

*Voltaire was Europe's most famous and influential philosophes. Micromégas is one of his most popular short stories. Micromégas (the name means "Little-Big") is a 120,000 foot giant from a planet near the star Sirius. While roaming the galaxy, he meets a 6,000 foot tall philosopher on Saturn. The two become friends and decide to visit other worlds. Within a short time, they stumble onto the tiny planet called Earth. Within a short time, Micromégas and the Saturnian dwarf reach the Baltic Sea where they discover a ship containing a number of philosophers*

Micromégas 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 quite an animal," 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.

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

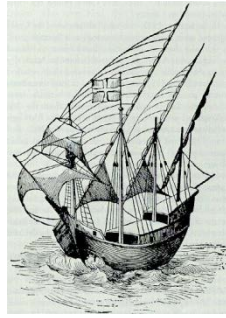
delight at beholding objects so unusual, and with fear lest they lose them.

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 Micromégas; 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.

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 Micromégas 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 Micromégas, 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, 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 size. 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 informed him that there are animals which bear the same proportion to bees that bees bear to men, or that Micromégas 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, 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 mud heap," 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 Micromégas 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, "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 Micromégas, "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."

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 endow matter with mind is what I doubt very strongly. I adore the eternal Power; I am not free to set bounds to it ; I assert nothing, I am content to believe that more things are possible than we think."

Micromégas smiled; he did deem the last speaker the most wise of the company; and, were it possible, the dwarf of Saturn would have grabbed Locke's disciple in his arms. But unluckily a little amoeba 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."

