

CHAPTER III - SHOOTING THE CHUTES--AND AFTER

Through the fog I felt my way along by means of my compass. I no longer heard the bears, nor did I encounter one within the fog.

Experience has since taught me that these great beasts are as terror-stricken by this phenomenon as a landsman by a fog at sea, and that no sooner does a fog envelop them than they make the best of their way to lower levels and a clear atmosphere. It was well for me that this was true.

I felt very sad and lonely as I crawled along the difficult footing. My own predicament weighed less heavily upon me than the loss of Perry, for I loved the old fellow.

That I should ever win the opposite slopes of the range I began to doubt, for though I am naturally sanguine, I imagine that the bereavement which had befallen me had cast such a gloom over my spirits that I could see no slightest ray of hope for the future.

Then, too, the blighting, gray oblivion of the cold, damp clouds through which I wandered was distressing. Hope thrives best in sunlight, and I am sure that it does not thrive at all in a fog.

But the instinct of self-preservation is stronger than hope. It thrives, fortunately, upon nothing. It takes root upon the brink of the grave, and blossoms in the jaws of death. Now it flourished bravely upon the breast of dead hope, and urged me onward and upward in a stern endeavor to justify its existence.

As I advanced the fog became denser. I could see nothing beyond my nose. Even the snow and ice I trod were invisible.

I could not see below the breast of my bearskin coat. I seemed to be floating in a sea of vapor.

To go forward over a dangerous glacier under such conditions was little short of madness; but I could not have stopped going had I known positively that death lay two paces before my nose. In the first place, it was too cold to stop, and in the second, I should have gone mad but for the excitement of the perils that beset each forward step.

For some time the ground had been rougher and steeper, until I had been forced to scale a considerable height that had carried me from the glacier entirely. I was sure from my compass that I was following the right general direction, and so I kept on.

Once more the ground was level. From the wind that blew about me I guessed that I must be upon some exposed peak of ridge.

And then quite suddenly I stepped out into space. Wildly I turned and clutched at the ground that had slipped from beneath my feet.

Only a smooth, icy surface was there. I found nothing to clutch or stay my fall, and a moment later so great was my speed that nothing could have stayed me.

As suddenly as I had pitched into space, with equal suddenness did I emerge from the fog, out of which I shot like a projectile from a cannon into clear daylight. My speed was so great that I could see nothing about me but a blurred and indistinct sheet of smooth and frozen snow, that rushed past me with express-train velocity.

I must have slid downward thousands of feet before the steep incline curved gently on to a broad, smooth, snow-covered plateau. Across this I hurtled with slowly diminishing velocity, until at last objects about me began to take definite shape.

Far ahead, miles and miles away, I saw a great valley and mighty woods, and beyond these a broad expanse of water. In the nearer foreground I discerned a small, dark blob of color upon the shimmering whiteness of the snow.

"A bear," thought I, and thanked the instinct that had impelled me to cling tenaciously to my rifle during the moments of my awful tumble.

At the rate I was going it would be but a moment before I should be quite abreast the thing; nor was it long before I came to a sudden stop in soft snow, upon which the sun was shining, not twenty paces from the object of my most immediate apprehension.

It was standing upon its hind legs waiting for me. As I scrambled to my feet to meet it, I dropped my gun in the snow and doubled up with laughter.

It was Perry.

The expression upon his face, combined with the relief I felt at seeing him again safe and sound, was too much for my overwrought nerves.

"David!" he cried. "David, my boy! God has been good to an old man. He has answered my prayer."

It seems that Perry in his mad flight had plunged over the brink at about the same point as that at which I had stepped over it a short time later. Chance had done for us what long periods of rational labor had failed to accomplish.

We had crossed the divide. We were upon the side of the Mountains of the Clouds that we had for so long been attempting to reach.

We looked about. Below us were green trees and warm jungles. In the distance was a great sea.

"The Lural Az," I said, pointing toward its blue-green surface.

Somehow--the gods alone can explain it--Perry, too, had clung to his rifle during his mad descent of the icy slope. For that there was cause for great rejoicing.

Neither of us was worse for his experience, so after shaking the snow from our clothing, we set off at a great rate down toward the warmth and comfort of the forest and the jungle.

The going was easy by comparison with the awful obstacles we had had to encounter upon the opposite side of the divide. There were beasts, of course, but we came through safely.

Before we halted to eat or rest, we stood beside a little mountain brook beneath the wondrous trees of the primeval forest in an atmosphere of warmth and comfort. It reminded me of an early June day in the Maine woods.

We fell to work with our short axes and cut enough small trees to build a rude protection from the fiercer beasts. Then we lay down to sleep.

How long we slept I do not know. Perry says that inasmuch as there is no means of measuring time within Pellucidar, there can be no such thing as time here, and that we may have slept an outer earthly year, or we may have slept but a second.

But this I know. We had stuck the ends of some of the saplings into the ground in the building of our shelter, first stripping the leaves and branches from them, and when we awoke we found that many of them had thrust forth sprouts.

Personally, I think that we slept at least a month; but who may say? The sun marked midday when we closed our eyes; it was still in the same position when we opened them; nor had it varied a hair's breadth in the interim.

It is most baffling, this question of elapsed time within Pellucidar.

Anyhow, I was famished when we awoke. I think that it was the pangs of hunger that awoke me. Ptarmigan and wild boar fell before my revolver within a dozen moments of my awakening. Perry soon had a roaring fire blazing by the brink of the littlestream.

It was a good and delicious meal we made. Though we did not eat the entire boar, we made a very large hole in him, while the ptarmigan was but a mouthful.

Having satisfied our hunger, we determined to set forth at once in search of Anoroc and my old friend, Ja the Mezop. We each thought that by following the little stream downward, we should come upon the large river which Ja had told me emptied into the Lural Az opposite his island.

We did so; nor were we disappointed, for at last after a pleasant journey--and what journey would not be pleasant after the hardships we had endured among the peaks of the Mountains of the Clouds--we came upon a broad flood that rushed majestically onward in the direction of the great sea we had seen from the snowy slopes of the mountains.

For three long marches we followed the left bank of the growing river, until at last we saw it roll its mighty volume into the vast waters of the sea. Far out across the rippling ocean we descried three islands. The one to the left must be Anoroc.

At last we had come close to a solution of our problem--the road to Sari.

But how to reach the islands was now the foremost question in our minds. We must build a canoe.

Perry is a most resourceful man. He has an axiom which carries the thought-kernel that what man has done, man can do, and it doesn't cut any figure with Perry whether a fellow knows how to do it or not.

He set out to make gunpowder once, shortly after our escape from Phutra and at the beginning of the confederation of the wild tribes of Pellucidar. He said that some one, without any knowledge of the fact that such a thing might be concocted, had once stumbled upon it by accident, and so he couldn't see why a fellow who knew all about powder except how to make it couldn't do as well.

He worked mighty hard mixing all sorts of things together, until finally he evolved a substance that looked like powder. He had been very proud of the stuff, and had gone about the village of the Sarians exhibiting it to every one who would listen to him, and explaining what its purpose was and what terrific havoc it would work, until finally the natives became so terrified at the stuff that they wouldn't come within a rod of Perry and his invention.

Finally, I suggested that we experiment with it and see what it would do, so Perry built a fire, after placing the powder at a safe distance, and then touched a glowing ember to a minute particle of the deadly explosive. It extinguished the ember.

Repeated experiments with it determined me that in searching for a high explosive, Perry had stumbled upon a fire-extinguisher that would have made his fortune for him back in our own world.

So now he set himself to work to build a scientific canoe. I had suggested that we construct a dugout, but Perry convinced me that we must build something more in keeping with our positions of supermen in this world of the Stone Age.

"We must impress these natives with our superiority," he explained. "You must not forget, David, that you are emperor of Pellucidar. As such you may not with dignity approach the shores of a foreign power in so crude a vessel as a dugout."

I pointed out to Perry that it wasn't much more incongruous for the emperor to cruise in a canoe, than it was for the prime minister to attempt to build one with his own hands.

He had to smile at that; but in extenuation of his act he assured me that it was quite customary for prime ministers to give their personal attention to the building of imperial navies; "and this," he said, "is the imperial navy of his Serene Highness, David I, Emperor of the Federated Kingdoms of Pellucidar."

I grinned; but Perry was quite serious about it. It had always seemed rather more or less of a joke to me that I should be addressed as majesty and all the rest of it. Yet my imperial power and dignity had been a very real thing during my brief reign.

Twenty tribes had joined the federation, and their chiefs had sworn eternal fealty to one another and to me. Among them were many powerful though savage nations. Their chiefs we had made kings; their tribal lands kingdoms.

We had armed them with bows and arrows and swords, in addition to their own more primitive weapons. I had trained them in military discipline and in so much of the art of war as I had gleaned from extensive reading of the campaigns of Napoleon, Von Moltke, Grant, and the ancients.

We had marked out as best we could natural boundaries dividing the various kingdoms. We had warned tribes beyond these boundaries that they must not trespass, and we had marched against and severely punished those who had.

We had met and defeated the Mahars and the Sagoths. In short, we had demonstrated our rights to empire, and very rapidly were we being recognized and heralded abroad when my departure for the outer world and Hooja's treachery had set us back.

But now I had returned. The work that fate had undone must be done again, and though I must need smile at my imperial honors, I none the less felt the weight of duty and obligation that rested upon my shoulders.

Slowly the imperial navy progressed toward completion. She was a wondrous craft, but I had my doubts about her. When I voiced them to Perry, he reminded me gently that my people for many generations had been mine-owners, not ship-builders, and consequently I couldn't be expected to know much about the matter.

I was minded to inquire into his hereditary fitness to design battleships; but inasmuch as I already knew that his father had been a minister in a back-woods village far from the coast, I hesitated lest I offend the dear old fellow.

He was immensely serious about his work, and I must admit that in so far as appearances went he did extremely well with the meager tools and assistance at his command. We had only two short axes and our hunting-knives; yet with these we hewed trees, split them into planks, surfaced and fitted them.

The "navy" was some forty feet in length by ten feet beam. Her sides were quite straight and fully ten feet high--"for the purpose," explained Perry, "of adding dignity to her appearance and rendering it less easy for an enemy to board her."

As a matter of fact, I knew that he had had in mind the safety of her crew under javelin-fire--the lofty sides made an admirable shelter. Inside she reminded me of nothing so much as a floating trench. There was also some slight analogy to a huge coffin.

Her prow sloped sharply backward from the water-line--quite like a line of battleship. Perry had designed her more for moral effect upon an enemy, I think, than for any real harm she might inflict, and so those parts which were to show were the most imposing.

Below the water-line she was practically non-existent. She should have had considerable draft; but, as the enemy couldn't have seen it, Perry decided to do away with it, and so made her flat-bottomed. It was this that caused my doubts about her.

There was another little idiosyncrasy of design that escaped us both until she was about ready to launch--there was no method of propulsion. Her sides were far too high to permit the use of sweeps, and when Perry suggested that we pole her, I remonstrated on the grounds that it would be a most undignified and awkward manner of sweeping down upon the foe, even if we could find or wield poles that would reach to the bottom of the ocean.

Finally I suggested that we convert her into a sailing vessel. When once the idea took hold Perry was most enthusiastic about it, and nothing would do but a four-masted, full-rigged ship.

Again I tried to dissuade him, but he was simply crazy over the psychological effect which the appearance of this strange and mighty craft would have upon the natives of Pellucidar. So we rigged her with thin hides for sails and dried gut for rope.

Neither of us knew much about sailing a full-rigged ship; but that didn't worry me a great deal, for I was confident that we should never be called upon to do so, and as the day of launching approached I was positive of it.

We had built her upon a low bank of the river close to where it emptied into the sea, and just above high tide. Her keel we had laid upon several rollers cut from small trees, the ends of the rollers in turn resting upon parallel tracks of long saplings. Her stern was toward the water.

A few hours before we were ready to launch her she made quite an imposing picture, for Perry had insisted upon setting every shred of "canvas." I told him that I didn't know much about it, but I was sure that at launching the hull only should have been completed, everything else being completed after she had floated safely.

At the last minute there was some delay while we sought a name for her. I wanted her christened the Perry in honor both of her designer and that other great naval genius of another world, Captain Oliver Hazard Perry, of the United States Navy. But Perry was too modest; he wouldn't hear of it.

We finally decided to establish a system in the naming of the fleet. Battle-ships of the first-class should bear the names of kingdoms of the federation; armored cruisers the names of kings; cruisers the names of cities, and so on down the line. Therefore, we decided to name the first battle-ship Sari, after the first of the federated kingdoms.

The launching of the Sari proved easier than I contemplated. Perry wanted me to get in and break something over the bow as she floated out upon the bosom of the river, but I told him that I should feel safer on dry land until I saw which side up the Sari would float.

I could see by the expression of the old man's face that my words had hurt him; but I noticed that he didn't offer to get in himself, and so I felt less contrition than I might otherwise.

When we cut the ropes and removed the blocks that held the Sari in place she started for the water with a lunge. Before she hit it she was going at a reckless speed, for we had laid our tracks quite down to the water, greased them, and at intervals placed rollers all ready to receive the ship as she moved forward with stately dignity. But there was no dignity in the Sari.

When she touched the surface of the river she must have been going twenty or thirty miles an hour. Her momentum carried her well out into the stream, until she came to a sudden halt at the end of the long line which we had had the foresight to attach to her bow and fasten to a large tree upon the bank.

The moment her progress was checked she promptly capsized. Perry was overwhelmed. I didn't upbraid him, nor remind him that I had "told him so."

His grief was so genuine and so apparent that I didn't have the heart to reproach him, even were I inclined to that particular sort of meanness.

"Come, come, old man!" I cried. "It's not as bad as it looks. Give me a hand with this rope, and we'll drag her up as far as we can; and then when the tide goes out we'll try another scheme. I think we can make a go of her yet."

Well, we managed to get her up into shallow water. When the tide receded she lay there on her side in the mud, quite a pitiable object for the premier battle-ship of a world--"the terror of the seas" was the way Perry had occasionally described her.

We had to work fast; but before the tide came in again we had stripped her of her sails and masts, righted her, and filled her about a quarter full of rock ballast. If she didn't stick too fast in the mud I was sure that she would float this time right side up.

I can tell you that it was with palpitating hearts that we sat upon the river-bank and watched that tide come slowly in. The tides of Pellucidar don't amount to much by comparison with our higher tides of the outer world, but I knew that it ought to prove ample to float the Sari.

Nor was I mistaken. Finally we had the satisfaction of seeing the vessel rise out of the mud and float slowly upstream with the tide. As the water rose we pulled her in quite close to the bank and clambered aboard.

She rested safely now upon an even keel; nor did she leak, for she was well calked with fiber and tarry pitch. We rigged up a single short mast and light sail, fastened planking down over the ballast to form a deck, worked her out into

midstream with a couple of sweeps, and dropped our primitive stone anchor to await the turn of the tide that would bear us out to sea.

While we waited we devoted the time to the construction of an upper deck, since the one immediately above the ballast was some seven feet from the gunwale. The second deck was four feet above this. In it was a large, commodious hatch, leading to the lower deck. The sides of the ship rose three feet above the upper deck, forming an excellent breastwork, which we loopholed at intervals that we might lie prone and fire upon an enemy.

Though we were sailing out upon a peaceful mission in search of my friend Ja, we knew that we might meet with people of some other island who would prove unfriendly.

At last the tide turned. We weighed anchor. Slowly we drifted down the great river toward the sea.

About us swarmed the mighty denizens of the primeval deep--plesiosaurs and ichthyosauria with all their horrid, slimy cousins whose names were as the names of aunts and uncles to Perry, but which I have never been able to recall an hour after having heard them.

At last we were safely launched upon the journey to which we had looked forward for so long, and the results of which meant so much to me.