

CHAPTER V

OFF FOR THE SUN LANDS

Dreadful as the moment was, I did not lose my senses. On the contrary, my mind was fearfully clear and active. There was not a horror that I missed. The strength and agility of my captor were astounding. I could no more have struggled with him than with a lion. Only one thing flashed upon me to do; I yelled with all the strength of my lungs. But they had become accustomed to our voices now, and the maddened creature was so intent upon his fell purpose that a cannon-shot would not have diverted him from it.

He got me to the altar, where the preceding victim already lay with his heart torn out, and, pressing me against it with all his bestial force, raised the pointed staff to transfix me. With dying eyes I saw the earth gleaming, magnificent, directly over my head, and my heart bounded with unreasoning hope at the sight. It was my mother planet, powerful to save!

All this passed in a second, while the dreadful spear was poised for its work. Even in that fraction of time I noticed the bunching muscles of the murderer's hairy arm, and then I pressed my eyes shut.

Bang!

Something touched me, and I felt the warm blood gushing. Then I knew no more.

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In the midst of a dream of boyhood scenes a murmur of familiar voices awoke me. I opened my eyes, but as I could not make out where I was, closed them again.

Then I heard Edmund saying:

"He's coming out all right."

Thereupon, I reopened my eyes, but still the scene puzzled me. I saw Edmund's face, and behind those of Jack and Henry, wearing anxious looks. But this was not my room! It seemed to be a cave, with faint firelight reflections on the walls.

"Where am I?" I asked.

"Back in the cavern, and coming along all right," said Edmund.

Back in the cavern! What did he mean? Then, suddenly, memory returned.

"So he didn't sacrifice me!" I cried.

"Not on your life!" Jack's hearty voice responded. "Edmund was too quick for that."

"But only by a fraction of a second!" said Edmund, smiling.

"What happened, then?" I asked, my recollections coming back stronger and stronger.

"A mighty good shot happened," said Jack. "The best I ever saw."

I looked inquiringly at Edmund. He saw that I could bear it, and he began:

"When that fellow snatched you up and leaped inside the circle I had my furs wrapped so closely around me, not anticipating any danger, that for quite ten seconds I was unable to get out my pistol. I tore the garment open just in time, for already he was pressing you against the accursed altar with his spear poised. I didn't waste any time finding my aim, but even as it was the iron point had touched you when the bullet crashed through his brain. The shock swerved the weapon a little and you were only wounded in the shoulder. You got a scratch which might have been serious but for your Arctic coat. The fellow fell dead beside you, and under the circumstances I felt compelled to shoot the other one also, for he was insane with the delirium of their bloody rite, and I knew that our lives would never be safe if he remained ready for mischief.

"I'm sorry to have had to begin killing right and left again, but I guess that's the lot of all invaders, wherever they may go. It's the second lesson for these savages, and I believe it will prove final. When their priests were dead and the others had no fight in them, even if they had intended any harm to us. Nobody knows to what those chaps might have led them, and my conscience is easy this time."

"How long have I been here?" I asked.

"Two days by the calendar clock?" replied Jack.

"Yes, two days," Edmund assented. "I never saw a man so knocked out by a shock, for the wound wasn't much; I fixed that up in five minutes. But I don't blame you. In your place I should have been scared to the bottom of my soul also. But look at yourself."

He held a pocket mirror before me, and then I saw that my hair was streaked with gray!

"But we haven't been idle in the meanwhile," Edmund went on. "I've got two sleds nearly completed, and to-morrow at midnight--earth time--I mean to set out for the sunny lands of Venus."

"How in the world could you have worked so fast?" I asked in surprise.

"Because I had certain tools in the car which vastly facilitated the operation; but I must admit that the savage blacksmiths worked well, too, and showed surprising intelligence in comprehending my directions. Perhaps that was because I had learned their language."

"Learned their language!" I exclaimed, staring in amazement.

"Well, perhaps that's putting it a little too strong; but I have learned enough to establish a pretty good understanding with them. There's nothing like working together to make intelligent creatures comprehend one another."

"But what kind of a language is it, then?" I asked.

"A language to make your hair stand on end," put in Jack. "The language that ghosts speak, I reckon! Not that I understand the least little bit of it, but I judge from what Edmund says."

With increasing bewilderment I looked at our leader. He smiled, and then looked thoughtful for a moment before again speaking. At last he said:

"It's a subject that I may be better able to discuss after I have learned more about it. All I can say at present is that it appears to be a kind of telepathy. You know that their voices seem hardly more cultivated, or capable of regular articulation, than those of mere brutes; and, besides, they have a certain horror of sound. These smiths wear coverings over

their ears to minify the noise of their hammering. Yet they are able to converse, partly by physical signs, but more, I am sure, by some means which they possess of transferring thought without the mediation of any senses familiar to us. Sometimes I imagine that their extraordinary eyes play a large part in the phenomenon. But, however that may be, they certainly are able to read some of my thoughts, when we are in close relations and working together. One of them is especially gifted in this way, and what do you think? I have discovered his name!"

"Now, Edmund--" I began incredulously.

"Yes," he persisted, "it's a fact. You are to remember that they do interchange some of their ideas by means of sounds, and they have certain words, among which I am disposed to think are their individual designations. One of these words particularly attracted my attention because I observed that it was always addressed to the person I have just spoken of, and I finally concluded that it was his name. As near as I can imitate it, it sounds something like 'Juba.' So that's what I call him, and he's going to be the chief of the party that I propose to take with us. His services may be invaluable to us."

A great deal more was said on this curious subject, but since we did not arrive at a complete understanding of it until after we had reached the other side of the planet, I shall postpone any further explanation to the chapters which will be devoted to our astonishing adventures on that part of Venus.

My wound, as Edmund had said, was very slight, and the effects of the shock having passed off during the period of my unconsciousness, I was soon busy with the others in making the final preparations for our departure. The sleds were, of course, very rude affairs, but they were also very strong. Among the innumerable stores which Edmund's foresight had led him to put into the car were a number of exceedingly strong but light metallic cables. With these the two sleds were hitched, one behind the other, and a line about a hundred feet long connected them with the car. The latter could thus rise to a considerable height without lifting the sleds from the ground.

The sleds were provisioned from the stores of the natives, and we also took some of their food in the car, not only to eke out our own but because we had come to like it.

Edmund had already chosen the fellows who were to accompany us, and among them were two of the smiths besides Juba. In all they were eight. How he succeeded in persuading them I do not know, but not the slightest objection was apparent on their part, or on the part of their compatriots in the caverns. We were all ready at the predetermined time, and the scene at our departure was a strange one.

At least five hundred natives had assembled in a furry crowd around the entrance to the caverns to see us off. When we started, the fellows on

the sleds, being unused to the motion, clung together like so many awkward white bears taking a ride in the circus. Their friends stood about the ill-omened sacrificial altar, waving their long arms, while their huge eyes goggled in the starlight.

Jack, in a burst of enthusiasm, fired four or five parting shots from his pistol. As the reports crashed through the heavy air, you should have seen the crowd vanish down the hole! The sight made me wince, for they must have gone down like a cataract, all heaped together. But they were tough, and I trust no heads were broken. The effect on the eight fellows on the sleds came near being disastrous. I expected to see them leap off and run, which no doubt they would have done if Edmund had not taken, for other reasons, the precaution to tie them fast. But they strained at their bonds, and squealed in terror.

"Give me your pistol!" commanded Edmund, in a voice of thunder, and with blazing eyes.

Jack was almost twice his size, but he handed over the pistol with the air of a rebuked schoolboy.

"When you learn how to use it, I'll give it back to you," said Edmund sternly, and that closed the incident.

Then we began gradually to put on speed, and as the ground was icy smooth

and entirely unobstructed, we were soon traveling at the rate of sixty miles an hour. The plan of the sleds worked like magic, and after their first terror had passed away it was plain to be seen that the natives enjoyed the new sensation immensely. And, indeed, it was a glorious spin!

But in a little while a danger developed which we had not thought of. It arose from the existence of other caverns whose mouths opened upon the plain. To have precipitated the sleds into these would have been fatal. Luckily, shafts of light issued from all of them, and warned by these, we managed to avoid the danger. But it was not entirely passed before we had traveled at least a hundred miles. It was like an immense city of prairie dogs without mounds. The cavern that we had discovered on our arrival was evidently situated on the outskirts of the group, and now we were passing through the center of it. Occasionally we saw a huge white form disappear in one of the holes as we swiftly approached, but that was all we beheld of the inhabitants. But the spectacle of the shafts of light rising all around us was amazing. When we were in the midst of it Edmund hesitated for a moment, muttering that we had been too hasty and should have remained longer to study the peculiarities of this wonderful world of night; but finally he decided to keep on, and soon afterwards we saw the last of the caverns. Then, as there appeared to be no obstructions of any kind, the speed was worked up to a hundred miles an hour. Going straight ahead as we did, there was no danger of the sleds being overturned.

Having, as Edmund had calculated, about five thousand miles to go before reaching the edge of the sun-illuminated hemisphere, it was evident that,

at our present rate of progress, we should arrive there in a little over two days by the calendar clock. We guided our course by the stars, and for me one of the most interesting things was to see the earth sinking toward the horizon, accompanied by the stars, as if the heavens were revolving in a direction opposed to our line of travel. We smoked and talked and ate and slept in the old way, while the marvelous mouths in the wall resumed their strange deglutition. Thus the time passed, without ennui, until, unexpectedly, a new phenomenon captured our attention.

Ahead, through the peephole, Edmund had descried again the flaming spires

which had so astonished us on our approach to Venus. But now their appearance was splendid and imposing beyond words. Above them rose an arc

of pearly light which grew higher every hour. And with the arc of light rose the flames also. At the same time they seemed to spread to the right and the left, until they were simultaneously visible from both of the side windows of the car. Their colors were wonderful--red, green, purple, orange--all the hues of the prism.

"There is the old mystery again," exclaimed Edmund, "and I can no more explain it now than I could when we first saw it on nearing the planet.

The arc of light above is natural enough; it's simply the dawn. The sun never rises on this side of Venus, but it will rise for us because we are approaching it, and the light is the first indication that we are getting near enough to the border between day and night for some of the sun's rays to be bent over the horizon by refraction. But those flames! See how

steady they are as a whole, and yet how they change color like a slowly turning prism."

"Don't, for God's sake, run us into a conflagration," said Jack. "I'm ready to believe anything of this topsy-turvy old planet, and I shouldn't be surprised if the other side is all fire as this one is all frost. I can stand these hairy beasts, but I'll be hanged if I want to be introduced among salamanders."

"That's not real fire," said Edmund. "When we get a little nearer we can see what it is. In the meantime I'll try to think it out."

The result of Edmund's meditations, when he announced it to us, an hour later, awoke as much amazement in our minds as anything that had yet occurred. He had been sitting silent in his corner, occasionally taking a glimpse through the peephole, or one of the windows, when suddenly he slapped his thigh, and springing to his feet, exclaimed:

"They're mountains of crystal!"

"Mountains of crystal!" we echoed.

"Nothing else in the world, and I am ashamed not to have foreseen the thing. It's plain enough when you come to think about it. Remember that Venus being a world lying half in the daylight and half in the night, is necessarily as hot on one side as it is cold on the other. All of the

clouds and floating vapors are on the day side, where the sunbeams act. The heated air charged with moisture rises over the sunward hemisphere, and flows off above, on all sides, toward the night side, while from the latter cold air flows in beneath to take its place. Along the junction of the two hemispheres the clouds and moisture are condensed by the intense cold, and fall in ceaseless snowstorms. This snow descending for ages has piled up in mountainous masses whose height may be increased in some places by real mountain ranges buried beneath. The atmospheric moisture cannot pass very far into the night hemisphere without being condensed, and so it is all arrested within a ring, or band, extending completely around the planet, and marking the division between perpetual day and perpetual night. The appearance of gigantic flames is produced by the sunbeams striking these mountains of ice and snow from behind and breaking into prismatic fire."

We listened to this explanation, so simple and yet so wonderful, with mingled feelings of astonishment and admiration. And then we turned again to regard the phenomenon, which now, with our nearer approach, had become splendid and awful beyond description.

In a few minutes Edmund addressed us again. "I foresee now," he said, "considerable trouble for us. There has been a warning of that, too, if I had but heeded it. I've noticed for some time that a wind, getting gradually stronger, has been following us, sometimes dying out and then coming on again stronger than before. It is likely that this wind gets to

be a perfect hurricane in the neighborhood of those strange mountains. It is the back suction, caused, as I have already told you, by the rising of the heated air on the sunny side of the planet. It may play the deuce with us when we get into the midst of it. I shall have to be cautious."

He immediately reduced the speed to not more than ten miles an hour, and at once we noticed the wind of which he had spoken. It came now in great gusts from behind, rapidly increasing in frequency and fury. Soon it was strong enough to drive the sleds without any pull upon the cable, and sometimes they were forced directly under the car, and even ahead of it, the natives clinging to one another in the utmost terror. Edmund managed to govern the motions of the car for a time, holding it back against the storm, but as he confessed, this was a contingency he had made no provision for, and eventually we became almost as helpless as a ship in a typhoon.

"Of course I could cut loose from the sleds and run right out of this," said Edmund, "but that would never do. I've taken them into my service and I'm bound to look out for them. If there was room for them in the car it would be all right. Let's see. Yes! I've got it. I'll fetch up the sleds and fasten them underneath the car, like baskets to a balloon, and so carry the whole thing. There's plenty of power; it's only room that's wanting."

No sooner said than done with Edmund. By this time we were getting into the ice, huge hills of which surrounded us. Edmund dropped the car in the

lee of one of these strange hummocks. Here the force of the wind was broken, and the sky directly over us was free from clouds, but a short distance ahead we could see them whirling and tumbling in mighty masses of tumultuous vapor. Lashing the two sleds together we attached them about ten feet below the bottom of the car. Then the natives, who had been unbound, and had stood looking on in utter bewilderment, were securely fastened on the sleds. We entered the car and the power was turned on.

"We'll rise straight up," said Edmund, "and as soon as we are out of the wind current we will sail over the mountains and come down on the other side as nice as you please. Strange that I didn't think of carrying the sleds in this way to begin with."

It was a beautiful program that Edmund had outlined, and we had complete confidence in our leader's ability to carry it through; but it didn't work as expected. Even his genius had met its match this time.

No sooner had we risen out of the protection of the hill of ice than the hurricane caught us. It was a blast of such power and ferocity that in an instant it had the car spinning like a teetotum, and then it shot us ahead, banging the sleds against the car as if they had been tassels. It is a wonder of wonders that the poor creatures on them were not flung off, but fortunately we had taken particular pains with their lashings, and as for knocks, they could stand them like so many bears.

In the course of twenty minutes we must have traveled twice as many miles, perfectly helpless to arrest our mad rush because, Edmund said, the atomic reaction partly refused to work, and he could not rise as he had expected to do. We were pitched hither and thither, and were sprawling on the floor more than half the time. The noise was awful, and nobody tried to speak after Edmund had shouted his single communication about the power, which would have filled us with dismay if we had had leisure to think.

The shutters were open, and suddenly I saw through one of the windows a sight which I thought must surely be my last. The car had been sweeping through a dense cloud of boiling vapors, and these had without warning split open before my eyes--and there, almost in contact with the car, was a glittering precipice of solid ice, gleaming with wicked blue flashes, and we were rushing upon it as if shot out of a cannon!

The next instant came a terrific shock, which I thought must have crushed the car like an eggshell, and down we fell--down and down!