why he had collected in the craft – which was big enough to accommodate several families – countless vegetable species and some animals, while limiting the number of the passengers to three: himself; his disciple Arthur Levain, a young physician with a great future; and myself, Ulysse Mérou, a little-known journalist who had met the professor as a result of an interview. He had suggested taking me with him after learning that I had no family and played chess reasonably well. This was an outstanding opportunity for a young journalist. Even if my story was not to be published for another eight hundred years, perhaps on that account it would have an exceptional value. I had accepted with enthusiasm.

The voyage thus occurred without a setback. The only physical

inconvenience was a sensation of heaviness during the year of acceleration and that of reducing speed. We had to get used to feeling our bodies weigh one and a half times their weight on Earth, a somewhat tiring phenomenon to begin with, but to which we soon paid no attention. Between those two periods there was a complete absence of gravity, with all the oddities accruing from this phenomenon; but that lasted only a few hours and we were none the worse for it.

And one day, after this long crossing, we had the dazzling experience of seeing the star Betelgeuse appear in the sky in a new guise.

3

The feeling of awe produced by such a sight cannot be described: a star, which only yesterday was a brilliant speck among the multitude of anonymous specks in the firmament, showed up more and more clearly against the black background, assumed a dimension in space, appearing first of all as a sparkling nut, then swelled in size, at the same time as its colour grew more definite, so as to resemble an orange, and finally fell into place in the cosmos with the same apparent diameter as our own familiar day-time star. A new sun was born for us, a reddish sun, like ours at its setting, of which we could already feel the attraction and the warmth.

Our speed was then very much reduced. We drew still closer to Betelgeuse, until its apparent diameter far exceeded that of all the heavenly bodies hitherto seen, which made a fabulous impression on us. Antelle gave some instructions to the robots and we started gravitating round the supergiant. Then the scientist got out his astronomical instruments and embarked on his observations.

It was not long before he discovered the existence of four planets, whose dimensions he rapidly determined together with their distance from the central star. One of these, two away from Betelgeuse, was moving on a trajectory parallel to ours. It was about the same size as Earth; it possessed an atmosphere containing oxygen and nitrogen; it revolved round Betelgeuse at a distance equivalent to thirty times the space between the Sun and Earth, receiving a radiation comparable to that received by our planet thanks to the size of the supergiant combined with its relatively low temperature.

We decided to make it our first objective. On fresh instructions being given to the robots, our craft was quickly put into orbit round it. Then, with engines switched off, we observed this new world at our leisure. The

telescope revealed the oceans and continents on it.

The craft was not equipped for a landing, but this eventuality had been provided for. We had at our disposal three much smaller rocket machines, which we called launches. It was in one of these that we embarked, taking with us some measuring instruments and Hector, the chimpanzee, who was equipped as we were with a diving suit and had been trained in its use. As for our ship, we simply let it revolve round the planet. It was safer there than a liner lying at anchor in a harbour and we knew it would not drift an inch from its orbit.

Landing on a planet of this kind was an easy operation with our launch. As soon as we had penetrated the thick layers of the atmosphere Professor Antelle took some samples of the outside air and analysed them. He found they had the same composition as the air on earth at a similar altitude. I hardly had time to ponder on this miraculous coincidence, for the ground was approaching rapidly; we were no more than fifty miles or so above it. Since the robots carried out every manoeuvre, I had nothing to do but press my face to the porthole and watch this unknown world rising towards me, my brain reeling with the excitement of discovery.

The planet bore a strange resemblance to Earth. This impression became clearer at every second. I could now discern the outline of the continents with my naked eye. The atmosphere was bright, slightly tinged with a pale green colour veering from time to time to orange, rather like our sky in Provence at sunset. The ocean was light blue, likewise with green tinges. The form of the coastline was very different from anything I had seen at home, though my feverish eye, conditioned by so many analogies, insisted wildly on discerning similarities even there. But there the resemblance ended. Nothing in the geography recalled either our ancient or new continent.

Nothing? Come now! On the contrary, the essential factor! The planet was inhabited. We flew over a town, a fairly big town, from which radiated roads bordered with trees and with vehicles moving along them. I had time to make out the general architecture: broad streets and white houses with long straight lines.

But we were to land a long way further off. Our flight swept us first over cultivated fields, then a thick russet-coloured forest which called to mind our equatorial jungle. We were now at a very low height. We caught sight of a fairly big clearing occupying the top of a plateau, the ground all round it being rather broken. Our leader decided to attempt a landing there and gave

his last orders to the robots. A system of retro-rockets came into action. We hovered motionless for a moment or two above the clearing, like a gull stalking a fish.

Then, two years after leaving our Earth, we came down gently and landed without a jolt in the middle of the plateau, on green grass which called to mind that of our meadows in Normandy.