

II

A STRANGE WORLD

I was unconscious little more than an instant, for as I lunged forward from the crossbeam to which I had been clinging, and fell with a crash to the floor of the cabin, the shock brought me to myself.

My first concern was with Perry. I was horrified at the thought that upon the very threshold of salvation he might be dead. Tearing open his shirt I placed my ear to his breast. I could have cried with relief--his heart was beating quite regularly.

At the water tank I wetted my handkerchief, slapping it smartly across his forehead and face several times. In a moment I was rewarded by the raising of his lids. For a time he lay wide-eyed and quite uncomprehending. Then his scattered wits slowly foregathered, and he sat up sniffing the air with an expression of wonderment upon his face.

"Why, David," he cried at last, "it's air, as sure as I live. Why--why what does it mean? Where in the world are we? What has happened?"

"It means that we're back at the surface all right, Perry," I cried; "but where, I don't know. I haven't opened her up yet. Been too busy reviving you. Lord, man, but you had a close squeak!"

"You say we're back at the surface, David? How can that be? How long have I been unconscious?"

"Not long. We turned in the ice stratum. Don't you recall the sudden whirling of our seats? After that the drill was above you instead of below. We didn't notice it at the time; but I recall it now."

"You mean to say that we turned back in the ice stratum, David? That is not possible. The prospector cannot turn unless its nose is deflected from the outside--by some external force or resistance--the steering wheel within would have moved in response. The steering wheel has not budged, David, since we started. You know that."

I did know it; but here we were with our drill racing in pure air, and copious volumes of it pouring into the cabin.

"We couldn't have turned in the ice stratum, Perry, I know as well as you," I replied; "but the fact remains that we did, for here we are this minute at the surface of the earth again, and I am going out to see just where."

"Better wait till morning, David--it must be midnight now."

I glanced at the chronometer.

"Half after twelve. We have been out seventy-two hours, so it must be midnight. Nevertheless I am going to have a look at the blessed sky that I had given up all hope of ever seeing again," and so saying I lifted the bars from the inner door, and swung it open. There was quite a quantity of loose material in the jacket, and this I had to remove with a shovel to get at the opposite door in the outer shell.

In a short time I had removed enough of the earth and rock to the floor of the cabin to expose the door beyond. Perry was directly behind me as I threw it open. The upper half was above the surface of the ground. With an expression of surprise I turned and looked at Perry--it was broad day-light without!

"Something seems to have gone wrong either with our calculations or the chronometer," I said. Perry shook his head--there was a strange expression in his eyes.

"Let's have a look beyond that door, David," he cried.

Together we stepped out to stand in silent contemplation of a landscape at once weird and beautiful. Before us a low and level shore stretched down to a silent sea. As far as the eye could reach the surface of the water was dotted with countless tiny isles--some of towering, barren, granitic rock--others resplendent in gorgeous trappings of tropical vegetation, myriad starred with the magnificent splendor of vivid blooms.

Behind us rose a dark and forbidding wood of giant arborescent ferns intermingled with the commoner types of a primeval tropical forest. Huge creepers depended in great loops from tree to tree, dense under-brush overgrew a tangled mass of fallen trunks and branches. Upon the outer verge we could see the same splendid coloring of countless blossoms that glorified the islands, but within the dense shadows all seemed dark and gloomy as the grave.

And upon all the noonday sun poured its torrid rays out of a cloudless sky.

"Where on earth can we be?" I asked, turning to Perry.

For some moments the old man did not reply. He stood with bowed head, buried in deep thought. But at last he spoke.

"David," he said, "I am not so sure that we are ON earth."

"What do you mean Perry?" I cried. "Do you think that we are dead, and this is heaven?" He smiled, and turning, pointing to the nose of the prospector protruding from the ground at our backs.

"But for that, David, I might believe that we were indeed come to the country beyond the Styx. The prospector renders that theory untenable--it, certainly, could never have gone to heaven. However I

am willing to concede that we actually may be in another world from that which we have always known. If we are not ON earth, there is every reason to believe that we may be IN it."

"We may have quartered through the earth's crust and come out upon some tropical island of the West Indies," I suggested. Again Perry shook his head.

"Let us wait and see, David," he replied, "and in the meantime suppose we do a bit of exploring up and down the coast--we may find a native who can enlighten us."

As we walked along the beach Perry gazed long and earnestly across the water. Evidently he was wrestling with a mighty problem.

"David," he said abruptly, "do you perceive anything unusual about the horizon?"

As I looked I began to appreciate the reason for the strangeness of the landscape that had haunted me from the first with an illusive suggestion of the bizarre and unnatural--THERE WAS NO HORIZON! As far as the eye could reach out the sea continued and upon its bosom floated tiny islands, those in the distance reduced to mere specks; but ever beyond them was the sea, until the impression became quite real that one was LOOKING UP at the most distant point that the eyes could fathom--the distance was lost in the distance. That was all--there was

no clear-cut horizontal line marking the dip of the globe below the line of vision.

"A great light is commencing to break on me," continued Perry, taking out his watch. "I believe that I have partially solved the riddle. It is now two o'clock. When we emerged from the prospector the sun was directly above us. Where is it now?"

I glanced up to find the great orb still motionless in the center of the heaven. And such a sun! I had scarcely noticed it before. Fully thrice the size of the sun I had known throughout my life, and apparently so near that the sight of it carried the conviction that one might almost reach up and touch it.

"My God, Perry, where are we?" I exclaimed. "This thing is beginning to get on my nerves."

"I think that I may state quite positively, David," he commenced, "that we are--" but he got no further. From behind us in the vicinity of the prospector there came the most thunderous, awe-inspiring roar that ever had fallen upon my ears. With one accord we turned to discover the author of that fearsome noise.

Had I still retained the suspicion that we were on earth the sight that met my eyes would quite entirely have banished it. Emerging from the forest was a colossal beast which closely resembled a bear. It was

fully as large as the largest elephant and with great forepaws armed with huge claws. Its nose, or snout, depended nearly a foot below its lower jaw, much after the manner of a rudimentary trunk. The giant body was covered by a coat of thick, shaggy hair.

Roaring horribly it came toward us at a ponderous, shuffling trot. I turned to Perry to suggest that it might be wise to seek other surroundings--the idea had evidently occurred to Perry previously, for he was already a hundred paces away, and with each second his prodigious bounds increased the distance. I had never guessed what latent speed possibilities the old gentleman possessed.

I saw that he was headed toward a little point of the forest which ran out toward the sea not far from where we had been standing, and as the mighty creature, the sight of which had galvanized him into such remarkable action, was forging steadily toward me. I set off after Perry, though at a somewhat more decorous pace. It was evident that the massive beast pursuing us was not built for speed, so all that I considered necessary was to gain the trees sufficiently ahead of it to enable me to climb to the safety of some great branch before it came up.

Notwithstanding our danger I could not help but laugh at Perry's frantic capers as he essayed to gain the safety of the lower branches of the trees he now had reached. The stems were bare for a distance of some fifteen feet--at least on those trees which Perry attempted to ascend, for the suggestion of safety carried by the larger of the

forest giants had evidently attracted him to them. A dozen times he scrambled up the trunks like a huge cat only to fall back to the ground once more, and with each failure he cast a horrified glance over his shoulder at the oncoming brute, simultaneously emitting terror-stricken shrieks that awoke the echoes of the grim forest.

At length he spied a dangling creeper about the bigness of one's wrist, and when I reached the trees he was racing madly up it, hand over hand. He had almost reached the lowest branch of the tree from which the creeper depended when the thing parted beneath his weight and he fell sprawling at my feet.

The misfortune now was no longer amusing, for the beast was already too close to us for comfort. Seizing Perry by the shoulder I dragged him to his feet, and rushing to a smaller tree--one that he could easily encircle with his arms and legs--I boosted him as far up as I could, and then left him to his fate, for a glance over my shoulder revealed the awful beast almost upon me.

It was the great size of the thing alone that saved me. Its enormous bulk rendered it too slow upon its feet to cope with the agility of my young muscles, and so I was enabled to dodge out of its way and run completely behind it before its slow wits could direct it in pursuit.

The few seconds of grace that this gave me found me safely lodged in the branches of a tree a few paces from that in which Perry had at last

found a haven.

Did I say safely lodged? At the time I thought we were quite safe, and so did Perry. He was praying--raising his voice in thanksgiving at our deliverance--and had just completed a sort of paeon of gratitude that the thing couldn't climb a tree when without warning it reared up beneath him on its enormous tail and hind feet, and reached those fearfully armed paws quite to the branch upon which he crouched.

The accompanying roar was all but drowned in Perry's scream of fright, and he came near tumbling headlong into the gaping jaws beneath him, so precipitate was his impetuous haste to vacate the dangerous limb. It was with a deep sigh of relief that I saw him gain a higher branch in safety.

And then the brute did that which froze us both anew with horror. Grasping the tree's stem with his powerful paws he dragged down with all the great weight of his huge bulk and all the irresistible force of those mighty muscles. Slowly, but surely, the stem began to bend toward him. Inch by inch he worked his paws upward as the tree leaned more and more from the perpendicular. Perry clung chattering in a panic of terror. Higher and higher into the bending and swaying tree he clambered. More and more rapidly was the tree top inclining toward the ground.

I saw now why the great brute was armed with such enormous paws. The

use that he was putting them to was precisely that for which nature had intended them. The sloth-like creature was herbivorous, and to feed that mighty carcass entire trees must be stripped of their foliage. The reason for its attacking us might easily be accounted for on the supposition of an ugly disposition such as that which the fierce and stupid rhinoceros of Africa possesses. But these were later reflections. At the moment I was too frantic with apprehension on Perry's behalf to consider aught other than a means to save him from the death that loomed so close.

Realizing that I could outdistance the clumsy brute in the open, I dropped from my leafy sanctuary intent only on distracting the thing's attention from Perry long enough to enable the old man to gain the safety of a larger tree. There were many close by which not even the terrific strength of that titanic monster could bend.

As I touched the ground I snatched a broken limb from the tangled mass that matted the jungle-like floor of the forest and, leaping unnoticed behind the shaggy back, dealt the brute a terrific blow. My plan worked like magic. From the previous slowness of the beast I had been led to look for no such marvelous agility as he now displayed. Releasing his hold upon the tree he dropped on all fours and at the same time swung his great, wicked tail with a force that would have broken every bone in my body had it struck me; but, fortunately, I had turned to flee at the very instant that I felt my blow land upon the towering back.

As it started in pursuit of me I made the mistake of running along the edge of the forest rather than making for the open beach. In a moment I was knee-deep in rotting vegetation, and the awful thing behind me was gaining rapidly as I floundered and fell in my efforts to extricate myself.

A fallen log gave me an instant's advantage, for climbing upon it I leaped to another a few paces farther on, and in this way was able to keep clear of the mush that carpeted the surrounding ground. But the zigzag course that this necessitated was placing such a heavy handicap upon me that my pursuer was steadily gaining upon me.

Suddenly from behind I heard a tumult of howls, and sharp, piercing barks--much the sound that a pack of wolves raises when in full cry. Involuntarily I glanced backward to discover the origin of this new and menacing note with the result that I missed my footing and went sprawling once more upon my face in the deep muck.

My mammoth enemy was so close by this time that I knew I must feel the weight of one of his terrible paws before I could rise, but to my surprise the blow did not fall upon me. The howling and snapping and barking of the new element which had been infused into the melee now seemed centered quite close behind me, and as I raised myself upon my hands and glanced around I saw what it was that had distracted the DYRYTH, as I afterward learned the thing is called, from my trail.

It was surrounded by a pack of some hundred wolf-like creatures--wild dogs they seemed--that rushed growling and snapping in upon it from all sides, so that they sank their white fangs into the slow brute and were away again before it could reach them with its huge paws or sweeping tail.

But these were not all that my startled eyes perceived. Chattering and gibbering through the lower branches of the trees came a company of manlike creatures evidently urging on the dog pack. They were to all appearances strikingly similar in aspect to the Negro of Africa. Their skins were very black, and their features much like those of the more pronounced Negroid type except that the head receded more rapidly above the eyes, leaving little or no forehead. Their arms were rather longer and their legs shorter in proportion to the torso than in man, and later I noticed that their great toes protruded at right angles from their feet--because of their arboreal habits, I presume. Behind them trailed long, slender tails which they used in climbing quite as much as they did either their hands or feet.

I had stumbled to my feet the moment that I discovered that the wolf-dogs were holding the dyryth at bay. At sight of me several of the savage creatures left off worrying the great brute to come slinking with bared fangs toward me, and as I turned to run toward the trees again to seek safety among the lower branches, I saw a number of the man-apes leaping and chattering in the foliage of the nearest tree.

Between them and the beasts behind me there was little choice, but at least there was a doubt as to the reception these grotesque parodies on humanity would accord me, while there was none as to the fate which awaited me beneath the grinning fangs of my fierce pursuers.

And so I raced on toward the trees intending to pass beneath that which held the man-things and take refuge in another farther on; but the wolf-dogs were very close behind me--so close that I had despaired of escaping them, when one of the creatures in the tree above swung down headforemost, his tail looped about a great limb, and grasping me beneath my armpits swung me in safety up among his fellows.

There they fell to examining me with the utmost excitement and curiosity. They picked at my clothing, my hair, and my flesh. They turned me about to see if I had a tail, and when they discovered that I was not so equipped they fell into roars of laughter. Their teeth were very large and white and even, except for the upper canines which were a trifle longer than the others--protruding just a bit when the mouth was closed.

When they had examined me for a few moments one of them discovered that my clothing was not a part of me, with the result that garment by garment they tore it from me amidst peals of the wildest laughter. Apelike, they essayed to don the apparel themselves, but their ingenuity was not sufficient to the task and so they gave it up.

In the meantime I had been straining my eyes to catch a glimpse of Perry, but nowhere about could I see him, although the clump of trees in which he had first taken refuge was in full view. I was much exercised by fear that something had befallen him, and though I called his name aloud several times there was no response.

Tired at last of playing with my clothing the creatures threw it to the ground, and catching me, one on either side, by an arm, started off at a most terrifying pace through the tree tops. Never have I experienced such a journey before or since--even now I oftentimes awake from a deep sleep haunted by the horrid remembrance of that awful experience.

From tree to tree the agile creatures sprang like flying squirrels, while the cold sweat stood upon my brow as I glimpsed the depths beneath, into which a single misstep on the part of either of my bearers would hurl me. As they bore me along, my mind was occupied with a thousand bewildering thoughts. What had become of Perry? Would I ever see him again? What were the intentions of these half-human things into whose hands I had fallen? Were they inhabitants of the same world into which I had been born? No! It could not be. But yet where else? I had not left that earth--of that I was sure. Still neither could I reconcile the things which I had seen to a belief that I was still in the world of my birth. With a sigh I gave it up.