

CHAPTER XIII

WE FALL INTO TROUBLE AGAIN

It was not long after our visit to the marvelous fountain when Jack proposed to me that he and I should make a little excursion on our own account in the city. Edmund was absent at the moment, engaged in some inquiries which interested him, under the guidance of Ala and her customary attendants. I forget why Jack and I had stayed behind, since both Juba and Henry had accompanied Edmund, but it was probably because

we wished to make some necessary repairs to our garments for I confess that I shared a little of the coquettishness of Jack in that matter. At any rate, we grew weary of being alone, and decided to venture just a little way in search of adventure. We calculated that the tower of the palace, which was so conspicuous, would serve us as a landmark, and that there was no danger of getting lost.

Nobody interfered with us at our departure, as we had feared they might, and in a short time we had become so absorbed in the strange spectacles of the narrow streets, lined with shops and filled with people on foot, while small air ships continually passed just above the roofs, that we forgot the necessity of keeping our landmark constantly in view, and were lost without knowing it.

One thing which immediately struck us was the entire absence of beasts of burden--nothing like horses or mules did we see. There were not even dogs, although, as I have told you, some canine-like animals dwelt with the people of the caverns. Everybody went either on foot or in air ships. There were no carriages, except a kind of palanquin, some running on wheels and others borne by hand.

"I should think they would have autos," said Jack, "with all their science and ingenuity which Edmund admires so much."

But there was not a sign of anything resembling an auto; the silence of the crowded streets was startling, and made the scene more dreamlike. Everybody appeared to be shod with some noise-absorbing material. We strolled along, turning corners with blissful carelessness, staring and being stared at (for, of course, everybody knew who we were), peering into open doors and the gaping fronts of bazaars, chattering like a couple of boys making their first visit to a city, and becoming every moment more hopelessly, though unconsciously, lost, and more interested by what we saw. The astonishing display of pleasing colors and the brilliancy of everything fascinated us. I had never seen anything comparable to this in beauty, variety, and richness. We passed a market where we saw some of the bright-plumaged birds that we had eaten at our first repast hung up for sale. They had a way of serving these birds at table with the brilliant feathers of the head and neck still attached, as if they found a gratification even at their meals in seeing beautiful colors before them.

Other shops were filled with birds in gilded cages, which we should have taken for songsters but for the fact that, although crowds gathered about and regarded them with mute admiration, not a sound issued from their throats--at least we heard none. A palanquin stopped at one of these shops, and a lady alighted and bought three beautiful birds which she carried away in their cages, watching them with every indication of the utmost pleasure, which we ascribed to the splendor of their plumage and the gracefulness of their forms. As a crowd watched the transaction without interference on the part of the shopkeeper, or evidence of annoyance on that of the lady, we took the liberty of a close look ourselves. Then we saw their money.

"Good, yellow gold," whispered Jack.

Such, indeed, it seemed to be. The lady took the money, which consisted of slender rings, chased with strange characters, from a golden purse, and the whole transaction seemed so familiar that we might well have believed ourselves to be witnessing a purchase in a bazaar of Cairo or Damascus. This scene led to a desire on Jack's part to buy something himself.

"If I only had some of their money," he said, "I'd like to get some curiosities to carry home. I wonder if they'd accept these?" and he drew from his pocket some gold and silver coins.

"No doubt they'd be glad to have a few as keepsakes," I said.

"By Jo! I think I'll try it," said Jack, "but not here. I'm not a bird fancier myself. Let's look a little farther."

We wandered on, getting more and more interested, and followed by a throng of curious natives, who treated us, I must say, much more respectfully than we should have been treated in similar circumstances at home. Many of the things we saw, I cannot describe, because there is nothing to liken them to, but all were as beautiful as they were strange. At last we found a shop whose contents struck Jack's fancy. The place differed from any that we had yet seen; it was much larger, and more richly fitted up than the others, and there were no counters, the things that it contained being displayed on the inner walls, while a single keeper, of a grave aspect, and peculiarly attired, all in black, occupied a seat at the back. The objects on view were apparently ornaments to be hung up, as we hang plaques on the wall. They were of both gold and silver, and in some the two metals were intermixed, with pleasing effects. What seemed singular was the fact that the motif of the ornaments was always the same, although greatly varied in details of execution. As near as I could make it out, the intention appeared to be to represent a sunburst. There was invariably a brilliant polished boss in the center, sometimes set with a jewel, and surrounding rays of crinkled form, which plunged into a kind of halo that encircled the entire work. The idea was commonplace, and it did not occur to me amidst

my admiration of the extreme beauty of the workmanship that there was any

cause for surprise in the finding of a sunburst represented here. Jack was enthusiastic.

"That's the ticket for me," he said. "How would one of those things look hanging over the fireplace of old Olympus? You bet I'm going to persuade the old chap to exchange one for a handful of good solid American money."

I happened to glance behind us while Jack was scooping his pocket, and was surprised to see that the crowd of idlers, which had been following us, had dispersed. Looking out of the doorway, I saw some of them furtively regarding us from a respectful distance. I twitched Jack by the sleeve:

"See here," I said, "there's some mistake about this. I don't believe that this is a shop. You'd better be careful, or we may make a bad break."

"Oh, pshaw!" he replied; "it's a shop all right, or if it isn't exactly a shop that old duffer will be glad to get a little good money for one of his gimcracks."

My suspicion that all was not right was not allayed when I noticed that the old man, whose complexion differed from the prevailing tone here, and who was specially remarkable by the possession of an eagle-beaked nose, a

peculiarity that I had not before observed among these people, began to frown as Jack brusquely approached him. But I could not interfere before Jack had thrown a handful of coin in his lap, and, reaching up, had put his hand upon one of the curious sunbursts, saying:

"I guess this will suit; what do you say, Peter?"

Instantly the old fellow sprang to his feet, sending the coins rolling over the polished floor, and with eyes ablaze with anger, seized Jack by the throat. I sprang to his aid, but in a second four stout fellows, darting out of invisible corners, grappled us, and before we could make any effective resistance, they had our arms firmly bound behind our backs! Jack exerted all his exceptional strength to break loose, but in vain.

"I tried to stop you, Jack--" I began, in a tone of annoyance, but immediately he cut me off:

"This is on me, Peter; don't you worry. You haven't done anything."

"I'm afraid it's on all of us," I replied. "The whole party, Edmund and all, may have to suffer for our heedlessness."

"Fiddlesticks," he returned. "I haven't got his old ornament, but he's got my coin. This looks like a skin game to me. What in thunder did he hang the things up for if he didn't want to sell 'em?"

"But I told you this wasn't a shop."

"No, I see it isn't; it's a trap for suckers, I guess."

Jack's indignation grew hotter as we were dragged out into the street, and followed by a crush of people drawn to the scene, were hurried along, we knew not whither. In fact, his indignation swallowed up the alarm which he ought to have experienced, and which I felt in full force. I beat my brains in vain to find some explanation for the merciless severity with which we were treated so out of all proportion to the venial fault that had unconsciously been committed, and my perplexity grew when I saw in the faces of the crowd surrounding us, and running to keep up, a look of horror, as if we had been guilty of an unspeakable crime. We were too much hurried and jolted by our captors to address one another, and in a short time we were widely separated, Jack being led, or rather dragged, ahead, as if to prevent any communication between us. Once in a while, to my regret, I observed him exerting all his force to break his bonds and slinging his custodians about; but he could not get away, and at last, to my infinite comfort, he ceased to struggle, and went along as quietly as the rapid pace would permit.

Presently an air ship swooped down from above, and alighted in a little square which we had just entered. Immediately we were taken aboard, with small regard to our comfort, and the air ship rose rapidly, and bore off in the direction of the great tower of the palace which we could now see.

Upon our arrival we were taken through the inevitable labyrinth of corridors, and finally found ourselves in a place that was entirely new to us.

It was a round chamber, perhaps two hundred feet in diameter, lighted, like the Roman Pantheon, by a huge circular opening in the vaulted roof, through which I caught a glimpse of the pearl-tinted cloud dome, which seemed infinitely remote. No opposition was made when I pushed ahead in order to be at Jack's side, and as a throng quickly hedged us round, our conductors released their hold, although our arms remained bound. When at

last we stood fast we were in front of a rich dais, containing a thronelike seat occupied by a personage attired in black, the first glimpse of whose face gave me such a shock as I had not experienced since the priest of the earth-worshippers seized me for his prey. I have never seen anything remotely resembling that face. It was without beard, and of a ghastly paleness. It was seen only in profile, except when, with a lightning-like movement, it turned, for the fraction of a second, toward us, and was instantly averted again. It made my nerves creep to look at it. The nose was immense, resembling a huge curved beak, and the eyes, as black and glittering as jet, were roofed with shaggy brows, and seemed capable of seeing crosswise.

Sometimes one side of the face and sometimes the other was presented, the transition being effected by two instantaneous jerks, with a slight pause between, during which the terrible eyes transfixed us. At such moments

the creature--though he bore the form of a man--seemed to project his dreadful countenance toward the object of his inspection like a monstrous bird stretching forth its neck toward its prey. The effect was indescribable, terrifying, paralyzing! The eyes glowed like fanned embers.

"In God's name," gasped Jack, leaning his trembling shoulder upon me, "what is it?"

I was, perhaps, more unmanned than he, and could make no reply.

Then there was a movement in the throng surrounding us, and the old man of the sunbursts appeared before the throne, and, after dropping on his knees and rising again, indicated us with his long finger, and, as was plain, made some serious accusation. The face turned upon us again with a longer gaze than usual, and we literally shrank from it. Then its owner rose from his seat, towering up, it seemed, to a height of full seven feet, shot his hand out with a gesture of condemnation, and instantly sat down again and averted his countenance. There seemed to have been a world of meaning in this brief act to those who could comprehend it. We were seized, even more roughly than before, and dragged from the chamber, and at the end of a few minutes found ourselves thrown into a dungeon, where there was not the slightest glimmer of light, and the door was locked upon us.

It was a long time before either of us summoned up the courage to speak.

At length I said faintly:

"Jack, I'm afraid it's all over with us. We must have done something terrible, though I cannot imagine what it was."

But Jack, after his manner, was already recovering his spirits, and he replied stoutly:

"Nonsense, Peter, we're all right, as Edmund says. Wait till he comes and he'll fix it."

"But how can he know what has happened? And what could he do if he did? More likely they will all be condemned along with us."

Jack felt around in the dark and got me by the hand, giving it a hearty pressure.

"Remember Ala," he said. "She's our friend, or Edmund's, and they'll bring us out of this. You want to brace up."

"Remember Ingra!" I responded with a shiver, and I could feel Jack start at the words.

"Hang him!" he muttered. "If I'd only finished him when I had the drop!"

After that neither spoke. If Jack's thoughts were blacker than mine he must have wished for his pistol to blow out his own brains. At no time since our arrival on the planet had I felt so depressed. I had no courage left; could see no lightening of the gloom anywhere. In the horror of the darkness which enveloped us, the horror of space came over my spirit. One feels a little of that sometimes when the breadth of an ocean separates him from home, and from all who really care for him--but what is the Atlantic or the Pacific to millions upon millions of leagues of interplanetary space! To be cast away among the inhabitants of another world than one's own! To have lost, as we had done (for in that moment of despair I was sure Edmund could never repair the car), the only possible means of return! To have offended, just because we were strangers, and could not know better, some incomprehensible social law of this strange people, who owned not a drop of the blood of our race, or of any race whatsoever dwelling on the earth! To lie under the condemnation of that goblin face, without the possibility of pleading even the mercy that our hearts instinctively grant to the smallest mite of fellow life on our own planet! To be alone! friendless! forsaken! condemned!--in a far-off, kinless world! I could have fallen down in idolatry before a grain of sand from the shore of the Atlantic!

In the murkiest depth of my despair a sound roused me with a shock that made my heart ache. In a moment the door opened, light streamed in, and Edmund stood there.