LONDON 1752 · COMPLETE IN MODERN ENGLISH

Micromegas

A Giant from Sirius Visits Earth

VOLTAIRE · A PHILOSOPHICAL TALE

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Micromegas

A Giant from Sirius Visits Earth (1752)

Voltaire's philosophical tale of two travellers from Sirius and Saturn who discover human beings on Earth and question their philosophers. Complete in modern English

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Source: Voltaire, *Le Micromégas de Mr. de Voltaire* (London, 1752). Rendered into modern English from images of the pages of this edition.

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PREFACE

A giant who came from the stars. Imagine a young man from a planet circling Sirius who is eight leagues tall, who has nearly a thousand senses, and who travels from world to world, sometimes riding a sunbeam, sometimes a passing comet. On Saturn he befriends the secretary of the local academy, a "dwarf" a mere six thousand feet high, and the two set off together to look around the solar system. On Earth they at first find no living creature at all. Only when the giant's diamond necklace snaps, and one of the diamonds turns out to be an excellent microscope, do they notice something tiny moving in the Baltic Sea. It is a ship full of philosophers. So begins a conversation in which human beings, with their pride, their wars and their theories of the soul, are for the first time in literature examined through the eyes of a visitor from another world. The story was written by Voltaire and published in 1752.

Who was Voltaire? François-Marie Arouet (1694–1778) was born in Paris, the son of a notary, and was educated by the Jesuits at the Collège Louis-le-Grand. He was famous for his sharp tongue while still a young man: in 1717 he was locked up in the Bastille without trial for satirical verses and spent almost a year there. Soon afterwards he began to sign himself "Voltaire", and his tragedy *Oedipus* (1718) was a great success. After a new quarrel with a high-born nobleman he was sent to the Bastille again in 1726 and then exiled to England. He spent about two years there, discovered Newton's physics and John Locke's philosophy, and saw the honours with which Newton was buried in 1727. He described his impressions in the *Philosophical Letters* (1734); in France the book was condemned and publicly burned, and Voltaire had to go into hiding.

Cirey and Potsdam. For almost fifteen years Voltaire lived at the château of Cirey in Champagne with the Marquise Émilie du Châtelet, a mathematician and

physicist who later translated Newton's *Principia* into French. There he wrote the *Elements of Newton's Philosophy* (1738), the book from which many French readers first learned about universal gravitation. In 1750, at the invitation of King Frederick II of Prussia, Voltaire moved to his court at Potsdam. It was there, in 1752, that *Micromegas* appeared. At court he fell out with Maupertuis, president of the Berlin Academy, the very scientist who in 1736–1737 had led an expedition to Lapland to measure the shape of the Earth, and whose companions sail home across the Baltic in this story. Voltaire left Prussia in 1753. He spent almost the last twenty years of his life at Ferney near the Swiss border, where he wrote *Candide* (1759) and campaigned for victims of injustice. He died in Paris in 1778.

What the story tells. In seven short chapters Micromegas and the Saturnian talk about the variety of nature, the number of the senses and the shortness of life, travel past Jupiter and Mars, land on Earth and with great difficulty make out human beings. With a speaking trumpet made from a nail clipping they learn to understand French and question the philosophers. The humans know exactly how far it is to the Moon and even measure the giants' height, yet each of them says something different about his own soul. At the end Micromegas presents them with a book that is supposed to contain "the true heart of things".

One of the first science fiction stories. *Micromegas* is often named among the earliest works of science fiction. It has travel between the stars, inhabitants of other planets with different senses and bodies, and at its centre the idea of scale: what seems enormous to one being is tiny to another. Voltaire learned from Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), but he moved the game of giants and dwarfs out into the cosmos, where the scales become endless. The story even contains a lucky guess: Voltaire writes that Mars has two moons, although astronomers did not discover them until 1877.

The targets of the satire. The secretary of the Academy of Saturn, who "had invented nothing, but who gave a very good account of the inventions of others" and loves flowery comparisons, is a good-natured caricature of Fontenelle, for many years secretary of the Academy of Sciences in Paris and author of the

popular *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds* (1686). The ship of philosophers is Maupertuis's expedition. In the seventh chapter the followers of Aristotle, Descartes, Malebranche, Leibniz, Locke and Thomas Aquinas take the floor one after another. But the main target of the satire is human pride: the conviction that the whole universe was made for our sake, and the wars in which a hundred thousand men kill one another over "a heap of mud the size of your heel".

This edition. This is a complete translation, sentence by sentence, made from the pages of the London edition of 1752, *Le Micromégas de Mr. de Voltaire*, rendered into modern English; nothing has been left out or retold. Voltaire's chapter headings are given in full (the fifth chapter has no heading in the original). The notes at the foot of the page explain people and allusions that an eighteenth-century reader understood at once but a modern reader no longer does, and where we now know otherwise, they say briefly what we know today. At the end of the book each chapter has a commentary, "In plain words" and "What science says". The same 1752 volume also contains Voltaire's *History of the Crusades* and his *New Plan for a History of the Human Mind*; in our series they are published as separate books.

CHAPTER I

THE JOURNEY OF AN INHABITANT OF THE STAR SIRIUS TO THE PLANET SATURN

Illustration in the manner of 18th-century engraving and painting

On one of the planets that revolve around the star called Sirius there lived a young man of great wit, whom I had the honor of meeting on his last journey to our little anthill. His name was Micromegas[1], a name that suits all the great very well. He stood eight leagues tall; by eight leagues I mean twenty-four thousand geometric paces of five feet each.

1. The name is built from the Greek "mikros" (small) and "megas" (large): the name itself is a joke, since it joins the small and the large.