

## CHAPTER III

### THE PLANETARY LIMITED

But Edmund had seen the meteor sooner than I, and as quick as thought he swerved the car, and threw us all off our feet once more. But we should have been thankful if he had broken our heads, since he had saved us from instant destruction.

The danger, however, was not yet passed. Scarcely had the immense dumb-bell (which Edmund declared must have been composed of solid iron, so great was its effect on his needles) disappeared, before there came from outside a blaze so fierce that it fairly slapped our lids shut.

"A collision!" Edmund exclaimed. "The thing has struck another big meteor, and they are exchanging fiery compliments."

He threw himself flat on the floor, and stared out of the peephole. Then he jumped to his feet and gave us another tumble.

"They're all about us," he faltered, breathless with exertion; then, having drawn a deep inspiration, he continued: "We're like a boat in a raging freshet, with rocks, tree trunks, and cakes of ice threatening it on all sides. But we'll get out of it. The car obeys its helm as if it appreciated the danger. Why, I got away from that last fellow by setting

up atomic reaction against it, as a boatman pushes with his pole."

Even in the midst of our terror we could not but admire our leader. His resources seemed boundless, and our confidence in him grew with every escape. While he kept guard at the peepholes we watched for meteors from the windows. We must have come almost within striking distance of a thousand in the course of an hour, but Edmund decided not to diminish our speed, for he said that he could control the car quicker when it was under full headway.

So on we rushed, dodging the things like a crow in a flock of pestering jays, and we really enjoyed the excitement. It was more fascinating sport than shooting rapids in a careening skiff, and at last we grew so confident in the powers of our car and its commander that we were rather sorry when the last meteor passed, and we found ourselves once more in open, unimpeded space.

After that the time passed quietly. We ate our meals and went to bed and rose as regularly as if we had been at home. In one respect, however, things were very different from what they were on the earth. We had no night! The sun shone continually, although the sky was black and always glittering with stars. None of us needed to be told by our conductor that this was due to the fact that we no longer had the shadow of the earth to make night for us when the sun was behind it. The sun was now never behind the earth, or any other great opaque body, and when we wished to sleep we made an artificial night, for our special use, by closing all

the shutters. And there was no atmosphere about us to diffuse the sunlight, and so to hide the stars. We kept count of the days by the aid of a calendar clock; there seemed to be nothing that Edmund had forgotten. And it was a delightful experience, the wonder of which grew upon us hour by hour. It was too marvelous, too incredible, to be believed, and yet--there we were!

Once the idea suddenly came to me that it was astonishing that we had not long ago perished for lack of oxygen. I understood, of course, from what Edmund had said, that the mysterious machines along the wall absorbed the carbonic acid, but we must be constantly using up the oxygen. When I put my difficulty before Edmund he laughed.

"That's the easiest thing of all," he said. "Look here."

He threw open a little grating.

"In there," he continued, "there's an apparatus which manufactures just enough oxygen to keep the air in good condition. It is supplied with materials to last a month, which will be much longer than this expedition will take."

"There you are again," exclaimed Jack. "I was asking you about that when we ran into those pesky meteors. What is this expedition? Where are we going, anyway?"

"Well," Edmund replied, "since we have become pretty good shipmates, I don't see any objection to telling you. We are going to Venus."

"Going to Venus!" we all cried in a breath.

"To be sure. Why not? We've got the proper sort of conveyance, haven't we?"

There was no denying that. Our conveyance had already brought us some millions of miles out into space; why, indeed, should it not be able to carry us to Venus, or any other planet?

"How far is it to Venus?" asked Jack.

"When we quit the earth," Edmund answered, "Venus was rapidly approaching

inferior conjunction. You know what that is," addressing me, "it's when the planet comes between the sun and the earth. The distance from the earth is not always the same at such a conjunction, but I figured out that on this occasion, after allowing for the circuit we should have to make, there would be just twenty-seven million miles to travel. At an average speed of twenty miles a second we could do that distance in fifteen days, fourteen and one half hours. But, of course, I had to lose some time going slow through the earth's atmosphere, for otherwise the car would have taken fire, like a meteor, on account of the friction.

Then, too, I shall have to slow up on entering the atmosphere of Venus, which appears to be very deep and dense; so, upon the whole, I don't count on landing upon Venus in less than sixteen days from the time of our departure. We've already been out five days, and within eleven more I expect to introduce you to the inhabitants of another world."

The inhabitants of another world! Again Edmund had thrown out an idea which took us all aback.

"Do you believe there are any inhabitants on Venus?" I asked at length.

"Certainly. I know there are."

"For sure," put in Jack, stretching out his legs and pulling at his pipe.

"Who'd go twenty-seven million miles to pay a visit if he didn't know there was somebody at home?"

"Then that's what you put the arms aboard for," I remarked.

"Yes, but I hope we shall not have to use them."

"Strikes me that this is a sort of pirate ship," said Jack. "But what kind of arms have you got, Edmund?"

For answer Edmund threw open a locker and showed us a gleaming array of automatic guns and pistols and even some cutlasses.

"Decidedly piratical!" exclaimed the incorrigible Jack. "You'd better hoist the black flag. But, see here, Edmund, with all this inter-atomic energy that you talk about, why in the world didn't you invent something new--something that would just knock the Venustians silly, and blow their old planet up if necessary? Automatic arms are pretty good at home, on that unprogressive earth that you have spurned with your heels, but they'll likely be rather small pumpkins on Venus."

"I didn't prepare anything else," Edmund replied, "because, in the first place, I was too busy with more important things, and in the second place because I don't really anticipate that we shall have any use for arms. I only took these as a precaution."

"You mean to try moral suasion, I suppose," drawled Jack. "Well, anyhow, I hope they'll be glad to see us, and since it is Venus that we are going to visit, I don't look for much fighting. I'm glad you made it Venus instead of Mars, Edmund, for, from all I've heard of Mars with its fourteen-foot giants, I don't think I should like to try the pirate business in that direction."

We all laughed at Jack's fancies; but there was something tremendously thrilling in the idea. Think of landing on another world! Think of meeting inhabitants there! Really, it made one's head spin.

"Confound it, this is all a dream," I said to myself. "I'm on my back in

bed with a nightmare. I'll kick myself awake."

But do what I would I could make no dream of it. On the contrary, I felt that I had never been quite so much awake in all my life before.

After a while we all settled down to take the thing in earnest. And then the charm of it began to master our imaginations. We talked over the prospects in all their aspects. Edmund said little, and Henry nothing, but Jack and I were stirred to the bottom of our romantic souls. Henry was different. He had no romance in his make-up. He always looked at the money in a thing. To his mind, going to Venus was playing the fool, when we had at our command the means of owning the earth.

"Edmund," he said, after mumbling for a while under his breath, "this is the most utter tomfoolery that ever I heard of. Here you've got an invention that would revolutionize mechanics, and instead of utilizing it you rush off into space on a hairbrained adventure. You might have been twenty times a billionaire inside of a year if you had stayed at home and developed the thing. Why, it's folly; pure, beastly folly! Going to Venus! What can you make on Venus?"

Edmund only smiled. After a little he said:

"Well, I'm sorry for you, Henry. But then you're cut out on the ordinary pattern. But cheer up. When we go back, perhaps I'll let you take out a patent, and you can make the billions. For my part, Venus is more

interesting to me than all the money you could pile up between the Atlantic Ocean and the Rocky Mountains. Why," he continued, warming up, and straightening with a certain pride which he had, "am I not the Columbus of Space?--And you my lieutenants," he added, with a smile.

"Right you are," cried Jack enthusiastically. "The Columbus of Space, that's the ticket! Where's old Archimedes now? Buried, by Jo! He couldn't go to Venus! And what need we care for your billionaires?"

Edmund patted Jack on the back, and I rather sympathized with his enthusiasm myself.

The time ran on, and we watched anxiously the day-hand of the calendar clock. Soon it had marked a week; then ten days; then a fortnight. We knew we must be getting very close to our goal, yet up to this time neither Jack, nor Henry, nor I had caught a glimpse of Venus. Edmund, however, had seen it, but he told us that in order to do so he had been obliged to alter our course because the planet was directly in the eye of the sun. In consequence of the change of course we were now approaching Venus from the east--flanking her, so to speak--and Edmund described her appearance as that of an enormous crescent. Finally he invited us to take a look for ourselves.

I shall never forget that first view! It was only a glimpse, for Edmund was nervous about meteors again, and would allow us only a moment at the peephole because he wished to be continually on the watch himself. But,



brief as was the view, that vast gleaming sickle hanging in the black sky was the most tremendous thing I ever looked upon!

Soon afterwards Edmund changed the course again, and then we saw her no

more. We had not come upon the swarms of meteors that Edmund had expected

to find lurking about the planet, and he said that he now felt safe in running into her shadow, and making a landing on her night hemisphere. You will allow me to remind you that Schiaparelli had long before found out that Venus doesn't turn on her axis once every twenty-four hours, like the earth, but keeps always the same face to the sun; the consequence being that she has perpetual day on one side and perpetual night on the other. I asked Edmund why he should not rather land on the daylight side; but he replied that his plan was safer, and that we could easily go from one side to the other whenever we chose. It didn't turn out to be so easy after all, but that is another part of the story.

"I hardly expect to find any inhabitants on the night side," Edmund remarked, "for it must be fearfully cold there--too cold for life to exist, perhaps; but I have provided against that as far as we are concerned. Still, one can never tell. There may be inhabitants there, and at any rate I am going to find out. If there are none, we'll just stop long enough to take a look at things, and then the car will quickly transport us to the daylight hemisphere, where life certainly exists. By landing on the uninhabited side, you see, we shall have a chance to reconnoiter a little, and can approach the inhabitants on the other side

so much the more safely."

"That sounds all right enough," said Jack, "but if Venus is correctly named, I'm for getting where the inhabitants are as quick as possible."

When we swung round into the shadow of the planet we got her between the sun and ourselves, and as she completely hid the sun, we now had perpetual night about the car. Out of the peephole she looked like a stupendous black circle, blacker than the sky itself, but round the rim was a beautiful ring of light.

"That's her atmosphere," Edmund explained, "lighted up by the sun from behind. But, for the life of me, I cannot tell what those immense flames mean."

He referred to a vast circle of many-colored spires that blazed and flickered like a burning rainbow at the inner edge of the ring of light. It was one of the most awful, and yet beautiful, sights that I had ever gazed upon.

"That's something altogether outside my calculations," Edmund added. "I can't account for it at all."

"Perhaps they are already celebrating our arrival with fireworks," suggested Jack, always ready to take the humorous view of everything.

"That's not fire," Edmund responded earnestly. "But what it is I confess I can't imagine. We'll find out, however, for I haven't come all this distance to be scared off."

And here I must try to explain a very curious thing which had puzzled our senses, though not our understanding (because Edmund had promptly explained it), throughout the voyage, and that was--levitation. On our first day out from the earth, we began to notice the remarkable ease with which we handled things, and the strange tendency we had to bump into one another because we seemed to be all the time employing more strength than was necessary and almost to be able to walk on air. Jack declared that he felt as if his head had become a toy balloon.

"It's the lack of weight," said Edmund. "Every time we double our distance from the earth we lose another three quarters of our weight. If I had thought to bring along a spring dynamometer, I could have shown you, Jack, that when we were 4,000 miles above the earth's surface the 200 good pounds with which you depress the scales at home had diminished to 50, and that when we had passed about 150,000 miles into space you weighed no more than a couple of ounces. From that point on, it has been the attraction of the sun to which we have owed whatever weight we had, and the floor of the car has been toward the sun, because, at that distance from the earth, the latter ceases to exercise the master force, and the pull of the sun becomes greater than the earth's. But as we approach Venus the latter begins to restore our weight, and when we

arrive on her surface we shall weigh about four fifths as much as when we started from the earth."

"But I don't look as if I had lost any avoirdupois," said Jack, glancing at his round limbs. "And when you give us a fling I seem to strike pretty hard, though in other respects I confess I do feel a good deal like an angel."

"Ah," said Edmund, laughing, "that's the inertia of mass. Your mass is the same, although your weight has almost disappeared. Weight depends upon the distance from the attracting body, but mass is independent of everything."

"Do you mean to say that angels are massive?"

"They may be as massive as they like provided they keep well away from great centers of gravitation."

"But Venus is such a center--then there can't be any angels there."

"I hope to find something better than angels," was Edmund's smiling reply.

Now, as we drew near to Venus, the truth of Edmund's statements became apparent. We felt that our weight was returning, and our muscular activity sinking back to the normal again. We imagined that every minute

we could feel our feet pressing more heavily upon the floor.

Our approach was so rapid that the immense black circle grew visibly minute by minute. Soon it was so large that we could no longer see its boundaries through the peephole in the floor.

"We're now within a thousand miles," said Edmund, "and must be close to the upper limits of the atmosphere. I'll have to slow down, or else we'll be burnt up by the heat of friction."

He proceeded to slow down a little more rapidly than was comfortable. It was jerk after jerk, as he dropped off the power, and put on the brakes, but at last we got down to the speed of a fast express train. Soon we were so close that the surface of the planet became dimly visible, simply from the starlight. We were now settling down very cautiously, and presently we began to notice curious shafts of light which appeared to issue from the ground, as if the surface beneath us had been sprinkled with iron founderies.

"Aha!" cried Edmund, "I believe there are inhabitants on this side after all. Those lights don't come from volcanoes. I'm going to make for the nearest one, and we'll soon know what they are."

Accordingly we steered for one of the gleaming shafts. It was a thrilling moment, I can tell you--that when we first saw another world than ours under our feet! As we approached the light it threw a pale illumination

on the ground around. Everything appeared to be perfectly flat and level. It was like dropping down at night upon a vast prairie. But the features of the landscape were indistinguishable in the gloom. Edmund boldly continued to approach until we were within a hundred feet of the shaft of light, which we could now perceive issued directly from the ground. Suddenly, with the slightest perceptible bump, we touched the soil, and the car came to rest. We had landed on Venus!

"It's unquestionably frightfully cold outside," said Edmund, "and we'll now put on these things."

He dragged out of one of his many lockers four suits of thick fur garments, and as many pairs of fur gloves, together with caps and shields for the face, leaving only narrow openings for the eyes. When we had got them on we looked like so many Esquimaux. Finally Edmund handed each of us a pair of small automatic pistols, telling us to put them where they would be handy in our side pockets.

"Boarders all!" cried the irrepressible Jack. "Pirates, do your duty!"

Our preparations being made, we opened the door. The air that rushed in almost hardened us into icicles!

"It won't hurt you," said Edmund in a whisper. "It can't be down to absolute zero on account of the dense atmosphere. You'll get used to it

in a few minutes. Come on."

His whispering gave us a sense of imminent danger, but nevertheless we followed as he led the way straight toward the shaft of light. On nearing it we saw that it came out of an irregularly round hole in the ground. When we got yet nearer we were astonished to see rough steps which led down into the pit. The next instant we were frozen in our tracks! For a moment my heart stopped beating.

Standing on the steps, just below the level of the ground, and intently watching us, with eyes as big and luminous as moons, was a creature shaped like a man, but more savage than a gorilla!