

CHAPTER VI

LOST IN THE CRYSTAL MOUNTAINS

If we had seen the danger earlier, and had not been so tumbled about by the pitching of the car, it is possible that Edmund would have prevented the collision, in spite of the partial disablement of his apparatus. The blow against the precipice of ice was not as severe as it had seemed to me, and the car was not smashed; but the fall was terrible! There was only one thing which saved us from destruction. At the base of the mighty cliff against which the wind had hurled the car an immense deposit of snow had collected, and into this we plunged. We were all thrown together in a heap, the car and the sleds being entangled with the wire ropes.

Fortunately the stout glass windows were not broken, and after we had struggled to our feet Edmund managed to open the door. Before emerging he bade us put on our furs, but even with them we found the cold outside all but unendurable. Yet the natives paid no attention to it. Not one of them was seriously hurt, although they were firmly attached to the sleds, and unable to undo their fastenings. We set them loose, and then began seriously to examine the situation.

Above us towered the vertical precipice disappearing in the whirling clouds, and the wind drove square against it with the roar of Niagara. The air was filled with snow and ice dust, and at intervals we could not

see objects three feet away from our noses. Our poor furry companions huddled together, and being of no use to themselves or us, suffered more from the noise, and from the terror inspired by the snow than from any injuries that they had received.

"We've got to get out of this mighty quick," shouted Edward. "Hustle now and repair ship."

We got to work at once, Juba aiding us a little under Edmund's direction, and soon we had the sleds out of the tangle and properly attached. Then we replaced the natives on their seats, and entered the car. Edmund began to fumble with his apparatus. After some ten minutes' work he said, in an evasive way, that the damage was not serious enough to prevent the working of the car, but I thought I caught an expression of extreme anxiety in his face. Still, his manner indicated that he considered himself master of the situation.

"You notice," he said, "that this wind is variable, and there lies our chance. When the blasts weaken, the air springs back from the face of the cliff and then whirls round to the right. I've no doubt that there is a passage in that direction through which the wind finds its way behind this icy mountain, and if we can get there, too, we shall undoubtedly find at least partial shelter. I'm going to take advantage of the first lull."

It worked out just as he had predicted. As the wind surged back after a

particularly vicious rush against the great blue cliff, we cut loose and went sailing up into it, rushing past the glittering wall so swiftly that it made our heads swim. In two or three minutes we rounded a corner, and then found ourselves in a kind of atmospheric eddy, where the car simply spun round and round, with the sleds whirling below it.

"Now for it!" shouted Edmund. "Hang on!"

He touched a knob, and instantly we rose with immense speed. We must have

shot up a couple of thousand feet, when the wind, coming over the top of the icy barrier we had just flanked, caught us again, and swept us off on a horizontal course. Then, suddenly, the air cleared all round about, as if a magic broom had swept away the clouds. The spectacle that was revealed--but why try to describe it! No language could do it. Yet I must tell you what we saw.

We were in the heart of the Crystal Mountains! They towered round us on every side, and stretched away in interminable ranges of shining pinnacles. Such shapes! Such colors! Such flashing and blazing of gigantic rainbows and prisms! There were mountains that looked to my amazed eyes as lofty as Mont Blanc, and as massive, every solid mile of which was composed of crystalline ice, refracting and reflecting the sunbeams with iridescent splendor. For now we could begin to see a part of the orb of the sun itself, prodigious in size, and poised on the edge of the gem-glittering horizon, where the jeweled summits split its beams

into a thousand haloes.

There was one mighty peak, still ahead of us, but toward which we were rushed sidewise by the wind, which surpassed all the others in marvelousness. It towered majestically above our level--a superb, stupendous, coruscating Alp of Light! On every side it darted blinding rays of a hundred splendid hues, as if a worldful of emeralds, rubies, sapphires, and diamonds had been heaped together in one gigantic pile and transfused with a sunburst. Even Edmund was for a moment speechless with astonishment at this wildly magnificent sight. But presently he spoke, very calmly, though what he said changed our amazement to terror.

"The trouble with the apparatus is very serious. I am unable to make the car rise higher. It will no longer react against an obstacle. We are entirely at the mercy of the wind. If it carries us against that glittering devil no power under heaven can save us."

If my hair had not whitened before it surely would have whitened now!

When we were swept against the first icy precipice the danger had come unexpectedly, out of a concealing cloud, and anticipation was swallowed up in the event. But now we had to bear the fearful strain of expectation, with the paralyzing knowledge that nothing that we could do could aid us in the least. I thought that even Edmund's face paled with fear.

On we rushed, still borne sidewise, so that the spectacle was burned into our eyes, as, with the fascination of impending death, we gazed helpless out of the window. Now we were upon it! Instinctively I threw myself backward; but the blow did not come. Instead there was a wild rush of ice crystals sweeping the thick glass.

"Look!" shouted Edmund. "We are safe! See how the particles of ice are swept from the face of the peak by the tempest. They leap toward us, and are then whirled round the mountain. The compacted air forms a buffer. We may yet touch the precipice, but the wind, having free vent on both sides, will carry us one way or the other without a serious shock."

He had hardly finished speaking, in a voice that had risen to a shriek with the effort to make himself heard, when the crisis came. We did just touch a projecting ridge, but the wind, howling past it, carried us in an instant round the obstruction.

"Scared ourselves for nothing," said Edmund, in a quieter voice, as the roar died down. "We were really as safe all the time as a boat in a deep rapid. The velocity of the current sheered us off."

Our hearts beat more steadily again, but there was a greater danger, of which he had warned us, but which we had not had time to contemplate. I, at least, began to think of it with dismay when the scintillant peak was left behind, and I saw Edmund again working away at his machinery.

Presently it was manifest that we were rapidly sinking.

"What's the matter?" I cried. "We seem to be going down."

"So we are," he replied quietly, "and I fear that we shall not go up again very soon. The power is failing all the time. It will be pretty hard to have to stop indefinitely in this frightful place, but I am afraid that that is our destiny."

Lost and helpless in these mountains of ice and this world of gloom and storm! The thought was too terrible to be entertained. Yet it was forced into our minds even more by our leader's manner than by his words. Not one of us failed to comprehend its meaning, and it was characteristic that, while talkative Jack now said not a word, uncommunicative Henry burst into a brief fury of denunciation. I was startled by the energy of his words:

"Edmund Stonewall," he cried, agitating his arms, "you have brought me to my death with your infernal invention! May you be--"

But he never finished the sentence. His face turned as white as a sheet, and he sank in a heap upon the floor.

"Poor fellow," said Edmund, pityingly. "Would to God that he instead of Church had remained at home. But I'll get him and all of us out of this trouble; only give me a little time."

In a few minutes Jack and I had restored Henry to his senses, but he was as weak as a child, and remained lying on one of the cushioned benches. In the meantime the car descended until at last it rested upon the snow in a deep valley, where we were protected from the wind. In this profound depression a kind of twilight prevailed, for the sun, which we had glimpsed when we were on the level of the peaks, was at least thirty degrees below our present horizon. Henry having recovered his nerve, we all got out of the car, unloosed the natives, and began to look about us.

The scene was more disheartening than ever. All about towered the crystal mountains, their bases leaden-hued and formless in the ghostly gloom, while their middle parts showed deep gleams of ultramarine, brightening to purple higher up, and a few aspiring peaks behind us sparkled brilliantly where the sunlight touched them. It was such a spectacle as the imagination could not have conceived, and I have often tried in vain to reproduce it satisfactorily in my own mind.

Was there ever such a situation as ours? Cast away in a place wild and wonderful beyond description, millions of miles from all human aid and sympathy, millions of miles from the world that had given us birth! I could, in bitterness of spirit, have laughed at the suggestion that there was any hope for us. And yet, at that very moment, not only was there hope, but there was even the certainty of deliverance. But, unknown to us, it lay in the brain of the incomparable man who had brought us hither.

I have told you that it was twilight in the valley where we lay. But when, as frequently happened, tempests of snow burst over the mountains, and choked the air about us, the twilight turned to deepest night, and we had to illumine the lamps in the car. By great good fortune, Edmund said, enough power remained to furnish us with light and heat, and now I looked upon those mysterious black-tusked muzzles in the car with a new sentiment, praying that they would not turn to mouths of death.

The natives, being used to darkness, needed no artificial illumination. In fact, we had observed that whenever the sunlight had streamed over them their great eyes were almost blinded, and they suffered cruelly from an affliction so completely outside of all their experience. Edmund now began to speak to us of this, saying that he ought to have foreseen and provided against it.

"I shall try to find some means of affording protection to their eyes when we arrive in the sunlit hemisphere," he said. "It must be my first duty."

We heard these words with a thrill of hope.

"Then you think that we shall escape?" I asked.

"Of course we shall escape," he replied cheerfully. "I give you my word for it, but do not ask me for any particulars yet. The exact means I have

not yet found, but find them I will. We may have to stay where we are for a considerable time, and our companions must be made comfortable. Even under their furry skins they'll suffer from this kind of weather."

Following his directions we took a lot of extra furs from the car, and constructed a kind of tent, under which the natives could huddle on the sleds. There being but little wind in the valley, this was not so difficult an undertaking as it may seem. And the poor fellows were very glad of the shelter, for some of them were shivering, since, not knowing what to do, they were less active than ourselves. No sooner were they housed than they fell to eating ravenously. Both the car and the sleds had been abundantly provisioned, so that there was no immediate fear of a famine among us.

Inside the car we soon had things organized very much as they were during our voyage from the earth. We read, talked, and smoked to our hearts' content, almost forgetting the icy mountains that tottered over us, and the howling tempest which, with hardly an intermission, tore through the cloud-choked air a thousand or two thousand feet above our heads. We talked of our adventure with the meteors, which seemed an event of long ago, and then we talked of home--home twenty-six million miles away! In fact, it may have been thirty millions by this time, for Edmund had told us that Venus, having passed conjunction while we were at the caverns, was now receding from the earth.

But while we thus strove to kill the time and banish thoughts of our

actual situation, Edmund sat apart much of the time absorbed in thought, and we respected his privacy, knowing that our only chance of escape lay in him. One day (I speak always of "days," because we religiously counted the passage of time by our clock) he issued alone from the car and was absent a long time, so that we began to be concerned, and, going outside looked everywhere for signs of him. At length, to our infinite relief, he appeared stumbling and crawling along the foot of an icy mountain. As he drew nearer we saw that he was smiling, and as soon as he was within easy earshot he called out:

"It's all right. I've found the solution."

Then upon joining us he continued:

"We'll get out all right, but we shall have to be patient for a while longer."

"What is it?" we asked eagerly. "What have you found out?"

"Peter," he said, turning to me, "you know what libration means; well, it's libration that is going to save us. As Venus travels round the sun she turns just once on her axis in making a complete circuit, the consequence being, as you already know, that she has one side on which the sun never rises while the other half is in perpetual daylight. But, since her orbit is not a perfect circle, she travels a little faster than the average during about half of her year and a little slower during the

other half, but, at the same time, her steady rotation on her axis never varies. This produces the phenomenon that is called libration, the result of which is that, along the border between the day and night hemispheres there is a narrow strip where the sun rises and sets once in each of her years, which are about two hundred and twenty-five of our days in length. Within this strip the sun shines continuously for about sixteen weeks, gradually rising during eight weeks and sinking during the following eight. Then, during the next sixteen weeks, the strip lies in unceasing night.

"Now the kind fates have willed that we should fall just within this lucky strip. By the utmost good fortune after we passed the blazing peak which so nearly wrecked us, we were carried on by the wind so far, before the ascensional power of the car gave out, that we descended on the sunward side of the crest of the range. The sun is now just beginning to rise on the part of the strip where we are, and it will get higher for several weeks to come. The result will be that a great melting of ice and snow will occur here, and in this deep valley a river will form, flowing off toward the sunward hemisphere, exactly where we want to go. I shall take advantage of the torrent that will flow here and float down with it until we are out of the labyrinth. It's our only chance, for we couldn't possibly clamber over the hummocky ice and drag the car with us."

"Why not leave the car here?" asked Henry.

Edmund looked at him and smiled.

"Do you want to stay on Venus all your life?" he asked. "I thought you didn't like it well enough for that. How could we ever get back to the earth without the car? I can repair the mechanism as soon as I can find certain substances, which I am sure exist on this planet as well as on the earth. But it is no use looking for them in this icy wilderness. No, we can never abandon the car. We must take it with us, and the only possible way to transport it is with the aid of the coming river."

"But how will you manage to float?" I asked.

"The car, being air-tight, will float like a buoy."

"But the natives, will you abandon them?"

"God forbid. I'll contrive a way for them."

The effects of libration on Venus were not new to me, but they were to Jack and Henry, who had never studied such things, and they expressed much doubt about Edmund's plan, but I had confidence in it from the beginning, and it turned out just as he had predicted, as things always did. Every twenty-four hours we saw, with thankful hearts, that the sun had perceptibly risen, and as it rose, the sky gradually cleared, while the sunbeams, falling uninterruptedly, grew hotter and hotter. Soon we no longer had any use for furs, or for artificial heat. At the same time the melting of the ice began. It formed, in fact, a new danger, by bringing

down avalanches into the valley, yet we watched the process joyously, since it fell so entirely within Edmund's program. While we were awaiting the flood, Edmund had prepared screens to protect the eyes of the natives.

We were just at the bottom of the trough of the valley, near its head. It wound away before us, turning out of sight beyond an icy bulwark. Streams were soon pouring down from the heights all around, and uniting, they formed a little torrent, which flowed swiftly over the smooth, hard ice. Edmund now completed his plan.

"I'll take Juba in the car with us," he said. "There's just room for him. As for the others, we'll fasten the sleds on each side of the car, which will be buoyant enough to float them, and they'll have to take their chances outside."

We made the final arrangements while the little torrent was swelling to a river. Before it became too broad and deep we managed to place the car across the center of its course, the sleds forming outriders. Then all took their places and waited. Higher and higher rose the waters, while avalanches, continually increasing in size and number, thundered down the heights, and vast cataracts leaped and poured from the precipices. It was a mercy that we were so situated that the avalanches could not reach the car. But we received some pretty hard knocks before the stream became deep and steady enough to float us off. Shall I ever forget that moment?

There came a sudden wave, forced onward by a great slide of ice, which lifted car and sleds on its crest, and away we went! The car proved more buoyant than I had believed possible. The sleds, fastened on each side, tended to give it extra stability, and it did not sink deeper than the middle of the windows. The latter, though formed of very thick glass, might have been broken by the tossing ice if they had not been divided into small panes separated by bars of steel, which projected a few inches outside.

"I made that arrangement for meteors," said Edmund, "but I never thought that they would have to be defended against ice."

The increasing force of the current sent us spinning down the valley with accelerated speed. We swept round the nearest ice peak on the left, and as we passed under its projecting buttresses a fearful roar above informed us that an avalanche of unexampled magnitude had been unchained.

We could not withdraw our eyes from the window on that side of the car, and almost instantly immense masses of ice appeared crashing into the water, throwing it over us in floods and half drowning the unfortunate wretches on the sleds. Still, they clung on, fastened together, and we could do nothing to aid them. The uproar grew worse, and the ice came plunging down faster and faster, accompanied with a deluge of water from the heights above. The car pitched and rolled until we were all flung off our feet. Poor Juba was a picture of abject terror. He hung moaning to a bench, his huge eyes aglow with fright.

Suddenly the car seemed to be lifted clear from the water, and then it fell back again and was submerged, so that we were buried in night. Slowly we rose to the surface, and Edmund, springing to a window, shouted:

"They're gone! Heaven have pity on them--and on me!"

In spite of their fastenings the water had swept every living soul from the sled on the left. We rushed to the other window. It was the same story there--the sled on that side was also empty. I saw a furry body tossed in the torrent alongside, but in a second it disappeared beneath the raging water. At the same time Edmund exclaimed:

"God forgive us for bringing those poor creatures here only to meet their death!"