

CHAPTER IX

AN AMAZING METROPOLIS

If I should undertake to describe in detail all the events that now followed in rapid succession, this history would take a lifetime to write. I must choose only the more significant facts.

The newcomer, whose remarkable face had immediately impressed me, and not

altogether favorably, proved to be a personage of very great importance, second only, as we could see, to Ala herself. And, what was particularly important for us, he showed none of her friendly disposition. I do not mean to suggest that he seemed inclined to any active hostility, but evidently we were, in his eyes, no better than savages, and consequently entitled to no special consideration, and especially to no favors. Jack, who, with all his careless ways, had a penetrating mind for the perception of character, whispered to me, within five minutes after the fellow came aboard:

"If that galoot had his way, we'd make our entry in irons. Mark my words, there's mischief in him. Hang him! I'm going to keep my pistol handy when he's around."

Edmund, who happened to overhear Jack's remark, interposed:

"See here, Master Jack, this is no time to be talking of pistols. I trust that we are done with shooting."

We were not done with it; but that comes later.

It was not long before Edmund had discovered a name for the newcomer also; he called him Ingra. It was singular, he said, that all the names seemed to be characterized by the prevalence of vowels sounds, but he thought it likely that this arose from the greater ease with which they could be enunciated. They were like Spanish words, which are the easiest of all for foreigners, and probably also for natives, to pronounce.

After we reached the coast we descended to the ground, at Edmund's request, I believe, because he wished to superintend the loading of the car upon one of the largest air ships, and it was an unforgettable sight to watch him managing the work as coolly and effectively as if he had been in charge of a gang of workmen at home! And, while I looked, I found myself again doubting if, after all, this was not a dream. The workers hurrying about, Edmund following them, pointing, objecting, urging and directing, with his derby hat, which had come through all our adventures (though somewhat damaged), stuck on the back of his head--and all this on the planet Venus! No! I could not be awake. But yet I was.

When we started again, we were escorted by a hundred air ships, forming a complete circle about us. Now I noticed, what had escaped attention

during the extraordinary atmospheric display, viz., that these craft were painted in colors that I should call gorgeous if they had not been so perfectly harmonious and pleasing. Every one looked like the careful creation of an artist, and the variety of tints exhibited was incredible. Our own air ship, and its consorts, on the other hand, were very plain in their decorations. I called Edmund's attention to this and immediately he said:

"Remember what I told you--this has been an exploring expedition, and the craft taking part in it have been fitted up for rough work. That reminds me that I have not yet made the inquiries that I intended on that subject. I shall go to Ala now and see what I can learn."

She was standing on the deck near the other end, with Ingra beside her. As Edmund approached them, Jack nudged me:

"Look at that fellow," he said. "Wasn't I right?"

There was no doubt about it; Ingra scowled and showed every sign of displeasure at Edmund's presence. But Ala greeted him graciously, and, apparently, Ingra did not dare to interfere. I could see that Jack was grasping his pistol again, but I did not anticipate that there would be any occasion to use it. Nevertheless, I watched them closely for a time, hoping to discover Edmund's method of reading her meaning; as to her comprehension of his I had no question about that. But I got no light on the subject, and, as it soon became evident, even to Jack, that there was

no danger this time, we fell to examining the land over which we were passing.

We flew at a height of about two thousand feet, so that the range of vision was very wide. The sea behind us curved into the land in three great scallops, separated by acuminate promontories, whose terminal bluffs of sand were as yellow as gold. Away ahead the line of mountains, that we had noticed before, appeared as a dark sierra, and between it and the sea the country seemed to be very little broken by hills. Large forests were visible, but from our elevation it was impossible to tell whether the trees composing them bore any resemblance to terrestrial forms. The open land was about equally divided in area between bare yellowish soil (or what we took to be soil) and bright green expanses whose color suggested vegetation. Scattered here and there we saw what appeared to be habitations, but we could not be sure of their nature; and, upon the whole, the land seemed to us to be very thinly populated.

Many birds accompanied us in our flight, frequently alighting on the deck and other parts of the air ship. They were remarkably tame, allowing us to approach them closely, and we were delighted by their beautiful plumage and their singular forms. This reminds me to say that the motion of the craft was extremely curious--a kind of gentle rising and falling, which was very agreeable when once we were accustomed to it, and which resembled what one would suppose to be the movement of a bird in flight. This, of course, arose from the structure of the air ship, which, as I have before said, seemed to be modeled, as far as its motive parts were

concerned, upon the principle of wings rather than of simple aeroplanes. But the mechanism was very complicated, and I never arrived at a full comprehension of it.

Edmund remained a long time in conference with Ala, Ingra staying constantly with them, and when he had apparently finished his "conversation" we were surprised to see them begin a tour of inspection of the air ship, finally descending into the interior. This greatly excited Jack, who was for following them at once.

"I can't be easy," he declared. "Nobody can tell what may happen to him if they get him alone."

But I succeeded in persuading him that there could be no danger, and that we ought to trust to Edmund's discretion. They were gone so long, however, that at last I became anxious myself, and was on the point of suggesting to Jack that we try to find them, when they reappeared, and Edmund at once came to us, his face irradiated with smiles.

"I have plenty of news for you," he said, as soon as he had joined us. "Never in my life have I spent two hours more delightfully. In the first place, I have found out practically all that I wished to know about this expedition, and, second, I have thoroughly examined the mechanism of the ship. Its complication is only apparent, and the management of it is so simple that a single man can pilot it easily. I could do it myself."

We did not appreciate at the time what the knowledge that Edmund had thus acquired meant for us.

"Well, what about the expedition?" asked Jack. "And where are we going?"

"From what I can make out," replied Edmund musingly, "Ala is really what you called her, Jack, a queen. But such a queen! If we had some like her on the earth, monarchy might not be such a bad thing after all. She is a savant."

"Bluestocking," put in Jack. "This is a new kind of amazon."

Edmund did not smile.

"I am in earnest," he continued. "Of course you understand that most of my conclusions are really based upon inference. I cannot grasp all that she tries to tell me, but her gestures are so speaking, and her eyes so full of a kind of meaning which seems to force its way into my mind, I cannot tell how, that I am virtually sure of the correctness of my interpretation. The expedition, which I am certain was planned by her, was intended to explore the outskirts of the dark hemisphere. Perhaps they meant to penetrate within it, but, if so, the stormy belt that we crossed was too serious an obstacle for them to overcome. Our encountering them was the greatest stroke of good fortune that we have yet had. It places us right at the center of affairs."

"Where are they going now?"

"Evidently back to their starting point; which is likely to be a great city--the capital and metropolis, most probably. The more I think of it the stronger becomes my conviction that Ala is really, at least in power and influence, a queen. And you can see for yourselves that it must be a great and rich empire that she rules, for remember the extraordinary reception with which she was greeted, the innumerable air ships, the splendor of everything."

"But are we to be well treated? Is there no danger for us in accompanying them?"

"If there were danger, it would be hard for us to escape from it now; but why should there be danger? We did not kill the Esquimaux that our polar explorers brought from the Arctic regions, and for these people, we are a greater curiosity than ever the Esquimaux, or the Pygmies of Africa, were for us. Instead of encountering any danger, I anticipate that we shall be very well treated."

"Perhaps they'll put us in a cage," said Jack, with a ludicrous grimace, "and tote us about as a great moral show for children. If there's a Barnum on Venus, our fate is sealed."

Jack's humorous suggestion struck home, for there seemed to be

probability behind it, and Henry groaned, while, for my part, I confess that I felt rather uncomfortable over the prospect. But Edmund did not pursue the conversation, and soon we fell to regarding again the landscape beneath and far around us. We were gradually nearing the mountains, although they were still distant, and presently we caught sight of what resembled, as much as anything, gigantic cobwebs glittering with dew, and rising out of the plain between us and the mountains.

"There, Edmund," said Jack, "there's another chance to exercise your genius for explaining mysteries. What are those things?"

Edmund watched the objects for several minutes before replying. At length he said, with the decision characteristic of him:

"Palaces."

Jack burst out laughing.

"Castles in Spain, I reckon," he said. "But, really, Edmund, what do you think they can be?"

"I have already told you, palaces, or castles, if you prefer."

"You are serious?" I asked.

"Perfectly so. They cannot be anything else."

Seeing our astonishment and incredulity, Edmund added:

"Since they retain their places, it is evident that they are edifices of some kind, attached to the ground. But their great height and aerial structure indicate that they are erected in the air--floating, I should say, but firmly anchored at the bottom. Really, I cannot see anything astonishing about it; it accords with everything else that we have seen. Your minds are too hidebound to terrestrial analogies, and you do not give your imaginations sufficient play with the new materials that are here offered.

"This atmosphere," he continued, after a pause, "is exactly suited for such things. It is a region of atmospheric calm. If we were not moving, you would hardly feel a breeze, and I doubt if there is ever a high wind here. To build their habitations in the air and make them float like gossamers--could any idea be more beautiful than that, or more in harmony with the nature of this planet, which is the favorite of the sun, for first he inundates it with a splendor unknown to the earth, and then generously covers it with a gorgeous screen of cloud which cuts off his scorching beams but suffers the light to pass, filtered to opalescent ether?"

When Edmund spoke like that, as he sometimes did, suffusing his words with the fervor of his imagination, even Henry, I believe, felt his soul lifted to unaccustomed heights. We hung upon his lips, and, without a

word, waited for him to continue. Presently he murmured, in an undertone:

"Yes, all this I foresaw in my dream. A world of crystal, houses that seemed not made with hands, reaching toward heaven, and a people, beautiful beyond compare, dwelling in the aerial home of birds"; and then, addressing us, in his ordinary tones: "You will see that the capital, which we are unquestionably approaching, is to a large extent composed of this airy architecture."

And it turned out to be as he had said--when, indeed, was it ever otherwise? As we drew nearer, the aerial structures which we had first seen began to tower up to an amazing height, just perceptibly swaying and undulating with the gentle currents of air that flowed through their traceried lattices, while behind them began to loom an immense number of floating towers, rising stage above stage, like the steel monsters of New York before they have received their outer coverings, but incomparably lighter in appearance, and more delicate and graceful; truly fairy constructions, bespangled with countless brilliant points. Yet nearer, and we could see cables attached to the higher structures, and running downward as if anchored to the ground beneath, but the ground itself we could not see, because now we had dropped lower in the air, and a long hill rose between us and the fairy towers, whose slight sinuous motion, affecting so many together, produced a trifling sense of dizziness as we gazed. Still nearer, and we believed that we could see people in the buoyant towers. A minute later there was no doubt about their presence, for the colors broke forth, and that marvelous interchange of chromatic

signals, which had so astonished us as we drew near the coast, was resumed.

"It is my belief," said Edmund, "that, notwithstanding the buoyancy of the heavy atmosphere, those structures cannot be maintained at such elevations without mechanical aid. You will see when we get nearer that every stage is furnished with some means of support, probably vertical screws reacting upon the air."

Again he had guessed right, for in a little while we were near enough to see the screws, working in a maze of motion, like the wings of a multitude of insects. The resemblance was increased by their gauzy structure, and, as they turned, they flashed and glittered as if enameled. (The supernatant structures that they maintained were, as we afterwards ascertained, framed of hollow beams and trusses--a kind of bamboo, of great strength and lightness.)

Now we rose over the intervening hill, and as we did so a cry burst from our lips. A vast city made its appearance as by magic, a magnified counterpart of the aerial city above it. Put all the glories of Constantinople, Damascus, Cairo, and Bombay, with all their spires, towers, minarets, and domes together, and multiply their splendor a thousand times, and yet your imagination will be unable to picture the scene of enchantment on which our eyes rested.

"It is the capital of Venus," exclaimed Edmund. "There can be nothing

greater than this!"

It must, indeed, be the capital, for in the midst of it rose an edifice of unparalleled splendor, which could only be the palace of a mighty monarch. Above this magnificent building, which gleamed with metallic reflections, although it was as light and airy in construction as frostwork, rose the loftiest of the aerial towers, a hundred, two hundred--I cannot tell you how many stories in height, for I never succeeded in counting them.

The other air ships now dropped back, and ours alone approached this stupendous tower, making apparently for its principal landing stage. Along the sides of the tower a multitude of small air ships ran up and down, stopping at various stages to discharge their living cargoes.

"Elevators," said Edmund.

Glancing round we saw that similar scenes were occurring at all the towers. They were filling up with people, and the continual rising and descending of the little craft that bore them, the holiday aspect of the gay colors everywhere displayed, and the brilliancy of the whole spectacle moved us beyond words. But the most astonishing scene still awaited us.

Just before our vessel reached the landing stage, the enormous tower, from foot to apex, broke out with all the hues of the rainbow, like an

enchanted rose tree covered with millions of brilliant flowers at the touch of a wand. The effect was overwhelming. The air became tremulous with rippling colors, whose vibrant waves, with quick succession of concordant tints afforded to the eye an exquisite pleasure akin to that which the ear receives from a carillon of bells. Our companions, and the people crowded on the towers, seemed to be transported with ecstatic delight.

"Again the music of the spectrum!" cried Edmund. "The diapason of color! It is their national hymn, or the hymn of their race, written on a prismatic, instead of a sonometric, staff. And, mark me, this has a significance beyond your conjectures!"

I believe that our enjoyment of this astonishing spectacle was hardly less than that of the natives themselves, but the pleasure was suddenly broken off by a tragedy that struck cold to our hearts.

We had nearly touched the landing, when we observed that a discussion was going on between Ala and Ingra, and it quickly became evident that we were the subject of it. Before we could exchange a word, they approached us, and Ingra, in a threatening manner, laid his hand on Edmund's shoulder. In a second Jack had his pistol covering Ingra. Edmund saw the motion, and struck Jack's arm aside, but the weapon exploded, and, clutching her breast, Ala fell at our feet!