

## Micromégas

'Micromégas' (1752) is a short story by the French philosopher and satirist Voltaire. It is a significant development in the history of literature because, along with Voltaire's story 'Plato's Dream', it is a seminal work in the genre of science fiction.

On a planet revolving around the star Sirius there lived a young man of great intelligence, whose acquaintance I had the honor of making during his recent visit to our little anthill. He was called Micromégas, an appropriate name for great people. He had a stature of eight leagues, or 24,000 geometrical paces of five feet each, or 120,000 statute feet.

We earthmen have an average stature hardly more than five feet--one pace--so Mr. Micromégas' world must in turn have a circumference 24,000 times greater than our little Earth. Nothing in nature is simpler, more a matter of course. The dominions of certain potentates in Germany or Italy, around which you can walk in half an hour, compared with the empires of Turkey, Russia, or China can give but a faint idea of the vast disparity Nature has set between different orders of being throughout the universe.

Given his Excellency's height, any sculptor or painter would agree his waist should, proportionally, be about 50,000 feet around. His nose being one third the length of his handsome face, and his handsome face being one seventh the height of his handsome body, it follows that the Sirian's nose is some 5,714 statute feet long.

His mind rivals the most cultivated among us; he knows many things, some of which are his own inventions. He had not yet reached his 250th year, and was studying, as was customary at his age, at the most famous school on the planet, when he solved 50 propositions of Euclid--18 more than Blaise Pascal, who, after having, according to his sister's account, solved 32 for his own amusement, became a pretty fair geometer, and a very poor metaphysician. When Micromégas was about 450 years old, and already passing out of childhood, he dissected, with the aid of powerful microscopes, many little insects less than 100 feet in diameter; he wrote an interesting book about them, which got him into trouble.

The mufti of that country, much given to hair-splitting and very ignorant, found in his work statements they deemed suspicious, offensive, rash, and heretical, and they prosecuted him with bitter animosity. The question in dispute was whether the substantial form of which the fleas of Sirius consisted was of the same nature as that of the snails. Micromégas defended himself spiritedly, and had all the ladies on his side; the trial lasted 220 years. At last the mufti had the book condemned by judges who had never read it, and the author was forbidden to appear at court for 800 years.

He was only moderately afflicted at being banished from a court full of trickery and meanness. He composed a very funny song ridiculing the mufti, which in turn failed to give the latter much annoyance; and he himself set forth on his travels from planet to planet, with a view to improving his mind and soul, as the saying goes.

Those who travel only in coaches will doubtless be astonished at the sort of conveyance adopted up there; for we, on our little mound of mud, can imagine nothing beyond our own experience. Our traveler had such a marvelous acquaintance with the laws of gravitation, and all the forces of attraction and repulsion, and made such good

use of his knowledge, that, sometimes by means of a sunbeam, and sometimes with the help of a comet, he went from one world to another as a bird hops from bough to bough. He traversed the Milky Way in a short time; and I am obliged to confess that he never saw, beyond the stars with which it is thickly sown, that beautiful celestial empyrean which the illustrious parson, Derham, boasts of having discovered at the end of his telescope. Not that I would for a moment suggest Mr. Derham mistook what he saw; Heaven forbid! But Micromégas was on the spot, he is an accurate observer, and I have no wish to contradict anybody.

Micromégas, after plenty of turns and twists, arrived at the planet Saturn. Accustomed though he was to the sight of novelties, when he saw the insignificant size of the globe and its inhabitants, he could not at first refrain from that smile of superiority which sometimes escapes even the wisest; for in truth Saturn is scarcely 900 times greater than Earth, and the citizens of that country are mere dwarfs, only a thousand fathoms high, or thereabout. He laughed a little at first at these people, in much the same way an Italian musician, when he comes to France, derides Lulli's performances. But, being a sensible fellow, the Sirian was soon convinced that a thinking being need not be altogether ridiculous because he is only 6,000 feet high. He was soon on familiar terms with the Saturnians after their astonishment had somewhat subsided. He formed a close friendship with the secretary of the Academy of Saturn, a man of great intelligence, who had not indeed invented anything himself, but excelled at describing the inventions of others, and who could turn a little verse neatly enough or perform an elaborate calculation.

One day, after the Sirian had laid down and the secretary had approached his face to facilitate conversation, Micromégas said, "I must confess that nature is full of variety."

"Yes," said the Saturnian; "nature is like a flower-bed, the blossoms of which--"

"Oh," said the other, "have done with your flower-bed!"

"She is," resumed the secretary, "like an assembly of blondes and brunettes, whose attire--"

"No, no," said the traveler. "Nature is like nature. Why do you search for comparisons?"

"To please you," answered the secretary.

"I do not want to be pleased," rejoined the traveler; "I want to be instructed; begin by telling me how many senses the men in your world possess."

"We have 72," said the academician; "and we are always complaining that they are so few. Our imagination soars beyond our needs; we find that with our 72 senses, our ring, and our five moons, that our range is too restricted, and, in spite of all our curiosity and the tolerably large number of passions which spring out of our 72 senses, we often feel bored."

"I can well believe it," said Micromégas; "for on our globe, though we have nearly a thousand senses, there lingers even in us a certain vague desire, an unaccountable restlessness, which warns us that we are of little account in the universe, and that there are beings much more perfect than ourselves. I have traveled; I have seen mortals far below us, and others greatly superior; but I have seen none who have not more desires

than real wants, and more wants than they can satisfy. I shall someday, perhaps, reach the country where there is lack of nothing, but hitherto no one has been able to give me any positive information about it." The Saturnian and the Sirian thereupon exhausted themselves with ingenious yet futile conjectures on the subject, but were eventually obliged to return to facts.

"How long do you people live?" asked the Sirian.

"Ah! a very short time," replied the little man of Saturn.

"So too with us," said the Sirian. "We are always complaining of the shortness of life. This must be a universal law of nature."

"Alas!" quoth the Saturnian, "none of us live more than 500 annual revolutions of the Sun." (That amounts to about 15,000 years, according to our manner of counting.) "You see how it is our fate to die almost as soon as we are born; our existence is a point, our duration an instant, our globe an atom. Scarcely have we begun to acquire a little information when death arrives before we can put it to use. I myself do not venture to lay any schemes; I feel like a drop of water in a boundless ocean. I am ashamed, especially before you, of the absurd figure I make in this universe."

Micromégas answered: "Were you not a philosopher, I should fear to distress you by telling you our lives are 700 times as long as yours; but you know too well that when the time comes to give back one's body to the elements, and reanimate nature under another form--the process called death--when that moment of metamorphosis comes, it is precisely the same whether we have lived an eternity or only a day. I have been in countries where life is a thousand times longer than with us, and yet have heard murmurs of its brevity even there. But people of good sense exist everywhere, who know how to make the most of what they have, and to thank the Author of nature. He has spread over this universe abundant variety, together with a kind of admirable uniformity. For example, all thinking beings are different, yet resemble each other in the common endowment of thought and will. Matter is infinitely extended, but has different properties in different worlds. How many of these various properties do you reckon in the matter with which you are acquainted?"

"If you speak," replied the Saturnian, "of those properities without which we believe this globe could not subsist as it is, we count 300 of them, such as extension, impenetrability, mobility, gravitation, divisibility, etc."

"Apparently," rejoined the traveler, "this small number is sufficient for the Creator's purpose in constructing this little habitation. I admire His wisdom throughout; I see differences everywhere, but everywhere also a due proportion. Your globe is small; you who inhabit it are small likewise; you have few senses; the matter comprising your world has few properties; all this is the work of Providence. What color is your sun when carefully examined?"

"White deeply tinged with yellow," said the Saturnian; "and when we split up one of its rays, it consists of seven colors."

"Our sun has a reddish light," said the Sirian, "and we have 39 primary colors. There is not a single sun, among all those I have approached, which resembles any other, just as among yourselves there is not a single face which is not different from all the rest."

After several other questions of this kind, he inquired how many modes of existence essentially different were enumerated on Saturn. He was told that not more than 30 were distinguished, as God, space, matter, beings occupying space which feel and think, thinking beings which do not occupy space, those which possess penetrability, others which do not, etc. The Sirian, in whose world they count 300 of them, and who had discovered 3,000 more in the course of his travels, astonished the philosopher of Saturn. At length, after having communicated to each other a little of what they knew, and a great deal of that about which they knew nothing, and after having exercised their reasoning powers during a complete revolution of the Sun, they resolved to make a little exploratory tour together.

Our two philosophers were ready to embark upon the atmosphere of Saturn, with a fine collection of scientific instruments, when the Saturnian's mistress, who had heard what he was up to, came in tears to remonstrate with him. She was a pretty little brunette, barely 660 fathoms high, but her agreeable manners amply atoned for that deficiency.

"Oh, cruel one!" she exclaimed, "after having resisted you for 1,500 years, and when I was at last beginning to surrender, and have passed scarcely a hundred years in your arms, to leave me thus, and start on a long journey with a giant of another world! Go, you have no taste for anything but novelty, you have never felt true love; were you a real Saturnian, you would be constant. Whither away so fast? What would you have? Our five moons are less fickle than you, our ring less changeable. So much for the past! I will never love again."

The philosopher embraced her, and, in spite of all his philosophy, joined his tears with hers. As to the lady, after having fainted away, she consoled herself with a certain beau who lived in the neighborhood.

Meanwhile our two inquirers commenced their travels; they first jumped onto Saturn's ring, which they found pretty flat, as an illustrious inhabitant of our little globe has cleverly conjectured; thence they easily made their way from moon to moon. A comet passed near the last one, so they sprang upon it, along with their instruments. When they had gone about 150,000,000 leagues, they came across the satellites of Jupiter. They landed on Jupiter itself, and remained there a year, during which they learned some very remarkable secrets which would now be appearing in the press, were it not for certain censors who find them too hard to swallow.

Leaving Jupiter, our explorers crossed a space of about 100,000,000 leagues, and, coasting along the planet Mars, which, as is well known, is five times smaller than our own little globe, they saw two moons. These have escaped the observation of our astronomers. I am well aware that Father Castel will write, and pleasantly enough too, against the existence of these two moons, but I believe those who reason from analogy. Those excellent philosophers know how difficult it would be for Mars, which is so distant from the Sun, to get by with less than two moons. Be that as it may, our friends found the planet so small they were afraid of finding no room there to put up for the night, so they proceeded on their way, like a pair of travelers who disdain a humble village inn, and push on to the nearest town. But the Sirian and his companion soon repented this decision, for they went a long time without finding anything at all.

At last they perceived a faint glimmer; it came from our Earth, and created compassion in the minds of those who had so lately left Jupiter. However, for fear of repenting a

second time, they decided to disembark. They passed over the tail of the comet, and with the aid with an aurora borealis close at hand, alighted on Earth by the northern shore of the Baltic Sea, July 5, 1737.

After resting, they consumed for breakfast a couple of mountains. Then wishing to inspect the countryside, they first went from north to south. Each of the Sirian's ordinary steps was about 30,000 statute feet; the Saturnian dwarf, whose height was only a thousand fathoms, followed panting far behind, for he had to take 20 steps when the other made a single stride. Picture to yourself a tiny little toy spaniel pursuing a captain of the King of Prussia's grenadiers!

The strangers proceeded quickly, circling the globe in 36 hours; the Sun, indeed, or rather the Earth, makes the same journey in a day; but it is much easier to turn on one's axis than to walk on one's feet. Behold our travelers, then, returned to the same spot from which they had started, after having set eyes upon that sea, to them almost imperceptible, called the Mediterranean, and that other little pond which, under the name of the great Ocean, surrounds this molehill. Therein the dwarf had never sunk much above the knee, while the other had scarcely wetted his ankle. They did all they could, searching here and there, to ascertain whether Earth was inhabited. They stooped, lay down, and groped about in all directions; but their eyes and hands being out of all proportion to the tiny beings who crawl up and down here, they felt not the slightest sensation which could lead them to suspect that we and our fellow creatures have the honor to exist.

The dwarf hastily declared there was not a single creature on this planet. His first reason was that he had not seen one. But Micromégas politely explained that that was not a good argument:

"For," said he, "you, with your little eyes, cannot see certain stars of the 50th magnitude which I distinctly discern; do you conclude that those stars have no existence?"

"But," argued the dwarf, "this globe is so ill-constructed, so irregular, and so ridiculously shaped! All here appears chaotic; look at these little brooks, not one of which goes in a straight line, and these ponds, which are neither round, square, oval, nor of any regular form; and all these little bristles which have rubbed the skin off my feet!"--he alluded to the trees--"Observe too the shape of the globe as a whole, how it is flat at the poles, how it turns around the Sun in a clumsily slanting manner, so that the polar climes are mere wastes. In truth, what chiefly makes me think there is nobody here, is that I cannot suppose any sensible people should wish to occupy such a dwelling."

"Well," said Micromégas, "perhaps the people who inhabit it are not sensible. But there are in fact signs of its not having been made for nothing. Everything here seems irregular, you say; but you judge by the standards of Saturn and Jupiter. Have I not told you that in the course of my travels I have always found variety?"

The Saturnian had answers to these arguments, and the dispute might never have ended, had not he suddenly spied what seemed to him a small tadpole moving half underwater in the Baltic sea. Actually, it was a whale. He caught it cleverly with his little finger, and placing it on his thumbnail, showed it to the Sirian, who burst out laughing a second time at the extreme minuteness of the inhabitants of our system.

The Saturnian, now convinced our world was inhabited, immediately concluded that whales were the only creatures to be found here, and, as speculation was his strong point, made conjectures about the origin of so insignificant an atom, the source of its movement, and whether it had ideas and free will. Micromégas drew a magnifying glass from his bundle of instruments, examined the creature patiently, and found no evidence that it had a soul lodged in its body. The two travelers then suspected there were no intelligent beings in this habitation of ours, when at last they noticed something as big as a whale, floating on the Baltic sea.

We know that at that very time, a flock of philosophers was returning from the polar circle, where they had gone to make observations no one had attempted before. The newspapers say their vessel ran aground in the gulf of Bothnia, and that they had great difficulty saving their lives; but we never know in this world the real truth about anything. I will relate honestly what occurred, without adding anything of my own invention--a task which demands no small effort on the part of a historian.

The Saturnian stretched out his hand, seized with great dexterity the ship which carried those gentlemen, and placed it in the hollow of his hand without squeezing it too much, for fear of crushing it. "Here is an animal quite different from the first," he observed.

The passengers and crew, who thought a tempest had whirled them aloft, and supposed they had struck upon some kind of rock, began to stir; the sailors seized casks of wine, threw them overboard on the Saturnian's hand, then jumped down themselves, while the geometers seized their quadrants, their sectors, and a pair of Lapland girls, and descended on the Saturnian's fingers. They made such a commotion that at last he felt a tickle--a pole with an iron point being driven a foot deep into his forefinger. He surmised that this prick proceeded somehow from the little animal he was holding; but at first he perceived nothing more than minute specks, which he guessed to be turds, spilling away from the creature.

I have no wish to shock anyone's vanity, but I must beg those who are sensitive about their own importance to consider what I have to say on this subject. Taking the average stature of mankind at five feet, we make no greater figure on Earth than an insect not quite one 200,000th of an inch in height on a bowl 10 feet around. Imagine a being who could hold Earth in his hands and who had organs of sense proportionate to our own--there are in fact many such beings--and consider what they would think of those battles which give the conqueror possession of some village, to be lost again soon after.

No doubt some captain of tall grenadiers will read this work and raise the caps of his company a couple of feet; but I warn him, it will be all in vain; he and his men will never be anything but the merest mites.

It was not until both Sirian and Saturnian examined the "turds" with microscopes that they realized the amazing truth. When Leeuwenhoek and Hartsoeker first saw, or thought they saw, the minute speck out of which we are formed, they did not make nearly so surprising a discovery. What pleasure Micromégas and the dwarf felt in watching the movements of those little machines, in examining their feats, in following their operations! How they shouted with joy!

"I see them!" they exclaimed both at once. "Do you not observe how they are carrying burdens, how they stoop down and rise up?"

As they spoke, their hands trembled with delight at beholding objects so unusual, and with fear lest they lose them. The Saturnian, passing from extreme skepticism to utter credulity, fancied he saw them engaged in the work of propagation.

"Ah!" said he, "I have surprised nature in the very act."

But he was deceived by appearances, an accident to which we are only too liable, whether using microscopes or not.

Micromégas, a much better observer, perceived clearly that the atoms were speaking to each other, and corrected his companion; but the dwarf, ashamed of having erred on this delicate subject, refused to believe that such creatures could have any means of communicating ideas. He had the gift of tongues as did the Sirian; he did not hear the atoms speak, so he concluded that they did not; besides, how could those imperceptible beings have vocal organs, and what could they have to say? To be able to speak, one must think, or at least make some approach to thought; but if those creatures could think, they must have something equivalent of a soul; and to attribute the equivalent of a soul to these little animals seemed absurd.

"But," said the Sirian, "you fancied just now they were making love; can they make love without being able to think or utter a word, or even to make themselves understood? Moreover, do you suppose it is more difficult to produce arguments than offspring? Both appear to me equally mysterious operations."

"I no longer venture either to believe or deny," said the dwarf; "We must try to examine these insects, then form our conclusions afterward."

"Well said!" replied Micromégas. Using the equipment he had brought with him, he fabricated a pair of monster speaking-trumpets, like huge funnels, the narrow ends of which he and the Saturnian placed in their ears. As the wide part of the trumpets covered the ship and her crew, the faintest voice was conveyed in such a manner that the philosophers high above them clearly heard the buzzing of our insects down below. In a few hours they succeeded in distinguishing the words, and at last in understanding the French language. The travelers' astonishment increased every instant. They heard mere mites speaking tolerably good sense; such a freak of nature seemed inexplicable.

You may imagine how impatiently the Sirian and his dwarf longed to converse with the atoms; but the dwarf feared that his voice of thunder, and still more that of Micromégas, might deafen the mites without conveying any meaning. To diminish its strength, they placed in their mouths little toothpicks, the tapering ends of which were brought near the ship. Then the Sirian, holding the dwarf on his knee (who in turn held the vessel with her crew upon his palm), bent his head down and spoke in a low voice, thus at last addressing them:

"Invisible insects, whom the hand of the Creator has been pleased to produce in the abyss of the infinitely little, I thank Him for having deigned to reveal to me secrets which seemed inscrutable. It may be the courtiers of my country would not condescend to look upon you, but I despise no one, and offer you my protection."

If ever anyone was astonished, it was the people who heard these words, nor could they guess whence they came. The ship's chaplain recited the prayers used in exorcism, the sailors swore, and the philosophers constructed theories; but whatever theories

they constructed, they could not divine who was speaking to them. The dwarf of Saturn, who had a softer voice than Micromégas, then told them briefly with what kind of beings they were dealing. He gave an account of their journey from Saturn, and acquainted them with the parts and powers of Mr. Micromégas; and, after having commiserated them for being so small, he asked if they had always been in that pitiful condition little better than annihilation, what they found to do on a globe that appeared to belong to whales, if they were happy, if they increased and multiplied, whether they had souls, and a hundred other questions.

A philosopher of the party, bolder than the rest, and shocked that the existence of his soul should be questioned, took observations of the speaker with a quadrant from two different stations, and, at the third, spoke: "Do you then suppose sir, because a thousand fathoms extend between your head and feet, that you are--"

"A thousand fathoms!" cried the dwarf. "Good heavens! How can he know my height? A thousand fathoms! He is not an inch out of his reckoning. What! Has that atom actually measured me? He is a geometer, he knows my size; while I, who can barely see him except through a microscope, am still ignorant of his!"

"Yes, I have taken your measure," said the man of science; "and, based on your relative proportions, I further deduce that your big companion is approximately 120,000 statute feet tall."

Thereupon Micromégas uttered, "I see more clearly than ever that we should judge nothing by its apparent importance. O God, Who hast bestowed intelligence upon things which seemed so despicable, the infinitely little is as much Thy concern as the infinitely great; and, if it is possible that there should be living things smaller than these, they may be endowed with minds superior even to those of the magnificent creatures I have seen in the sky, who with one foot could cover this globe upon which I have alighted."

One of the philosophers agreed he might with perfect confidence believe there actually were intelligent beings much smaller than man. He related, not the fables Virgil told on the subject of bees, but the results of Swammerdam's discoveries, and Reamur's dissections. Finally, he informed him that there are animals which bear the same proportion to bees that bees bear to men, or that the Sirian himself bore to those huge creatures of which he spoke, or that those great creatures themselves bore to others before whom they seemed mere atoms.

The conversation grew more and more interesting, and Micromégas spoke as follows:

"O intelligent atoms, in whom the Eternal Being has been pleased to manifest His skill and power, you must doubtless taste joys of perfect purity on your globe; for, being encumbered with so little matter, and seeming to be all spirit, you must pass your lives in love and meditation--the true life of spiritual beings. I have nowhere beheld genuine happiness, but here it is to be found, without a doubt."

On hearing these words, all the philosophers shook their heads, and one, more frank than the others, candidly confessed that, with the exception of a small number held in mean estimation among them, all the rest of mankind were a multitude of fools, knaves, and miserable wretches.



"We have more matter than we need," said he, "the cause of much evil, if evil proceeds from matter; and we have too much mind, if evil proceeds from mind. For instance, at this very moment there are 100,000 fools of our species who wear hats, slaying 100,000 fellow creatures who wear turbans, or being massacred by them, and over almost all of Earth such practices have been going on from time immemorial."

The Sirian shuddered, and asked what could cause such horrible quarrels between those miserable little creatures.

"The dispute concerns a lump of clay," said the philosopher, "no bigger than your heel. Not that a single one of those millions of men who get their throats cut has the slightest interest in this clod of earth. The only point in question is whether it shall belong to a certain man who is called Sultan, or another who, I know not why, is called Caesar. Neither has seen, or is ever likely to see, the little corner of ground which is the bone of contention; and hardly one of those animals, who are cutting each other's throats has ever seen the animal for whom they fight so desperately."

"Ah! wretched creatures!" exclaimed the Sirian with indignation; "Can anyone imagine such frantic ferocity! I should like to take two or three steps, and stamp upon the whole swarm of these ridiculous assassins."

"No need," answered the philosopher; "they are working hard enough to destroy themselves. I assure you, at the end of 10 years, not a hundredth part of those wretches will be left; even if they had never drawn the sword, famine, fatigue, or intemperance will sweep them almost all away. Besides, it is not they who deserve punishment, but rather those armchair barbarians, who from the privacy of their cabinets, and during the process of digestion, command the massacre of a million men, and afterward ordain a solemn thanksgiving to God."

The traveler, moved with compassion for the tiny human race, among whom he found such astonishing contrasts, said to the gentlemen:

"Since you belong to the small number of wise men, and apparently do not kill anyone for money, tell me, pray, how you occupy yourselves."

"We dissect flies," said the same philosopher, "measure distances, calculate numbers, agree upon two or three points we understand, and dispute two or three thousand points of which we know nothing."

The visitors from Sirius and Saturn immediately desired to question these intelligent atoms about the subjects on which they agreed.

"How far do you reckon it," said the latter, "from the Dog Star to the great star in Gemini?"

They all answered together: "32 degrees and a half."

"How far do you make it from here to the Moon?"

"60 half-diameters of the Earth, in round numbers."

"What is the weight of your air?"

He thought to trick them, but they all answered that air weighs about 900 times less than an equal volume of distilled water, and 19,000 times less than pure gold.

The little dwarf from Saturn, astonished at their replies, was now inclined to take for sorcerers the same people he had disbelieved, just a quarter hour ago, could possess souls.

Then Micromégas said: "Since you know so well what is outside yourselves, doubtless you know still better what is within you. Tell me what is the nature of your soul, and how you form ideas."

The philosophers spoke all at once as before, but this time all their opinions differed. The oldest quoted Aristotle, another pronounced the name of Descartes, this spoke of Malebranche, that of Leibnitz, and another again of Locke. The old Peripatetic said loudly and confidently: "The soul is an actuality and a rationality, in virtue of which it has the power to be what it is; as Aristotle expressly declares on page 633 of the Louvre edition of his works"; and he quoted the passage.

"I don't understand Greek very well," said the giant.

"Neither do I," said the mite of a philosopher.

"Why, then," inquired the Sirian, "do you quote the man you call Aristotle in that language?"

"Because," replied the sage, "it is right and proper to quote what we do not comprehend in a language we least understand."

The Cartesian interposed and said: "The soul is pure spirit, which receives in its mother's womb all metaphysical ideas, and which, on issuing thence, is obliged to go to school as it were, and learn afresh all it knew so well, and will never know again."

"It was hardly worthwhile, then," answered the eight-leagued giant, "for your soul to have been so learned in your mother's womb, if you were to become so ignorant by the time you have a beard on your chin. But what do you mean by spirit?"

"Why do you ask?" said the philosopher; "I have no idea of its meaning, except that it is said to be independent of matter."

"You know, at least, what matter is, I presume?"

"Perfectly well," replied the man. "For instance, this stone is gray, is of such and such a form, has three dimensions, has weight and divisibility."

"Very well," said the Sirian, "Now tell me, please, what this thing actually is which appears to you to be divisible, heavy, and of a gray color. You observe certain qualities; but are you acquainted with the intrinsic nature of the thing itself?"

"No," said the other.

"Then you do not know what matter is."

Thereupon Mr. Micromégas, addressing his question to another sage, whom the Saturnian held on his thumb, asked him what the soul was, and what it did.

"Nothing at all," said the disciple of Malebranche; "it is God who does everything for me; I see and do everything through Him; He it is who does all without my interference."

"Then you might just as well not exist," replied the sage of Sirius.

"And you, my friend," he said to a follower of Leibnitz, who was there, "what is your soul?"

"It is," answered he, "a hand which points to the hour while my body chimes, or, if you like, it is the soul which chimes, while my body points to the hour; or to put it another way, my soul is the mirror of the universe, and my body is its frame: that is all clear enough."

A little student of Locke was standing near; and when his opinion was at last asked: "I know nothing," said he, "of how I think, but I know I have never thought except on the suggestion of my senses. That there are immaterial and intelligent substances is not what I doubt; but that it is impossible for God to communicate the faculty of thought to matter is what I doubt very strongly. I adore the eternal Power, nor is it my part to limit its exercise; I assert nothing, I content myself with believing that more is possible than people think."

The creature of Sirius smiled; he did not deem the last speaker the least sagacious of the company; and, were it possible, the dwarf of Saturn would have clasped Locke's disciple in his arms.

But unluckily a little animalcule was there in a square cap, who silenced all the other philosophical mites, saying that he knew the whole secret, that it was all to be found in the "Summa" of St. Thomas Aquinas; he scanned the pair of celestial visitors from top to toe, and maintained that they and all their kind, their suns and stars, were made solely for man's benefit.

At this speech our two travelers tumbled over each other, choking with that inextinguishable laughter which, according to Homer, is the special privilege of the gods; their shoulders shook, and their bodies heaved up and down, till in those merry convulsions, the ship the Saturnian held on his palm fell into his breeches pocket. These two good people, after a long search, recovered it at last, and duly set to rights all that had been displaced. The Saturnian once more took up the little mites, and Micromégas addressed them again with great kindness, though he was a little disgusted in the bottom of his heart at seeing such infinitely insignificant atoms so puffed up with pride. He promised to give them a rare book of philosophy, written in minute characters, for their special use, telling all that can be known of the ultimate essence of things, and he actually gave them the volume ere his departure. It was carried to Paris and laid before the Academy of Sciences; but when the old secretary came to open it, the pages were blank.

"Ah!" said he. "Just as I expected."