

CHAPTER II

A TRIP OF TERROR

I take up the story at the point where I dropped it to introduce Church's narrative.

As minute after minute elapsed and we continued in motion we changed our minds about the descent, and concluded that the inventor was going to give us a much longer ride than we had anticipated. We were startled and puzzled but not really alarmed, for the car traveled so smoothly that it gave one a sense of confidence. On the other hand, we felt a little indignation that Edmund should treat us like a lot of boys, without wills of our own. No doubt we had provoked him, though unintentionally, but this was going too far on his part. I am sure we were all hot with this feeling and presently Jack flamed out:

"Look here, Edmund," he exclaimed, dropping his customary good-natured manner, "this is carrying things with a pretty high hand. It's a good deal like kidnapping, it seems to me. I didn't give you permission to carry me off in this way, and I want to know what you mean by it and what you are about. I've no objection to making a little trip in your car, which is certainly mighty comfortable, but first I'd like to be asked whether I want to go or no."

Edmund shrugged his shoulders and made no reply. He was very busy just then with the metallic knobs. Suddenly we were jerked off our feet as if we had been in a trolley driven by a green motorman. Edmund also would have fallen if he had not clung to one of the handles. We felt that we were spinning through the air at a fearful speed. Still Edmund uttered not a word, but while we staggered upon our feet, and steadied ourselves with hands and knees on the leather-cushioned benches like so many drunken men, he continued pulling and pushing at his knobs. Finally the motion became more regular and it was evident that the car had slowed down from its wild rush.

"Excuse me," said Edmund, then, quite in his natural manner, "the thing is new yet and I've got to learn the stops by experience. But there's no occasion for alarm."

But our indignation had grown hotter with the shake-up that we had just had, and as usual Jack was spokesman for it:

"Maybe there is no occasion for alarm," he said excitedly, "but will you be kind enough to answer my question, and tell us what you're about and where we are going?"

And Henry, too, who was ordinarily as mute as a clam, broke out still more hotly:

"See here! I've had enough of this thing! Just go down and let me out. I

won't be carried off so, against my will and knowledge."

By this time Edmund appeared to have got things in the shape he wanted, and he turned to face us. He always had a magnetism that was inexplicable, and now we felt it as never before. His features were perfectly calm, but there was a light in his eyes that seemed electric. As if disdainful to make a direct reply to the heated words of Jack and Henry he began in a quiet voice:

"It was my first intention to invite you to accompany me on a very interesting expedition. I knew that none of you had any ties of family or business to detain you, and I felt sure that you would readily consent. In case you should not, however, I had made up my mind to go alone. But you provoked me more than you knew, probably, at the club, and after we had entered the car, and, being myself hot-tempered, I determined to teach you a lesson. I have no intention, however, of abducting you. It is true that you are in my power at present, but if you now say that you do not wish to be concerned in what I assure you will prove the most wonderful enterprise ever undertaken by human beings, I will go back to the shed and let you out."

We looked at one another, in doubt what to reply until Jack, who, with all his impulsiveness had more of the milk of human kindness in his heart than anyone else I ever knew, seized Edmund's hand and exclaimed:

"All right, old boy, bygones are bygones; I'm with you. Now what do you

fellows say?"

"I'm with you, too," I cried, yielding to the spur of Jack's enthusiasm and moved also by an intense curiosity. "I say go ahead."

Henry was more backward. But his curiosity, too, was aroused, and at length he gave in his voice with the others.

Jack swung his hat.

"Three cheers, then, for the modern Archimedes! You won't take that amiss now Edmund."

We gave the cheers, and I could see that Edmund was immensely pleased.

"And now," Jack continued, "tell us all about it. Where are we going?"

"Pardon me, Jack," was Edmund's reply, "but I'd rather keep that for a surprise. You shall know everything in good time; or at least everything that you can understand," he added, with a slightly malicious smile.

Feeling a little more interest than the others, perhaps, in the scientific aspects of the business, I asked Edmund to tell us something more about the nature of his wonderful invention. He responded with great good humor, but rather in the manner of a schoolmaster addressing pupils who, he knows, cannot entirely follow him.

"These knobs and handles on the walls," he said, "control the driving power, which, as I have told you, comes from the atoms of matter which I have persuaded to unlock their hidden forces. I push or turn one way and we go ahead, or we rise; I push or turn another way and we stop, or go back. So I concentrate the atomic force just as I choose. It makes us go, or it carries us back to earth, or it holds us motionless, according to the way I apply it. The earth is what I kick against at present, and what I hold fast by; but any other sufficiently massive body would serve the same purpose. As to the machinery, you'd need a special education in order to understand it. You'd have to study the whole subject from the bottom up, and go through all the experiments that I have tried. I confess that there are some things the fundamental reason of which I don't understand myself. But I know how to apply and control the power, and if I had Professor Thomson and Professor Rutherford here, I'd make them open their eyes. I wish I had been able to kidnap them."

"That's a confession that, after all, you've kidnapped us," put in Jack, smiling.

"If you insist upon stating it in that way--yes," replied Edmund, smiling also. "But you know that now you've consented."

"Perhaps you'll treat us to a trip to Paris," Jack persisted.

"Better than that," was the reply. "Paris is only an ant-hill in

comparison with what you are going to see."

And so, indeed, it turned out!

Finally all got out their pipes, and we began to make ourselves at home, for truly, as far as luxurious furniture was concerned, we were as comfortable as at the Olympus Club, and the motion of the strange craft was so smooth and regular that it soothed us like an anodyne. It was only those unnamed, subtle senses which man possesses almost without being aware of their existence that assured us that we were in motion at all.

After we had smoked for an hour or so, talking and telling stories quite in the manner of the club, Edmund suddenly asked, with a peculiar smile:

"Aren't you a little surprised that this small room is not choking full of smoke? You know that the shutters are tightly closed."

"By Jo," exclaimed Jack, "that's so! Why here we've been pouring out clouds like old Vesuvius for an hour with no windows open, and yet the air is as clear as a bell."

"The smoke," said Edmund impressively, "has been turned into atomic energy to speed us on our way. I'm glad you're all good smokers, for that saves me fuel. Look," he continued, while we, amazed, stared at him, "those fellows there have been swallowing your smoke, and glad to get it."

He pointed at a row of what seemed to be grinning steel mouths, barred with innumerable black teeth, and half concealed by a projecting ledge at the bottom of the wall opposite the entrance, and as I looked I was thrilled by the sight of faint curls of smoke disappearing within their gaping jaws.

"They are omnivorous beasts," said Edmund. "They feed on the carbon from your breath, too. Rather remarkable, isn't it, that every time you expel the air from your lungs you help this car to go?"

None of us knew what to say; our astonishment was beyond speech. We began to look askance at Edmund, with creeping sensations about the spine. A formless, unacknowledged fear of him entered our souls. It never occurred to us to doubt the truth of what he had said. We knew him too well for that; and, then, were we not here, flying mysteriously through the air in a heavy metallic car that had no apparent motive power? For my part, instead of demanding any further explanations, I fell into a hazy reverie on the marvel of it all; and Jack and Henry must have been seized the same way, for not one of us spoke a word, or asked a question; while Edmund, satisfied, perhaps, with the impression he had made, kept equally quiet.

Thus another hour passed, and all of us, I think, had fallen into a doze, when Edmund aroused us by saying:

"I'll have to keep the first watch, and all the others, too, this night."

"So then we're not going to land to-night?"

"No, not to-night, and you may as well turn in. You see that I have prepared good, comfortable bunks, and I think you'll make out very well."

As Edmund spoke he lifted the tops from some of the benches along the walls, and revealed excellent beds, ready for occupancy.

"I believe that I have forgotten nothing that we shall really need," he added. "Beds, arms, instruments, books, clothing, furs, and good things to eat."

Again we looked at one another in surprise, but nobody spoke, although the same thought probably occurred to each--that this promised to be a pretty long trip, judging from the preparations. Arms! What in the world should we need of arms? Was he going to the Rocky Mountains for a bear hunt? And clothing, and furs!

But we were really sleepy, and none of us was very long in taking Edmund at his word and leaving him to watch alone. He considerately drew a shade over the light, and then noiselessly opened a shutter and looked out.

When I saw that, I was strongly tempted to rise and take a look myself, but instead I fell asleep. My dreams were disturbed by visions of the

grinning nondescripts at the foot of the wall, which transformed themselves into winged dragons, and remorselessly pursued me through the measureless abysses of space.

When I woke, windows were open on both sides of the car, and brilliant sunshine was streaming in through one of them. Henry was still asleep, Jack was yawning in his bunk, and Edmund stood at one of the windows staring out. I made a quick toilet, and hastened to Edmund's side.

"Good morning," he said heartily, taking my hand. "Look out here, and tell me what you think of the prospect."

As I put my face close to the thick but very transparent glass covering the window, my heart jumped into my mouth!

"In Heaven's name, where are we?" I cried out.

Jack, hearing my agitated exclamation, jumped out of his bunk and ran to the window also. He gasped as he gazed out, and truly it was enough to take away one's breath!

We appeared to be at an infinite elevation, and the sky, as black as ink, was ablaze with stars, although the bright sunlight was streaming into the opposite window behind us. I could see nothing of the earth.

Evidently we were too high for that.

"It must lie away down under our feet," I murmured half aloud, "so that even the horizon has sunk out of sight. Heavens, what a height!"

I had that queer uncontrollable qualm that comes to every one who finds himself suddenly on the edge of a soundless deep.

Presently I became aware that straight before us, but afar off, was a most singular appearance in the sky. At first glance I thought that it was a cloud, round and mottled, But it was strangely changeless in form, and it had an unvaporous look.

"Phew!" whistled Jack, suddenly catching sight of it and fixing his eyes in a stare, "what's that?"

"That's the earth!"

It was Edmund who spoke, looking at us with a quizzical smile. A shock ran through my nerves, and for an instant my brain whirled. I saw that it was the truth that he had uttered, for, as sure as I sit here, his words had hardly struck my ears when the great cloud rounded out and hardened, the deception vanished, and I recognized, as clearly as ever I saw them on a school globe, the outlines of Asia and the Pacific Ocean!

In a second I had become too weak to stand, and I sank trembling upon a bench. But Jack, whose eyes had not accommodated themselves as rapidly as

mine to the gigantic perspective, remained at the window, exclaiming:

"Fiddlesticks! What are you trying to give us? The earth is down below, I reckon."

But in another minute he, too, saw it as it really was, and his astonishment equaled mine. In fact he made so much noise about it that he awoke Henry, who, jumping out of bed, came running to see, and when we had explained to him where we were, sank upon a seat with a despairing groan and covered his face. Our astonishment and dismay were too great to permit us quickly to recover our self-command, but after a while Jack seized Edmund's arm, and demanded:

"For God's sake, tell us what you've been doing."

"Nothing that ought to appear very extraordinary," answered Edmund, with uncommon warmth. "If men had not been fools for so many ages they might have done this, and more than this long ago. It's enough to make one ashamed of his race! For countless centuries, instead of grasping the power that nature had placed at the disposal of their intelligence, they have idled away their time gabbling about nothing. And even since, at last, they have begun to do something, look at the time that they have wasted upon such petty forces as steam and 'electricity,' burning whole mines of coal and whole lakes of oil, and childishly calling upon winds and tides and waterfalls to help them, when they had under their thumbs the limitless energy of the atoms, and no more understood it than a baby

understands what makes its whistle scream! It's inter-atomic force that has brought us out here, and that is going to carry us a great deal farther."

We simply listened in silence; for what could we say? The facts were more eloquent than any words, and called for no commentary. Here we were, out in the middle of space; and there was the earth, hanging on nothing, like a summer cloud. At least we knew where we were if we didn't quite understand how we had got there.

Seeing us speechless, Edmund resumed in a different tone:

"We made a fairly good run during the night. You must be hungry by this time, for you've slept late; suppose we have breakfast."

So saying, he opened a locker, took out a folding table, covered it with a white cloth, turned on something resembling a little electric range, and in a few minutes had ready as appetizing a breakfast of eggs and as good a cup of coffee as I ever tasted. It is one of the compensations of human nature that it is able to adjust itself to the most unheard-of conditions provided only that the inner man is not neglected. The smell of breakfast would almost reconcile a man to purgatory--anyhow it reconciled us for the time being to our unparalleled situation, and we ate and drank, and indulged in as cheerful good comradeship as that of a fishing party in the wilderness after a big morning's catch.

When the breakfast was finished we began to chat and smoke, which reminded me of those gulping mouths under the wainscot, and I leaned down to catch a glimpse of their rows of black fangs, thinking to ask Edmund for further explanation about them; but the sight gave me a shiver, and I felt the hopelessness of trying to understand their function.

Then we took a turn at looking out of the window to see the earth. Edmund furnished us with binoculars which enabled us to recognize many geographical features of our planet. The western shore of the Pacific was now in plain sight, and a few small spots, near the edge of the ocean, we knew to be Japan and the Philippines. The snowy Himalayas showed as a crinkling line, and a huge white smudge over the China Sea indicated where a storm was raging and where good ships, no doubt, were battling with the tossing waves.

After a time I noticed that Edmund was continually going from one window to the other and looking out with an air of anxiety. He seemed to be watching for something, and there was a look of mingled expectation and apprehension in his eyes. He had a peephole at the forward end of the car and another in the floor, and these he frequently visited. I now recalled that even while we were at breakfast he had seemed uneasy and occasionally left his seat to look out. At last I asked him:

"What are you looking for, Edmund?"

"Meteors."

"Meteors, out here!"

"Of course. You're something of an astronomer; don't you know that they hang about all the planets? They didn't give me any rest last night. I was on tender hooks all the time while you were sleeping. I was half inclined to call one of you to help me. We passed some pretty ugly fellows while you slept, I can tell you! You know that this is an unexplored sea that we are navigating, and I don't want to run on the rocks."

"But we seem to be a good way off from the earth now," I remarked, "and there ought not to be much danger."

"It's not as dangerous as it was, but there may be some of them yet around here. I'll feel safer when we have put a few more million miles behind us."

A few more million miles! We all stood aghast when we heard the words. We had, indeed, imagined that the earth looked as if it might be a million miles away, but, then, it was merely a passing impression, which had given us no sense of reality; but now when we heard Edmund say that we actually had traveled such a distance, the idea struck us with overwhelming force.

"In the name of all that's good, Edmund," cried Jack, "at what rate are we traveling, then?"

"Just at present," Edmund replied, glancing at an indicator, "we're making twenty miles a second."

Twenty miles a second! Our excited nerves had another shock.

"Why," I exclaimed, "that's faster than the earth moves in its orbit!"

"Yes, a trifle faster; but I'll probably have to work up to a little better speed in order to get where I want to go before our goal begins to run away from us."

"Ah, there you are," said Jack. "That's what I wanted to know. What is our goal? Where are we going?"

Before Edmund could reply we all sprang to our feet in affright. A loud grating noise had broken upon our ears. At the same instant the car gave a lurch, and a blaze of the most vicious lightning streamed through a window.

"Confound the things!" shouted Edmund, springing to the window, and then darting to one of his knobs and beginning to twist it with all his force.

In a second we were sprawling on the floor--all except Edmund, who kept his hold on the knob. Our course had been changed with amazing quickness, and our startled eyes beheld a huge misshapen object darting past the window.

"Here comes another!" cried Edmund, again seizing the knob.

I had managed to get my face to the window, and I certainly thought that we were done for. Apparently only a few rods away, and rushing straight at the car, was a vast black mass, shaped something like a dumb-bell, with ends as big as houses, tumbling over and over, and threatening us with annihilation. If it hit us, as it seemed sure that it would do, I knew that we should never return to the earth, unless in the form of pulverized ashes!