

## CHAPTER XI

### BEFORE THE THRONE OF VENUS

While we were dropping down toward the city, with a great fleet of air ships attending, Edmund opened his mind upon another curious difficulty besetting us.

"You, of course, noted," he said, "how close we approached at one time to the cloud dome. The existence of that sky screen is a circumstance which may possibly be decisive in the determination of our fate."

"Favorable or unfavorable?" I asked.

"Unfavorable, for this reason. If these people could be made to understand that we are visitors from another world, and not inhabitants of the other side of their own planet, they might treat us with greater consideration, and even with a certain superstitious deference. The imagination is doubtless as active with them as with terrestrial beings, and if you can once touch the imagination, even of the most intelligent and instructed persons, you can do almost anything you choose with them. But how am I to convey to them any idea of this kind? Seeing neither sun, nor moon, nor stars, they can have no conception of such a thing as another world than their own."

"Couldn't you persuade them," said Jack, "that we come from the upper side of the cloud dome? You could pretend that it's very fine living up there--plenty of sunshine and good air."

Edmund laughed.

"I'm afraid, Jack, that they are too intelligent to believe that a person of your avoirdupois could walk on the clouds. You're not quite angelic enough for that. I'm sure that they know perfectly well what the dome consists of."

"The presence of Juba with us is another difficulty," I suggested. "If, as you suppose, they recognize certain racial characteristics in him, which convince them that he belongs to the other side of Venus, then they are sure to believe that we belong there, too."

"Certainly. But I must find some way round the difficulty. I depend upon the intelligence of Ala. If she had been killed, nothing could have saved us. We have had an unpleasant escape from something too closely resembling the misfortune of Oedipus."

In the meanwhile, we reached the capital and disembarked on the great tower. To our intense surprise and delight, instead of being reconducted to prison, we were led into a magnificent apartment, with open arches facing toward the distant mountains, and a repast was spread before us. Juba, to our great contentment, was allowed to accompany us. I think that

Jack was the most pleased member of the party at the sight of the food. We sat at a round table, and I observed that the eatables consisted, as with Juba's people, exclusively of vegetables, except that there were birds, of species unknown to us, but of most exquisite flavor, and a light, white wine, the most delicious that I ever tasted.

When we had finished eating, we fell to admiring the view, and Jack pulled out his pipe, and, aided by Edmund's pocket lamp, which possessed an attachment for cigar lighting, began to smoke, leaning back luxuriously in his seat, with as much nonchalance as if he had been in the smoking room at the Olympus. I think I may say that we all exhibited a sang froid amidst our novel surroundings that would have astonished us if we had stopped to analyze our feelings, but in that respect Jack was often the coolest member of the party, although he had not the iron nerves of Edmund. On this occasion, he was not long in producing a sensation. No sooner had the smoke begun to curl from his lips than the attendants in the room were thrown into a state of laughable consternation. Evidently they thought, like the servant of Walter Raleigh, that the smoke must come from an internal fire. Their looks showed alarm as well as astonishment.

"Keep your pipe concealed," whispered Edmund. "Take a few strong whiffs, and hide it in your pocket before they observe whence the smoke really comes. This may do us some good; it will, at least, serve to awake their imagination, and that is what we need."

Jack did as requested, first filling his mouth with smoke, and then slowly letting it out in puffs that more and more astonished the onlookers, who kept at a respectful distance, and excitedly discussed the phenomenon. Suddenly, Jack, with characteristic mobility of thought, turned to Edmund and demanded:

"Edmund, why didn't those fellows shoot us when we were running away? There were enough of them to bring us down with the wildest sort of shooting."

"They didn't shoot," was the reply, "because they had nothing to shoot with. I have made up my mind that they are an unwarlike people. I don't believe that they have the slightest idea what a gun is. Yet they are no cowards, and they'll fight if there is need of fighting, and no doubt they have weapons of some kind; only they are not natural slaughterers like ourselves, and I shouldn't be surprised if war is unknown on Venus."

"All the same," said Jack, "I wish I had my pistol back. I tried to hide it, but those fellows had their eyes on it, and it's confiscated. I'm glad you think they don't know how to use it."

"And I'm glad," returned Edmund, "that you haven't got your pistol. You've been altogether too handy with it. Now," he continued, "let us consider our situation. You see at a glance that we have gained a great deal as a result of the parley; the way we have just been treated here shows plainly enough that we shall, at least, have a fair trial, and we

couldn't have counted on that before. You can never make people listen to reason against their inclination unless you hold certain advantages, and our advantage was that we clearly had it in our power to continue our flight. My only anxiety now is in regard to the means of holding them to the agreement--for agreement it certainly was--and of impressing them not only with a conviction of our innocence but with a sense of our reserve power, and the more mysterious I can make that power seem to them, the better. That is why I welcomed even the incident of Jack's smoking. We shall surely be arraigned before a court of some kind, and I imagine that we shall not have long to wait. What I wish particularly is that all of you shall desist from every thought of resistance, and follow strictly such instructions as I may have occasion to give you."

He had hardly ceased speaking when a number of official-looking persons entered the room where we were.

"Here come the cops," said Jack. "Now for the police court."

He was not very far wrong. We were gravely conducted to one of the little craft which served for elevators, and after a rapid descent, were led through a maze of passages terminating in a vast and splendid apartment, apparently perfectly square in plan, and at least three hundred feet on a side. It was half filled with a brilliant throng, in which our entry caused a sensation. Light entered through lofty windows on all four sides. The floor seemed to be of a rose-colored marble, with inlaid diapering of lapis lazuli, and the walls and ceiling were equally rich.

But that which absolutely fascinated the eye in this great apartment was a huge circle high on the wall opposite the entrance door, like a great clock face, or the rose window of a cathedral, from which poured trembling streams of colored light.

"Chromatic music, once more," said Edmund, in a subdued voice. "Do you know, that has a strange effect upon my spirits, situated as we are. It is a prelude that may announce our fate; it might reveal to us the complexion of our judges, if I could but read its meaning."

"It is too beautiful to spell tragedy," I said.

"Ah, who knows? What is so fascinating as tragedy for those who are only lookers-on?"

"But, Edmund," I protested, "why do you, who are always the most hopeful, now fall into despondency?"

"I am not desponding," he replied, straightening up. "But this soundless music thrills me with its mysterious power, and sometimes it throws me into dejection, though I cannot tell why. To me, when what I firmly believe was the great anthem of this wonderful race, was played in the sky with spectral harmonies, there was, underlying all its mystic beauty, an infinite sadness, an impending sense of something tragic and terrible."

I was deeply surprised and touched by Edmund's manner, and would have questioned him further, but we were interrupted by the officials, who now led us across the vast apartment and to the foot of a kind of throne which stood directly under the great clock face. Then, for the first time, we recognized Ala, seated on the throne. Beside her was a person of majestic stature, with features like those of a statue of Zeus, and long curling hair of snowy whiteness. The severity of his aspect struck cold to my heart, but Ala's countenance was smiling and full of encouragement. As we were led to our places a hush fell upon the throng of attendants, and the colors ceased to play from the circle.

"Orchestra stopped," whispered the irrepressible Jack. "Curtain rises."

The pause that followed brought a fearful strain upon my nerves, but in a moment it was broken by Ala, who fixed her eyes upon Edmund's face as he stood a little in advance of the rest of us. He returned her regard unflinchingly. Every trace of the feeling which he had expressed to me was gone. He stood erect, confident, masterful, and as I looked, I felt a thrill of pride in him, pride in his genius which had brought us hither, pride in our mother earth--for were we not her far-wandering children?

I summoned all my powers in the effort to understand the tongueless speech which I knew was issuing from Ala's eyes. And I did understand it! Although there was not a sound, I would almost have sworn that my ears heard the words:

"Who and what are you, and whence do you come?"

Breathlessly I awaited Edmund's answer. He slowly lifted his hand and pointed upward. He was, then, going at once to proclaim our origin from another world; to throw over us the aegis of the earth!

The critical experiment had begun, and I shivered at the thought that here they knew no earth; here no flag could protect us. I saw perplexity and surprise in Ala's eyes and in those of the stern Zeus beside her. Suddenly a derisive smile appeared on the latter's lips, while Ala's confusion continued. God! Were we to fail at the very beginning?

Edmund calmly repeated his gesture, but it met with no response; no indication appeared to show that it awakened any feeling other than uncomprehending astonishment in one of his judges and derision in the other. And then, with a start, I caught sight of Ingra, standing close beside the throne, his face made more ugly by the grin which overspread it.

I was almost wild; I opened my mouth to cry I know not what, when there was a movement behind, and Juba stepped to Edmund's side, dropped on his knees, rose again, and fixed his great eyes upon the judges!

My heart bounded at the thoughts which now raced through my brain. Juba belonged to their world, however remote the ancestral connection might



be; he possessed at least the elements of their unspoken language; and it might be a tradition among his people, who we knew worshipped the earth-star, that it was a brighter world than theirs. Had Edmund's gesture suddenly suggested to his mind the truth concerning us--a truth which the others had not his means of comprehending--and could he now bear effective testimony in our favor?

With what trembling anxiety I watched his movements! Edmund, too, looked at him with mingled surprise and interest in his face. Presently he raised his long arm, as Edmund had done, and pointed upward. A momentary

chill of disappointment ran through me--could he do no more than that? But he did more. Half unconsciously I had stepped forward where I could see his face. His eyes were speaking. I knew it. And, thank God! there was a gleam of intelligence answering him from the eyes of our judges.

He had made his point; he had suggested to them a thought of which they had never dreamed!

They did not thoroughly comprehend him; I could see that, for he must have been for them like one speaking a different dialect, to say nothing of the fundamental difficulty of the idea that he was trying to convey, but yet the meaning did not escape, and as he continued his strange communication, the wonder spread from face to face, for it was not only the judges who had grasped the general sense of what he was telling them. Even at that critical moment there came over me a feeling of admiration

for a language like this; a truly universal language, not limited by rules of speech or hampered by grammatical structure. At length it became evident that Juba had finished, but he continued standing at Edmund's side.

Ala and her white-headed companion looked at one another, and I tried to read their thoughts. In her face, I believed that I could detect every sign of hope for us. Occasionally she glanced with a smile at Edmund. But the old judge was more implacable, or more incredulous. There was no kindness in his looks, and slowly it became clear that Ala and he were opposed in their opinion.

Suddenly she placed her hand upon her breast, where the bullet must have grazed her, and made an energetic gesture, including us in its sweep, which I interpreted to mean that she had no umbrage against those who had unintentionally injured her. It was plain that she insisted upon this point, making it a matter personal to herself, and my hopes rose when I thought that I detected signs of yielding on the part of the other. At this moment, when the decision seemed to hang in the balance, a new element was introduced into the case with dramatic suddenness and overwhelming force.

For several minutes I had seen nothing of Ingra, but my thoughts had been too much occupied with more important things to take heed of his movements. Now he appeared at the left of the throne, leading a file of

fellows bearing a burden. They went direct to the foot of the throne, and deposited their burden within a yard of the place where Edmund was standing. They drew off a covering, and I could not repress a cry of consternation.

It was the body of one of their compatriots, and a glance at it sufficed to show the manner in which death had been inflicted. It had been crushed in a way which could probably mean nothing else than a fearful fall. The truth flashed upon me like a gleaming sword. The victim must have been precipitated from the air ship which we had struck at the beginning of our flight!

And there stood our enemy, Ingra, with exultation written on his features. He had made a master stroke, like a skillful prosecutor.

"Hang him!" I heard Jack mutter between his teeth. "Oh, if I only had my pistol!"

"Then you would make matters a hundred times worse," I whispered. "Keep your head, and remember Edmund's injunction."

The behavior of the latter again awoke my utmost admiration.

Contemptuously turning his back upon Ingra, he faced Ala and old Zeus, and as their regards mingled, I knew well what he was trying to express. This time, since his meaning involved no conception lying utterly beyond their experience, he was more successful. He told them that the death of

this person was a fact hitherto unknown to us, and that, like the injury to Ala, it had been inflicted without our volition. I believed that this plea, too, was accepted as valid by Ala; but not so with the other. He understood it perfectly, and he rejected it on the instant. My reason told me that nothing else could have been expected of him, for, truly, this was drawing it rather strong--to claim twice in succession immunity for evils which had undeniably originated from us.

Our case looked blacker and blacker, as it became evident that the opposition between our two judges had broken out again, and was now more decided than before. The features of the old man grew fearfully stern, and he rejected all the apparent overtures of Ala. He had been willing to pardon the injury and insult to her person, since she herself insisted upon pardon, but now the affair was entirely different. Whether purposely or not, we had caused the death of a subject of the realm, and he was not to be swerved aside from what he regarded as his duty. My nerves shook at the thought that we knew absolutely nothing about the social laws of this people, and that, among them, the rule of an eye for an eye, and blood for blood, might be more inviolable than it had ever been on the earth.

As the discussion proceeded, with an intensity which spoken words could not have imparted to it, Ala's cheeks began to glow, and her eyes to glitter with strange light. One could see the resistance in them rising to passion, and, at last, as the aged judge again shook his head, with greater emphasis than ever, she rose, as if suddenly transformed. The majestic splendor of her countenance was thrilling. Lifting her jeweled

arm with an imperious gesture, she commanded the attendants to remove the bier, and was instantly obeyed. Then she beckoned to Edmund, and without an instant's hesitation, he stepped upon the lower stage of the throne. With the stride of a queen, she descended to his side, and, resting her hand on his shoulder, looked about her with a manner which said, as no words could have done:

"It is the power of my protection which encircles him!"