

CHAPTER IV

THE CAVERNS OF VENUS

For two or three minutes the creature continued to stare at us, motionless; and we stared at him. It was so dramatic that it makes my nerves tingle now when I think of it. His eyes alone were enough to harrow up your soul. Huge beyond belief, round and luminous as full moons, they were filled with the phosphorescent greenish-yellow glare that sometimes appears in the expanded pupils of a cat or a wild beast. The great hairy head was black, but the stocky body was as white as a polar bear. The arms were apelike and very long and muscular, and the entire aspect of the creature betokened immense strength and activity.

Edmund was the first to recover from the stupor of surprise, and instantly he did a thing so apparently absurd but so marvelous in its calculated effect that no brain but his could have conceived it. It shakes me at once with laughter and recollected terror when I recall it.

"WELL, HELLO YOU!" he called out in a voice of such stentorian power that we jumped as at a thunderclap. The effect on the strange brute was electric. A film shot across the big eyes, he leaped into the air, uttering a squeak that was ridiculous, coming from an animal of such size and strength, and instantly disappeared, tumbling down the steps.

But we were as much frightened as the ugly monster himself. We stared at Edmund, speechless in our amazement. Never could I have believed it possible for such a voice to issue from the human throat. It was not the voice of our friend, nor the voice of a man at all, but an indescribable clangor; and the words I have quoted had been scarcely distinguishable, so shattered were they by the crash of sound that whirled them into our astonished ears. Edmund, seeing us gaping in speechless wonder, laughed with such an appearance of hearty enjoyment as I had never known him to exhibit--and his merriment produced another thunderous explosion that shook the air.

Then the truth burst upon me, and I exclaimed:

"It's the atmosphere!"

I had not spoken very loudly, but the words seemed to reverberate in my mouth, as if to testify to the correctness of my explanation.

"Yes," said Edmund, taking pains to moderate his voice, "you've hit it, it's the atmosphere. I had calculated on an effect of the kind, but the reality exceeds all that I had anticipated. Spectroscopic analysis as well as telescopic appearances demonstrated long ago that the atmosphere of Venus was extraordinarily extensive and dense, from which fact I inferred that we should encounter some wonderful acoustic phenomena here, and this was in my mind when, on stepping out of the car, I addressed you

in a whisper. The reaction even of the whisper on my organs of speech told me that I was right, and showed me what to expect if the full power of the voice were used. When we caught sight of the creature at the top of the pit I had no desire to shoot him, and I saw that he was too powerful to be captured alive. In a second I had decided what to do. It ran through my mind that, in a world where the density, and probably something also in the peculiar constitution of the air, had the effect of vastly magnifying sound, the phonetic and acoustic organs of the inhabitants would be modified, and that the sounds uttered by them would be much fainter than those that we are accustomed to hear from living creatures on the earth. That being so, I argued that a very great and heavy sound coming from a strange animal would produce in the creature before us a paralyzing terror. You have seen that it did so. I expect that this will give us an immense advantage to begin with. We have already inspired so great a fear that I believe that we can now safely follow the creature into its habitation, and encounter without danger any of its congeners that may be there. Nevertheless, I shall not ask you to run any risks, and I will alone descend into the pit."

"If you do, may I be hanged for sheep stealing!"

You will guess at once that it was Jack who had spoken thus.

"No, sir," he continued, "if you go, we all go. Isn't that so, boys?"

In answer to an appeal thus put, neither Henry nor myself could have hung

back even if we had had the disposition to do so. But I believe that we all instinctively felt that our place was by Edmund's side, wherever he might choose to go.

"Go ahead, then, Edmund," Jack added, seeing that we consented, "we're with you." And then his enthusiasm taking fire, as usual, he exclaimed: "Hurrah! Columbus forever! We've conquered a hemisphere with a blank shot."

And so we began our descent into the mysterious pit. The strange light that came from it, and formed a shaft in the dense atmosphere above like sunlight in a haymow, was accompanied by a considerable degree of heat, which was very grateful to our lungs after the frigid plunge that we had taken from the comfortable car. As we descended, the temperature continually rose until we were glad to throw off our Arctic togs, and leave them on a shelf of rock to await our return. But, fortunately, we did not forget to take the pistols from the pockets before leaving the garments. I am very uncertain what would have been the future course of our history if we had neglected this precaution.

It was an awful hole for depth. The steps, rudely cut, wound round and round the sides like those in a cathedral tower, but the pit was not perfectly circular. It looked like a natural formation, such as the vertical entrance to a limestone cavern, or the throat of a sleeping volcano. But whatever the nature of the pit might be, I was convinced that the steps were of artificial origin. They were reasonably regular in

height and broad enough for two, or even three, persons to go abreast.

When we had descended perhaps as much as two hundred feet, we suddenly found ourselves in a broad cavern with a surprisingly level floor. The temperature had been steadily rising all the time, and here it was as warm as in an ordinary living room. The cavern appeared to be about twenty yards broad and eight or ten feet in height, with a flat roof of rock. It was dimly illuminated by a small heap of what seemed to be hard coal, burning in a very roughly constructed brazier, which, as far as looks went, one would have said was constructed of iron.

You will imagine our surprise upon seeing these things. The appearance of the gorilla-like beast with the awful eyes had certainly not led us to anticipate the finding in his lair of any such evidences of human intelligence, and we stood fast in our tracks for a minute or two, nobody speaking a word. Then Edmund said:

"This is far better than I hoped. I had not thought about caverns, though I ought to have foreseen the probability of something of the kind. It is hard to drive out life as long as a world has solid foundations, and air for breathing. I shall be greatly surprised now if these creatures do not turn out to be at least as intelligent as our African or Australian savages."

"But," said I, "the fellow that we saw surely cannot have more

intelligence than a beast. There must be some more highly developed creatures living here."

"I'm not so sure of that," Edmund responded. "Looks go for nothing in such a case. He had arms and hands, and his brain may be well organized."

"If his brain is as big as his eyes," Jack put in, "he ought to be able to give odds to old Solomon and beat him easy. My, but I'd like to see their spectacles--if they ever wear any!"

Jack's humor recalled us from our meditation, and we began to look about more carefully. There was not a living creature in sight, but over in a corner I detected a broad hole, down which the steps continued to descend.

"Here's the way," said Edmund, discovering the steps at the same moment.

"Down we go."

He again led the way, and we resumed the descent. As we stumbled along downward we began to talk of a strange but agreeable odor which we had noticed in the cavern. Edmund said that it was due, perhaps, to some peculiar quality of the atmosphere.

"I think," he continued, "that it is heavily charged with oxygen. You have noticed that none of us feels the slightest fatigue, notwithstanding the precipitancy of our long descent."

I reflected that this might also be the cause of our rising courage, for I was sure that not one of us felt the slightest fear in thus pushing on toward dangers of whose nature we could form no idea. The steps, precisely like those above, wound round and round and led us down I should say as much as three hundred feet before we entered another cavern, larger and loftier than the first.

And there we found them!

There was never another such sight! It made our blood run cold once more, rather with surprise than fear, though the latter quickly followed.

Ranged along the farther side of the cavern, and visible in the light of another glowing heap in the center, were as many as thirty of those huge hairy creatures, standing shoulder to shoulder, their great eyes glaring like bull's-eye lanterns. But the thing that filled us with terror was their motions.

You have read, with thrilling nerves, how a huge cobra, reared on his coils, sways his terrible head from side to side before striking. Well, all those black heads before us were swaying in unison, but with a sickening circular movement, which was regularly reversed in direction. Three times by the right and then three times by the left those heads circled, in rhythmic cadence, while the luminous eyes seemed to leave phosphorescent rings in the air, intersecting one another in consequence

of the rapidity of the motion.

It was such a spectacle as I had never beheld in the wildest dream. It was baleful. It was the charm of the serpent fascinating his terrified prey. In an instant I felt my brain turning, and I staggered in spite of my utmost efforts. A kind of paralysis stiffened my limbs.

Presently, all moving together, and uttering a hissing, whistling sound, they began slowly to approach us, keeping in line, each shaggy leg lifted at the same moment, like so many soldiers on parade, while the heads continued to swing, and the glowing eyes to cut linked circles in the air. But for Edmund we should certainly have been lost. Standing a little to the fore, he spoke to us over his shoulder, in a low voice:

"Take out your pistols, but don't shoot unless they make a rush. Then kill as many as you can. I'll knock over the leader in the center, and I think that will be enough."

We could as easily have stirred our arms if we had been marble statues, but he promptly raised his pistol, and the explosion followed on the instant. The report was like an earthquake. It shocked us into our senses and almost out of them again. The weight of the air and the confinement of the cavern magnified and concentrated the sound so that it was awful beyond belief. The fellow in the center was hurled back as if shot from a catapult, and the others fell at flat as he, and lay there groveling, their big eyes filming and swaying, but no longer in unison.

The charm was broken, and as we saw our fearful enemies prostrate, our courage returned at a bound.

"I thought as much," said Edmund coolly. "But I'm sorry now that I aimed at that fellow; the sound alone would have sufficed. It was not necessary to take life. However, we should probably have had to come to it eventually, and now we have them thoroughly cowed. Our safety consists in keeping them terrified."

Thus speaking, Edmund boldly approached the groveling row, and pushed with his foot the furry body of the one he had shot. The bullet had gone through his head. At Edmund's approach the creatures sank lower on the rocky floor, and those nearest him turned up their moon eyes with an expression of submission and supplication that was grotesque. He motioned us to join him and, imitating him, we began to pat and smooth the shrinking bodies until, understanding that we would not hurt them, they gradually acquired confidence.

In the meantime the crowd in the cavern increased, others coming in through side passages, and exhibiting the utmost astonishment at the spectacle which greeted them. It was clear that those who had taken part in the opening scene imparted to the newcomers a knowledge of the situation of affairs, and we could see that our prestige was thoroughly established. It remained to utilize our advantage, and we looked to Edmund to show how it should be done. He was equal to the undertaking,

but I shall not trouble you with the details of his diplomacy. Let it suffice to say that by a combination of gentleness and firmness he quickly reduced almost the entire population of the caverns (for, as we afterwards discovered, there were a dozen or more of these underground dwellings connected by horizontal passages through the rocks) into subjection to his will. I say "almost," because, as you will see in a little while, there were certain members of this extraordinary community who possessed a spirit of independence too strong to be so easily subdued.

As we became better acquainted with the cave dwellers we found that they were by no means as savage as they looked. Their appearance was certainly grotesque, and even unaccountable. Why, for instance, should their heads have been covered with coarse black disordered hair while their bodies, from the neck down, were almost beautiful with a natural raiment of golden white, as soft as silk and as brilliant as floss? I never could explain it, and Edmund was no less puzzled by this peculiarity. The immense size of their eyes did not seem astonishing after we began to reflect upon the consequences of the relative lack of light in their world. It was but a natural adjustment to their environment; with such eyes they could see in the dark better than cats. Their feet were bare and covered on the soles with thick soft skin, while the insides of their long hands were almost as white and delicate as those of a human being.

Their intelligence was sufficiently demonstrated by the construction of the hundreds of rocky steps leading from the caverns to the surface of

the ground, and by their employment of fire, and manufacture of the metallic braziers which contained it. But this was not all. We found that in some of the winding passages connecting the caverns they cultivated food. It consisted entirely of vegetables of various kinds, and all unlike any that I ever saw on the earth. Water dripped from the roofs of these particular passages, and the almost colorless vegetation thrived there with astonishing luxuriance. They had many simple ways of cooking their food, and it was evident that they possessed some form of salt, though we did not discover the deposit from which they must have drawn it. They collected water in cisterns hollowed in the rock.

Although we still had abundance of food in the car, Edmund insisted on trying theirs, and it proved to be very palatable.

"This is fortunate, though hardly surprising," said Edmund. "If we had found the food on Venus uneatable, we should indeed have been in a fine fix. While we remain here we will eat as the natives eat, and save our own supplies for future need."

The only brute animals that we saw in the caverns were some doglike creatures, about as large as terriers, but very furry, which showed the utmost terror whenever we appeared.

One of the first things that we discovered outside the main cavern where we had made our debut was the burial ground of the community. This happened when they came to dispose of the fellow that Edmund had shot.

They formed a regular procession, which greatly impressed us, and we followed them as they bore the body through several winding ways into a large cavern, at a considerable distance from any of the others. Here they had dug a grave, and, to our astonishment, there appeared to be something resembling a religious ceremony connected with the interment. And then, for the first time, we distinguished the females from the others. But a still greater surprise awaited us. It was no less than plain evidence of regular family relationship.

As the body was lowered into the grave one of the females approached with every sign of distress and sorrow. Jack declared that he saw tears running down her hairy cheeks. She held two little ones by the hand, and this spectacle produced an astonishing effect upon Edmund, revealing an entirely new side of his character. I have told you that he expressed regret for having killed the fellow in the cavern, but now, at the sight before him, he seemed filled with remorse.

"I wish I had never come here!" he said bitterly. "The first thing I have done is to kill an inoffensive and intelligent creature."

"Intelligent, perhaps," said Jack, "but inoffensive--not by a long shot! Where'd we have been if you hadn't killed him? They'd have made mincemeat of us."

"No," replied Edmund, sorrowfully shaking his head, "it wasn't necessary."

The noise would have sufficed; and I ought to have known it."

"Why didn't you shout, then? That scared the first one," put in Henry, whose soul, it must be said, was not overflowing with sympathy.

"I did what I thought was best at the moment," Edmund replied, with a broken voice. "They were so many and so threatening that I imagined my voice alone might not be effective. But I'm sorry, sorry!"

"Henry, you're a fool!" cried the sympathetic Jack. "Come now, Edmund," he continued, kindly laying a hand on his shoulder, "what you did was the only thing under heaven that could have been done. You're wrong to blame yourself. By Jo, if you hadn't done it I would!"

But Edmund only shook his head, as if refusing to be comforted. It was the first sign of weakness that we had seen in our incomparable leader, but I am sure it only increased our respect for him--at least that's true of Jack and me. After that I noticed that Edmund was far more gentle than before in his relations with the people of the caverns.

Not long after this painful incident we made a discovery of extreme interest. It was nothing less than a big smithy! Edmund had foretold that we should find something of the kind.

"Those braziers and cooking pots," he had said, "and the tools that must have been needed to build the steps and to dig their graves, prove that

they know how to work in iron. If it is not done in these caverns, then they get it from some other similar community. But I think it likely that we shall come upon some signs of the work hereabouts."

"Maybe they import it from Pittsburg," was the remark that fun-loving Jack could not refrain from making.

"Well, you'll see," said Edmund.

And, as I have already told you, he was right. We did find the smithy, with several stout fellows pounding out rude tools with equally rude hammers of iron. Of course we could ask them no questions, for their language was only a kind of squeak, and they seemed to converse mostly by means of expressive signs. But Edmund was not long in drawing his conclusions.

"This," he said, after closely examining the metal, "is native iron. There's nothing remarkable in the fact that it should be here. All the solid planets, as you know" (turning to me), "are very largely composed of iron, and Venus, being nearer the center of the system, may have proportionally more of it than the earth. And these fellows have found out its usefulness, and how to work it. There's nothing surprising in that, either, for some of our savages have done as much on the earth. Now I'll make another prediction--we are going to find coal here. That is inevitable, since we know that they burn it in the caverns. I shouldn't wonder if it were close at hand, from the look of these rocks."

He approached the wall of the cavern containing the smithy, and immediately exclaimed:

"Look here! Here it is!"

And sure enough, on joining him we saw a seam of as fine anthracite as Pennsylvania ever produced.

"A Carboniferous Age on Venus!" Edmund continued. "What do you think of that? But, of course, it was sure to be so; all the planets that are old enough have been through practically the same stages. Think of it! The plants that gave origin to this coal must have flourished here when Venus still rotated on her axis rapidly enough to have day and night succeeding one another on all sides of her, for now no vegetation except the insignificant plants that grow in these caverns can live on this hemisphere. And think, too, of the countless ages that must have been consumed in slowing down her rotation by the friction of her ocean tides."

"Has Venus got any oceans?" asked Jack.

"I haven't a doubt of it; but we shall find none on this side, although they must once have been here."

We all mused for a time on the subject that Edmund had started, when

suddenly his face lighted up with the greatest animation, and he exclaimed, but as if speaking to himself rather than to us:

"Capital! It couldn't have happened better!"

"What's capital?" drawled Jack.

"Why, this smithy, and these Tubal Cains here. Unconsciously they have solved for me a problem that has given me considerable trouble. Almost as soon as we got acquainted with the people of the caverns the idea occurred to me that I should like to take some of them with us when we visit the other hemisphere. There are many interesting observations that their presence on that side of Venus would give rise to, and, besides, they might be of great use to us. Of course I meant to bring them back to their home. But the puzzling question has been how to transport them. The car has a full load already."

"They've got good legs; make 'em walk," said Jack.

Edmund burst into a laugh.

"Why, Jack," he asked, "how far do you think it is to the other side of Venus?"

"I don't know," said Jack, "but I suppose it's not very far round her. How far is it?"

"Five thousand miles, at least, to the edge of the sunlit hemisphere."

Jack whistled.

"By Jo! I wouldn't have believed it."

"Well, it's a fact," said Edmund, "and of course I don't propose to take several months to make the journey. Now the sight of these fellows at work has shown me just how it can be done in short order. It's this way: I'll have iron sleds made, put the natives that I propose to take along upon them, hitch them by wire cables, which luckily I've got, to the car, and away we'll spin. The power of the car is practically unlimited, and, as you have observed, the ground is as flat and smooth as a prairie, and, moreover, is coated with an icy covering."

Jack glowed with enthusiasm over this project, and was about to indulge in one of his characteristic outbreaks, when there came an interruption which ended in a drama that put silver streaks among my coal-black locks! Some one came in where we were and called off the workmen, who went out with the others in great haste. Of course we followed at their heels. On reaching the principal cavern, we found a singular scene. Two natives, whom we had never seen before, were evidently in charge of some kind of a ceremony. They wore tall, conical hats made of polished metal and covered with hieroglyphics, and carried staves of iron in their hands.

"Priests," Edmund immediately whispered. "Now we'll see something interesting."

The "priests" marshaled all the others, numbering several hundreds, into a long column, and then began a slow, solemn march up the steps. The leaders produced a squeaking music by blowing into the ends of their staves. Women were mingled with men, and even the children were there, too. We followed at the tail of the procession, our curiosity at the highest pitch. At the rate we went it must have taken nearly an hour to mount the steps, but at last all emerged in the open air, where the cold struck to our marrow. The natives didn't seem to mind it, but we ran back and donned our furs. Then we re-ascended and stepped out into the Arctic night, finding the crowd assembled not far from the entrance to the cavern. The frosty sky was ablaze with stars, and directly overhead shone a planet of amazing size and splendor with a little one beside it.

"The earth and the moon!" exclaimed Edmund.

I cannot describe the flood of feeling that went over me at that sight! But in a moment Edmund interrupted my meditation by saying, in a quick, nervous way:

"Look at that!"

The natives had formed themselves in a circle with the two priests standing alone in the center. All but these two had dropped on their

knees, while the leaders, elevating their long arms toward the zenith, gazed upward, uttering a kind of chant in their queer, squeaking voices.

"Don't you see what they're about?" demanded Edmund, twitching me irritably by the sleeve. "They're worshipping the earth!"

It was the truth--the amazing truth! They were worshipping our planet in the sky! And, indeed, she looked worth worshipping. Never have I seen so splendid a star. She was twenty times as bright as the most brilliant planet that any terrestrial astronomer ever beheld; and the moon, glowing beside her like an attendant, redoubled the beauty of the sight.

"It's just the moment of the conjunction," said Edmund. "This is their religion; the earth is their goddess, and when she is nearest and brightest they perform this ceremony in her honor. I wouldn't have missed this for a world."

Suddenly the two priests began to pirouette, and as they whirled more and more rapidly, their huge glowing eyes made phosphorescent circles in the gloom like those that had so alarmed and fascinated us in the cavern. They gyrated round the ring of worshipers with accelerated speed, and all those poor creatures fell under the fascination and drooped with heads to the ground. Now for the first time I caught sight of an oblong object rising a couple of feet above the ground in the center of the circle. I was wondering what it might be when the spinning priests, who had gradually drawn closer to the ring of worshipers, dived into the circle,

and, catching each a native in his arms, ran with their captives to the curious object that I have just described.

"It's a sacrificial stone!" exclaimed Edmund. "They're going to kill them as an offering to the earth and her child the moon."

I was frozen with horror at the sight, but just as the second priest reached the altar, where the first victim had already been pinned with the sharp point of the sacrificial staff, his captive, suddenly recovering his senses, and terrified by the awful fate confronting him, uttered a cry, wrenched himself loose, and, running like the wind, leaped over the circle and disappeared in the darkness. The fugitive passed close by us, and Jack shouted as he darted past:

"Good boy!"

The enraged priest was after him like lightning, and as he came near us his awful eyes seemed to emit actual flames. But the runner had vanished. Without an instant's hesitation the priest shot out his great arm and caught me by the throat! In another second I felt myself carried in a bound, as if a tiger had seized me, over the drooping heads of the worshipers and toward the horrible altar.