

CHAPTER VII

THE CHILDREN OF THE SUN

But the situation was too critical to permit us to think of the unfortunates whose death we had undoubtedly caused. There seemed less than an even chance of our getting through with our own lives. As we tossed and whirled onward the water rose yet higher, and blocks of ice assailed us on all sides. First the sled on the left was torn loose; then the other followed it, leaving the car to fight its battle alone. But the loss of the sleds was a good thing now that their occupants were gone, for it eased off the weight and the car rose much higher in the water. Moreover, it gave way more readily when pressed by the ice. To be sure, it rolled more than before, but still, being well ballasted, it did not turn turtle, and most of the time we were able to keep on our feet by holding fast to the inside window bars.

Once we took a terrible plunge, over a vertical fall of not less than twenty or thirty feet. But the water below the fall was very deep, a profound hole having been quickly scooped out in the unfathomable ice beneath, so that we did not strike bottom, as I had feared, but came bobbing to the top again like a cork. Below this fall there was a very long series of rapids, extending, it seemed, for miles upon miles, and we shot down them with the speed of an express train, lurching from side to side, and colliding with hundreds of ice floes. It must not be supposed

that we went through this experience without suffering any injuries. On the contrary, our hands were all bleeding, our faces cut, Henry had one eye closed by a blow, and our clothing, for we were not wearing our Arctic outfit, was badly used up. Yet none of our injuries was really serious, although we looked as if we had just come out of the toughest kind of a street brawl.

But there is no use in prolonging the story of this awful ride. It seemed to us to last for days upon days, though, in fact, the worst of it was over within twelve hours after we were lifted from our moorings in the valley. The tumbling stream gradually broadened out as it left the region of the high mountains, and then we found ourselves in a district covered with icy hills of no great elevation. But we could still see, by glances, as the stream curved this way and that, the glittering peaks behind. It was an appalling thing to watch many of the nearer hills as they suddenly sank, collapsed, and disappeared, like pinnacles of loaf sugar melting and falling to pieces in a basin of water.

Edmund said that all of the ice-hills and mounds through which we were passing no doubt owed their existence to pressure from behind, in the belt where the sun never rose, and where the ice was piled up in actual mountains. These foothills were, in fact, enormous glaciers thrust out toward the sunward hemisphere.

After a long time the now broad river widened yet more until it became a great lake, or bay. The surface of the planet around appeared nearly

level, and, as far as we could see, was mostly covered by the water. Here vast fields of ice floated, and the water was not muddy, as it would have been if it had passed over soil, but of crystal purity and wonderfully blue in places where shafts of sunlight penetrated to great depths--for now the sun was high above the horizon ahead, and shining in an almost clear sky. Presently we began to notice the wind again. It came fitfully, first from one quarter and then another, rapidly increasing until, at times, it rose into a tempest. It lifted the water in huge combing waves, but the car rode them like a lifeboat.

"There is peril for us in this," said Edmund, at last. "We are being carried by the current into a region where the contending winds may play havoc. It is the place where the hot air from the sunward side begins to be chilled and to descend, meeting the colder air from the night side. It must form a veritable belt of storms, which may be as difficult to pass, circumstanced as we are, as the crystal mountains themselves."

"Suppose it should turn out that there is nothing but an ocean on this side of the planet," I suggested.

"That I believe to be impossible," Edmund responded. "This hemisphere must be, as a whole, broken up into highlands and depressions. The geological formation of the other side, as far as I could make it out from the appearance of the rocks in the caverns, indicates that Venus has undergone the same experience of upheavals and fracturings of the crust that the earth has been through. If that is true of one side it must be

true of the other also, for during a large part of these geological changes she undoubtedly rotated rapidly on her axis like the earth."

"But we traveled five thousand miles on the other side without encountering anything but a frozen prairie," I objected.

"True enough, and yet I would lay a wager that all of that side of the planet is not equally level. Remember the vast plains of Russia and Siberia."

"Well," put in Jack, whose spirits were beginning to revive, "if there's a shore somewhere, let's find it. I want to see the other kind of inhabitants. These that we've met don't accord with my ideas of Venus."

"We shall find them," responded Edmund, "and I think I can promise you that they will not disappoint your expectations."

Yet there seemed to be nothing in our present situation to warrant the confidence expressed by our leader's words and manner. The current that had carried us out of the crystal mountains gradually disappeared in a vast waste of waters, and we were driven hither and thither by the tempestuous wind. Its force increased hour by hour, and at last the sky, which at brief intervals had been clear and exquisitely blue, became choked with black clouds, sweeping down upon the face of the waters, and often whirled into great trombes by the tornadic blasts. Several times the car was deluged by waterspouts, and once it was actually lifted up

into the air by the mighty suction. An ordinary vessel would not have lived five minutes in that hell of winds and waters. But the car, if it had been built for this kind of navigation, could not have behaved better.

I do not know how long all this lasted. It grew worse and worse. Sometimes a flood of rain fell, and then would come a storm of lightning, and a downpour of gigantic hailstones that rattled upon the steel shell of the car like a rain of bullets from a battery of machine guns. Half the time one window or the other was submerged by the waves, and when we got an opportunity to glance out, we saw nothing but torn streamers of cloud whipping the face of the waters. But when the change came at last, it was as sudden as the dropping of a curtain. The clouds broke away, a soft light filled the atmosphere, the waves ceased to break and rolled in long undulations, and a marvelous dome appeared overhead.

That dome, at its first dramatic appearance, was one of the most astonishing things that we saw in the whole course of our adventures. It was not a cerulean vault like that which covers the earth in halcyon weather, but an indescribably soft, pinkish-gray concavity that seemed nearer than the sky and yet farther than the clouds. Here and there, far beneath it, but still at a vast elevation, floated delicate gauzy curtains, tinted like sheets of mother-of-pearl. The sun was no longer visible, but the air was filled with a delicious luminousness, which bathed the eyes as if it had been an ethereal liquid.

Below each window was a steel ledge, broad enough to stand on, with convenient hold-fasts for the hands. These had evidently been prepared for some such contingency, and Edmund, throwing open the windows, invited

us to go outside. We gladly accepted the invitation, and all, except Juba, issued into the open air. The temperature was that of an early spring day, and the air was splendidly fresh and stimulating. The rolling of the car had now nearly ceased, and we had no difficulty in maintaining our positions. For a long while we admired, and talked of, the great dome overhead, which drew our attention, for the time, from the sea that had so strangely brought us hither.

"There," said Edmund, pointing to the dome, "is the inside of the shell of cloud whose exterior, gleaming in the sunshine, baffles our astronomers in their efforts to see the surface of Venus. I believe that we shall find the whole of this hemisphere covered by it. It is a shield for the inhabitants against the fervors of an unsetting sun. Its presence prevents their real world from being seen from outside."

"Well," said Jack, laughing, "I never heard before that Venus was fond of a veil."

"Not only can they not be seen," continued Edmund, "but they cannot themselves see beyond the screen that covers them."

"Worse and worse!" exclaimed Jack. "The astronomers have certainly made a mistake in naming this bashful planet Venus."

We continued for a long time to gaze at the great dome, admiring the magnificent play of iridescent colors over its vast surface, until suddenly Jack, who had gone to the other side of the car, called out to us:

"Come here and tell me what this is."

We hurried to his side and were astonished to see a number of glittering objects which appeared to be floating in the atmosphere. They were arranged in an almost straight row, at an elevation of perhaps two thousand feet, and were apparently about three miles away. After a few moments of silence, Edmund said, in his quiet way:

"Those are air ships."

"Air ships!"

"Yes, surely. An exploring expedition, I shouldn't wonder. I anticipated something of that kind. You know already how dense the atmosphere of Venus is. It follows that balloons, and all sorts of machines for aerial navigation, can float much more easily here than over the earth. I was prepared to find the inhabitants of Venus skilled in such things, and I'm not surprised by what we see."

"Venus with wings!" cried Jack. "Now, Edmund, that sounds more like it. I guess we've struck the right planet after all."

"But," I said, "you spoke of an exploring expedition. How in the world do you make that out?"

"It seems perfectly natural to me," replied Edmund. "Remember the two sides of the planet, so wonderfully different from one another. If we on the earth are so curious about the poles of our planet, simply because they are unlike other parts of the world, don't you think that the inhabitants of Venus should be at least equally curious concerning a whole hemisphere of their world, which differs in toto from the half on which they live?"

"That does seem reasonable," I assented.

"Of course it's reasonable, and I imagine that we, ourselves, are about to be submitted to investigation."

"By Jo!" exclaimed Jack, running his hands through his hair, and smoothing his torn and rumpled garments, "then we must make ready for inspection. But I'm afraid we won't do much honor to old New York. Can I get a shave aboard your craft, Edmund?"

"Oh, yes," Edmund replied, laughing. "I didn't forget soap and razors."

But Jack would have had no time to make his toilet even if he had seriously thought of it. The strange objects in the air approached with great rapidity, and we soon saw that Edmund had correctly divined their nature. They were certainly air ships, and I was greatly interested in the observation that they seemed to be constructed somewhat upon the principles upon which our inventors were then working on the earth. But they were neither aeroplanes nor balloons. They bore a resemblance to mechanical birds, and seemed to be sustained and forced ahead by a wing-like action.

This, of course, did not escape Edmund's notice.

"Look," he said admiringly, "how easily and gracefully they fly. Perhaps with our relatively light atmosphere we shall never be able to do that on the earth; but no matter," he added, with a flush, "for with the inter-atomic energy at our command, we shall have no need to imitate the birds."

"Perhaps they have made that discovery here, too," I suggested.

"No, it is evident that they have not, else they would not be employing mechanical means of flight. Once let me get the car fixed up and we'll give them a surprise."

"Yes, and if you had used common sense," growled Henry, nursing his

injured eye, "you would not be here fooling away your time and ours, and risking our lives every minute, but you'd be making millions and revolutionizing life at home."

"And where'd the Columbus of Space be then?" demanded Jack. "Hanged if Edmund is not right! I'd rather be here meeting these doves of Venus than grinding out dollars on the earth. And can't we go back and scoop in the money when we get ready?"

The discussion went no further, for, by this time, two of the air ships were close at hand. And now we perceived, for the first time, the beings that they carried. Our surprise at the sight was even greater than that which we had experienced upon meeting the inhabitants of the dark hemisphere. The latter were extraordinary--but we were looking for extraordinary things. Indeed they were, except for certain peculiarities, much more like some members of our own race than we should have deemed possible. How great, then, was our astonishment upon seeing the two air ships apparently in charge of real human beings!

At least that was our first impression. In the midst of the strange apparatus, which evidently fulfilled the function of wings for the air ships, we saw decks, spacious enough to contain twenty persons, and surmounted with deck houses, and along the railings inclosing the decks were gathered the crews, among whom we believed that we could recognize their officers. The two vessels had approached within a hundred yards

before being suddenly arrested. Then they settled gracefully down upon the water, where they floated like swans.

At first, as I have said, the resemblance of their crews to inhabitants of the earth seemed complete. One would have said that we had met a yachting party, composed of tall, well-formed, light-complexioned, yellow-haired Englishmen, the pick of their race. At a distance their dress alone appeared strange, though it, too, might easily be imitated on the earth. As well as I can describe it, it bore some resemblance, in general effect, to the draperies of a Greek statue, and it was specially remarkable for the harmonious blending of soft hues in its texture.

During a space of at least five minutes we gazed at them, and they at us. Probably their surprise was greater than ours, because we had been on the lookout for strange sights, being, of our own volition, in a foreign world, while they could have had no expectation of such an encounter, even if, as Edmund had conjectured, they were engaged in exploration. We could read their astonishment in their gesticulations. Slowly the car and the nearer of the two air ships drifted closer together. When we were within less than fifty yards of one another, Jack suddenly called out:

"A woman! By Jo, it's Venus herself!"

His excited voice rang like a rattle of musketry in the heavy air, and the beings on the air ship started back in alarm. But although, like the inhabitants of the dark hemisphere, they were, evidently, unaccustomed

to hearing sounds of such forcefulness issue from a living creature no larger than themselves, they were not faint-hearted, and the air ship did not, as we half expected it would, take flight. The momentary commotion was quickly quieted, and our visitors continued their inspection. All of us immediately recognized the personage whom Jack had singled out as the subject of his startling exclamation. It was clear that he had rightly guessed her sex, and she appeared worthy of his admiring designation. Even at the distance of a hundred feet we could see that she was very beautiful. Her complexion was light, with a flame upon the cheeks; her hair a chestnut blond; and her large, round eyes were sapphire blue, and seemed to radiate a light of their own. This last statement (about the eyes) must not be taken for a conventional exaggeration, such as writers of fiction employ in describing heroines who never existed. On the contrary, it expresses a literal fact; and moreover, as the reader will see further on, this peculiarity of the eyes was shared, in varying degrees, by all these people of Venus, and was connected with the most amazing of all our discoveries on that planet. I should say here that, while the eyes of the inhabitants of the day side were larger than ours, they did not, in respect of size, resemble the extraordinary organs of vision possessed by the compatriots of Juba.

In a few minutes we became aware that the beautiful creature we had been admiring was not the only representative of the female sex on the air ship. Several others surrounded her, and the fact quickly became manifest that they recognized her as a superior. Still more surprising was the discovery, which we were not long in making, that she was actually the

commander of the craft. We could see that the orders which determined its movements emanated from her.

"Amazons!" exclaimed Jack, taking pains this time to moderate his voice.

"And what a queen they've got!"

During all this time the car and the air ship were slowly drifting nearer to one another, drawn by that strange attraction which seems to affect inanimate things when in close neighborhood, and when they were not more than fifteen yards apart the personage we had been watching slowly lifted her arm, revealing a glittering bracelet, and, with an ineffably winning smile, made a gesture which said plainer than any words could have done:

"Welcome, strangers."