

CHAPTER X

IMPRISONMENT AND A WONDERFUL ESCAPE

The shock of this terrible accident, the full import of which must have flashed simultaneously through the mind of every one of us, drove the blood from Edmund's face, while Jack staggered, uttering a pitiful moan, Henry collapsed, and I stood trembling in every limb. The report of the pistol produced upon the natives the effect that was to have been expected. Ingra sprang backward with a cry like that of a startled beast, and many upon the deck fell prostrate, either through terror or the effect of collision with one another in their wild flight. What occurred among the waiting crowd on the tower I do not precisely know, but a wind of fear seemed to pass through the air--a weird, heart-quaking shadow of sound.

For a few moments, I believe, no one but ourselves understood what had happened to Ala. Ingra may have thought, if he thought at all in his terror and surprise, that she had fallen as the result of nervous shock. This moment of paralysis on the part of those whom we had now to regard as our enemies, whatever they may have been before, afforded the opportunity for escape--if there had been any way to escape. But we were completely trapped; there was no direction in which we could flee. Yet I doubt if the thought of flight occurred to any of us. Certainly it did not to Edmund, who was the first to recover his self-command.

"We have shot down our only friend!" he said with terrible emphasis, and, as he spoke, he lifted Ala in his arms and laid her on a seat. Her breast was stained with blood.

At the sight of this, a flash of comprehension passed over the features of Ingra; then, instantly, his face changed to a look of fury, and he sprang upon Edmund. With trembling hand, I tried to draw my pistol, but before I could get it from my pocket there was a rush, a hairy form darted past me, and Ingra lay sprawling on his back. Over him, with foot planted on his breast, stood the burly form of Juba, with his muscular arms uplifted, and his enormous eyes blazing fire!

God only knows what would have happened next, but at this instant Ala--to my amazement, for I had thought that the bullet had gone through her heart--rose to an upright posture, and made a commanding gesture, which arrested those who were now hurrying to take a part in the scene. All, natives as well as ourselves, stood as motionless as stone. Her face was pale and her eyes were wonderful to look upon. With a gasp of thankfulness, I noticed that the blood on her breast was but a narrow streak. Juba, staring at her, slowly withdrew his foot from his prostrate opponent, and Ingra first sat up, and then got upon his feet. Ala, who had been seated, rose at the same moment, and looked Ingra straight in the face. I saw Edmund glancing from one to the other, and I knew he was trying to follow the communication that was taking place between them.

The general sense of it I could follow, myself. Ingra, metaphorically, stormed and Ala commanded. That she was defending us was plain, and it was but natural that my admiration for this wonderful woman should rise to the highest pitch. I thanked God, in my heart, that her wound could be no more than a scratch--and yet it was a wound, inflicted upon the person of her who, there could be no doubt, was the ruler of a powerful empire. It was less majesty, or worse, and she, herself, might not be able to protect us against its consequences.

At last, it became evident that a decision had been made. Ala turned to us with a smile, which we took for an assurance of encouragement, at least, and started to leave the deck. Edmund instantly stepped in front of her, and pointed to the stain of blood, with a gesture and a look which meant, at the same time, an inquiry as to the nature of the wound and an expression of the wish to do something to repair the injury. She shook her head and smiled again, in a manner which clearly said that the hurt was not serious and that she understood that it was an accident. Then, surrounded by her female attendants, she passed out of our sight in the crowd on the landing. Edmund turned to us:

"We shall probably get out of it all right," he said, "but not without some difficulty. They will surely imprison us. Make no resistance. Leave all to me. Jack's pistol will, no doubt, be seized, but if the rest of you keep yours concealed, they may not search for them, as they know nothing about the weapons."

Edmund had spoken hurriedly, and had hardly finished when a dozen stout fellows, under Ingra's directions, took us in charge, Juba included, and we were led from the deck, through the vast throng on the platform, who made room for our passage, while devouring us with curious, though frightened eyes. In a minute we embarked on one of the "elevators," and made a thrillingly rapid descent. Arrived at the bottom, we were conducted, through long, stone-walled passages, into a veritable dungeon. And there they left us. I wondered if this had been done at Ala's order, or in defiance of her wishes. After all, I reflected, what claim have we upon her?

In the absolute darkness where we now found ourselves, we remained silent for a minute or two, feeling about for one another, until the quiet voice of Edmund said:

"Fortune still favors us."

As he spoke, a light dazzled our eyes. He had turned on a pocket electric lamp. We looked about and found that we were in a square chamber, about fifteen feet on a side, with walls of heavy stone.

"They make things solid enough down here," said Jack, with some return of his usual spirits, "however airy and fairy they may be above."

"All the better for us," returned Edmund enigmatically.

Henry sank upon the floor, the picture of dejection and despair. I expected another outbreak from him, but he spoke not a word. His heart was too full for utterance, and I pitied him so much that I tried to reanimate his spirits.

"Come, now," I said, "don't take it this way, man. Have confidence in Edmund. He has never yet been beaten."

"I reckon he's got his hands full this time," put in Jack. "What do you think, Edmund, can your atomic energy bore a hole through these walls?"

"If I had it here, you'd see," Edmund replied. "But there's no occasion to worry, we'll come out all right."

It was his unfailing remark when in difficulties, and somehow it always enheartened us. Juba, more accustomed to such situations, seemed the least disturbed member of the party. He rolled his huge eyes around the apartment once or twice, and then lay down on the floor, and seemed at once to fall asleep.

"That's a good idea of Juba's," said Edmund, smiling; "it's a long time since we have had a nap. Let's all try a little sleep. I may dream of some way out of this."

It was a fact that we were all exhausted for want of sleep, and, in spite of our situation, I soon fell into deep slumber, as peaceful as if I had

been in my bed at home. Edmund had turned out the lamp, and the silence and darkness were equally profound.

I dreamt that I was at the Olympus Club on the point of trumping an ace, when a flash of light in the eyes awoke me. I started up and found Edmund standing over me. The others were all on their feet. Edmund immediately whispered:

"Come quietly; I've found a way out."

"What have you found?"

"Something extremely simple. This is no prison cell, but a part of what appears to be the engine rooms--probably it is an unused storeroom. They have put us here for convenience, trusting more to the darkness than to the lock, for the corridors outside are as black as Erebus and as crooked as a labyrinth."

"How do you know?"

"Because, while you were all asleep, I made an exploration. The lock was nothing; the merest tyro could pick it. Fortunately they never guessed that I had a lamp. In this world of daylight, it is not likely that pocket lamps have ever been thought of. Just around the corner, there is another door opening into a passage that leads by a power house. That passage gives access to a sort of garage of air craft, and when I stole

into it five minutes ago, there was not a soul in sight. We'll simply slip in there, and if I can't run away with one of those fliers, then I'm no engineer. To tell the truth, I'm not altogether sure that it is wise for us to escape, for I have a feeling that Ala will help us; still, when Providence throws one a rope, it's best, perhaps, to test its strength. Come on, now, and make no noise."

Accompanied by Juba, we stepped noiselessly outside, extinguishing the light, and, led by Edmund, passed what he had called the power house, where we saw several fellows absorbed in their work, lighted somehow from above. Then we slipped into the "garage." Here light entered from without, through a large opening at the side. There may have been twenty small air ships resting on cradles. Edmund selected one, which he appeared to have examined in advance, and motioning us to step upon its little deck, he began to manipulate the mechanism as confidently as if it had been his own invention.

"You see that I did not waste my time in examining the air ship that brought us," he whispered, and never before had I admired and trusted him as I did now. In less than a minute after we had stepped aboard, we were circling in the air outside. We rose with stunning rapidity, swooping away in a curve like an eagle.

At this instant we were seen!

There was a quick flashing of signals, and two air craft shot into sight

above us.

"Now for a chase!" cried Edmund, actually laughing with exultation.

We darted upward, curving aside to avoid the pursuers. And then they swooped after us. We rose so rapidly that within a couple of seconds we were skirting the upper part of the great tower. Then others saw us, and joined in the chase. Jack's spirits soared with the excitement:

"Sorry to take rogue's leave of these Venuses," he exclaimed. "But no dungeons for us, if you please."

"We're not away, yet," said Edmund over his shoulder; and, indeed, we were not!

The air ships swarmed out on every side like hornets; the atmosphere seemed full of them. I gave up all hope of escape, but Edmund was like a racer who hears the thud of hoofs behind him. He put on more and more speed until we were compelled to hang on to anything within reach in order to save ourselves from being blown off by the wind which we made, or whirled overboard on sharp turns.

Crash! We had run straight into a huge craft that persisted in getting in our way. She dipped and rolled like a floating log. I saw the fellows on her tumble over one another, as we shot by, and I glanced anxiously to see if any had gone overboard. We could afford to do no killing if we

could avoid it; for, in case of recapture, that would be another indictment against us. I saw no one falling from the discomfited air ship, and I felt reassured. Occupied as he was, dodging and turning, Edmund did not cease to address a few words to us occasionally.

"There's just one chance to beat them," he said, "and only one. I'm going to try it as soon as I can get out of this press."

I had no notion of what he meant, but a few minutes later I divined his intention. I had observed that all the while he was working higher and higher, and this, as you will presently see, was the key to his plan.

Up and up we shot, Edmund making the necessary circles as short as possible, and so recklessly did he turn on the speed that it really began to look as if we might get away after all. Two thirds of our pursuers were now far below our level, but none showed a disposition to give up the chase, and those which were yet above tried to cross our bow. While I saw that Edmund's idea was to hold a skyward course, I was far from guessing the particular reason he had for doing so, and, finally, Jack, who comprehended it still less, exclaimed:

"See here, Edmund, if you keep on going up instead of running off in one direction or another, they'll corner you in the middle of the sky. Don't you see how they have circled out on all sides so as to surround us? Then when we get as high as we can go, they'll simply close in, and we'll be trapped."

"Oh, no, we won't," Edmund replied.

"I don't see why."

"Because they can't go as high as we can."

"The deuce they can't! I guess they understand these ships as well as you do."

"Can a fish live out of water?" asked Edmund, laughing.

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Why, it's plain enough. These people are used to breathing an atmosphere surcharged with oxygen and twice as dense as that of the earth. It doesn't trouble our breathing, simply giving us more energy; but we can live where they would gasp for breath. Air impossibly rare for them is all right for us, and that's what I am in search of, and we shall find it if we can get high enough."

The beauty and simplicity of this unexpected plan struck us all with admiration, and Jack, his doubts instantly turning to enthusiasm, cried:

"By Jo, Edmund, you're a trump! I'd like to get a gaff into the gills of that catfish, Ingra, when he begins to blow. By Jo, I'd pickle him and

make a present of him to the Museum of Natural History. 'Catfishia Venusensis, presented by Jack Ashton, Esq.'--how'd that look on a label, hey?"

And Jack hugged himself with delight over his conceit.

In a short time the accuracy of Edmund's conjecture became apparent. Our pursuers, one by one, dropped off. Their own strategy, to which Jack had called attention, was simply a playing into our hands. They had really thought to catch us in the center of a contracting circle, when, to their amazement, we rose straight up into air so rare that they could not live in it. Edmund roared with laughter when he saw the assured success of his maneuver.

But there was one thing which even he had overlooked, and it struck to our hearts when we became aware of it. Poor, faithful Juba, who had so recently proved his devotion to us, could endure this rare air no better than our pursuers. Already, unnoticed in the excitement, he had fallen upon the deck, where he lay gasping.

"Good God, he's dying!" exclaimed Jack.

"He shall not die!" responded Edmund, setting his lips, and turning to his machinery.

"But, you're not going back down there!"

"I'll run beyond the edge of the circle, and drop down far enough to revive him. Then we can keep dodging up and down just out of their reach, and so be out of danger both ways."

No sooner said than done. We ran rapidly on a horizontal course until we had cleared the air ships below, and then dropped like a shot. Juba came to his senses in a few moments after we entered the denser air. But now our pursuers, thinking, no doubt, that we had found it impracticable to remain where they knew they could not go, began to close in upon us. I reflected that here was the only mistake that Edmund had made--I mean the bringing along with us of the natives of the dark hemisphere. It was only their presence that had prevented us from sailing triumphantly over the crystal mountains; it was because of them that we had wrecked the car; and now it was Juba who baffled our best chance of escape. And yet--and I am glad to be able to say it--I could not regret his presence, for had he not made himself one of us; had he not proved himself entitled to all the privileges of comradeship?

But Henry (I am sorry to write it) did not share these feelings.

"Edmund," he said, "why do you insist upon endangering our lives for the sake of this--this--animal here?"

Never have I beheld such a blaze of anger as that which burst from

Edmund's eyes as he turned upon Henry:

"You cowardly brute!" he shouted. "I ought to throw you overboard!"

He seemed about to execute his threat, dropping the controller from his hand as he spoke, and Henry, with ashen face, ran from him like a madman.

I caught him in my arms, fearing that he would tumble overboard in his fright, and Edmund, instantly recovering his composure, turned back to his work.

Finding Juba sufficiently recovered, although yet weak and almost helpless, he rose again, but more cautiously than before. And now our pursuers, plainly believing that these maneuvers could have but one ending, began to set their net, and I could not help admiring their plan, which would surely have succeeded if they had not made a fundamental error in their calculations, but one for which they were not to blame. There was such a multitude of their craft, fresh ones coming up all the while, that they were able to form themselves into the shape of a huge bag net, the edge of which was carried as high as they dared to go, while the sides and receding bottom were composed of air ships so numerous that they were packed almost as closely as meshes. Edmund laughed again as he looked down into this immense net.

"No, no," he shouted. "We're no gudgeons! You'll have to do better than that!"

"See here, Edmund," Jack suddenly exclaimed, "why don't you make off and leave them? By keeping just above their reach we could easily escape."

"And leave the car?" was the reply.

"By Jo," returned Jack, "I never thought of that. But, then, what did you run away for at all?"

"Because," said Edmund quietly, "I thought it better to parley than to lie in prison."

"Parley! How are you going to parley?"

"That remains to be seen; but I guess we'll manage it."

We were now, as far as I could estimate, five or six miles high. When we were highest, the great cloud dome seemed to be but a little way above our heads, and I thought, at first, that Edmund intended to run up into it and thus conceal our movements. The highest of our pursuers were about half a mile below us. They circled about, and were evidently parleying on their own account, for waves of color flowed all about them, making a spectacle so brilliant and beautiful that sometimes I almost forgot our critical situation in watching it.

"I suppose you'll play them a prismatic symphony," said Henry mockingly.

I looked at him in surprise. Evidently his fear of Edmund had vanished; no doubt because he knew in his heart the magnanimity of our great leader.

"Who knows?" Edmund replied. "I've no doubt the materials are aboard, and if I had been here a month, I'd probably try it. As things stand, we shall have to resort to other methods."

While we were talking, Edmund did not relax his vigilance, and two or three times, when he had dropped to a lesser elevation for Juba's sake, he baffled a dash of the enemy. At last we noticed a movement in the crowd which betokened something of importance, and in a moment we saw what it was. A splendid air ship, by far the most beautiful that we had yet seen, was swiftly approaching from below.

"It's the queen," said Edmund. "I thought she'd come."

The approaching ship made its way straight toward us, and, without the slightest hesitation, Edmund dropped down to meet it. Those who had been our pursuers now made no attempt to interfere with us; they recognized the presence of a superior authority. Soon we were so near that we could recognize Ala, who looked like Cleopatra in her barge on the charmed waves of Cydnus. Beside her, to the intense disappointment of Jack and myself, stood Ingra.

"Confound him!" growled Jack. "He's always got to have his oar in the puddle. Blamed if I'm not sorry Edmund spoiled my aim. I'd have had his scalp to hang up at the Olympus to be smoked at!"

Of what now occurred, I can give no detailed account, because it was all beyond my comprehension. We approached almost within touch, and then Edmund stood forth, fearless and splendid as Caesar, and conducted his "parley." When it was over, there was a flashing of aerial colors between Ala's ship and the others, and then all, including ours, set out to return to the capital. After a while Edmund, who had been very thoughtful, turned to us and said:

"You can make your minds easy. Of course you'll understand there is a certain amount of guesswork in what I tell you, but you can depend upon the correctness of my general conclusions. I believe that I have made it perfectly clear that we intended no harm, and that we are not dangerous characters. At least Ala understands it perfectly. As for Ingra, perhaps he doesn't want to understand it. I can't make out the cause of his enmity, but it is certain that he doesn't like us, and if it all depended upon him, it would go hard with us. I believe that we shall have to stand a trial of some kind, but remember that we've got a powerful advocate. I don't regret our running off, for, as I anticipated, it afforded us the opportunity to establish some sort of terms. The mere fact that we return willingly when they know that we might have fled beyond their reach should count in our favor, for, as I have always insisted, these are highly intelligent people, with civilized ideas. If I had not been sure

of that I should have continued the flight and depended upon some other means of recovering the car--or constructing a new one."

We had become so much accustomed to accept Edmund's decisions as final that none of us thought of objecting to what he had done; unless it might have been Henry, but he kept his thoughts to himself.