

CHAPTER XIV

THE SUN GOD

Strangely enough, I, who have an exceptional memory for spoken words, cannot, by any effort, recall what Edmund said, as his face beamed in upon us. I have only a confused recollection that he spoke, and that his words had a marvelous effect upon my broken spirit. But I can see, as if it were yet before me, the smile that illumined his features. My heart bounded with joy, as if a messenger had come straight from the earth itself, bearing a reprieve whose authority could not be called in question.

Jack's joy was no less than mine, although he had not suffered mentally as I had done. And the sight of Ala was hardly less reassuring to us, but to find Ingra, too, present was somewhat of a shock to our confidence in speedy delivery from trouble. And, in fact, we were not at once delivered. We had to spend many weary hours yet in our dark prison, but they were rendered less gloomy by Edmund's assurance that he would save us. The confidence that he always inspired seems to me to have been another mark of his genius. We had an instinct that he could do in any circumstances what was impossible to ordinary men.

At last the welcome moment came, and we were led forth, free, and rejoined Edmund, Henry, and Juba in our apartments. Then, for the first,

we learned what we had done, and how narrow had been our escape from a terrible doom. It was a new chapter of wonder that Edmund opened before us. I shall tell it in his own words.

"When I returned to the palace and found you missing I was greatly wrought up. Immediately I applied to Ala for aid in finding you. She was quickly informed of all the circumstances of your arrest, and I saw at once, by the expression of her features, that it was a matter of the utmost gravity. I was not reassured by Ingra's evident joy. I could read in his face the pleasure that the news gave him, and I perceived that there was again opposition between him and Ala, and that she was trying, with less success than I hoped for, to bring him round to her view.

"With no little trouble I finally discovered the nature of your offense. I understood it the more readily because I had already begun to suspect the existence among these people of a strange form of idolatry, in some respects akin to the earth-worship of the cavern dwellers. I have told you that certain things had led me to think that they occasionally see the sun here. It is a phenomenon of excessive rarity, and whole generations sometimes pass without its recurrence. It is due to an opening which at irregular periods forms for a brief space of time in the cloud dome. I imagine that it may be in some way connected with sunspots, but here they have no notion of its cause, and look upon it as entirely miraculous.

"Whenever this rare event occurs it gives rise to extraordinary religious

excitement, and ceremonies concerning which there is some occult mystery that I have not yet penetrated. I suspect that the ceremonies are not altogether unlike the Bacchanalian festivals of ancient Greece. At any rate the momentary appearance of the sun at these times is regarded as the avatar of a supreme god, and their whole religious system is based upon it. So universal and profound is the superstition to which it gives rise that the most instructed persons among them are completely under its dominion. The eagle-beaked individual who condemned you, and whom I have since seen, is the chief priest of this superstition, and within his sphere his power is unlimited. It is solely to the belief--which, through Ala, I have succeeded in impressing upon him--that we are children of the sun that I owe the success of my efforts in your behalf. Without that you would surely have been sacrificed, and we with you.

"One of the forms which this superstition takes is a belief that the anger of the sun god can be mollified by offerings of images, made in his likeness, which are first consecrated by the chief priest, and then hung up on the walls of certain small temples, which are scattered through the city, and are always kept open to the air under the guard of a minor priest and his attendants. A whole family, as I understand it, deems itself protected by one of these images, which are made by artists who never touch any other work, and which are only granted to those who have undergone a painful series of purifications in the great temple. The preliminary ceremonies finished, the images are suspended, and at certain times those to whom they belong go and kneel and pray before them, as

before their guardian saints."

"What a fool I was not to understand it," I murmured.

"You will understand now," Edmund continued, "how serious was Jack's offense in insulting a priest, and laying impious hands upon a sacred image, belonging, no doubt, to a family whose antiquity of descent would make our oldest pedigrees on the earth seem as ephemeral as the existence of a May fly; for I am convinced that here life has gone on, uninterrupted by wars and changes of dynasty, for untold ages.

"It is a marvel that you escaped, for already they were preparing the awful sacrifice. The chief priest was amazed when an interposition was made on your behalf. Such a thing had never been known, and, as I have said, it was only by acting upon his superstition that I succeeded, with Ala's assistance, in obtaining a reprieve. As the case stands, we find ourselves occupying a dangerous eminence, which it may be difficult for us to maintain. I must beseech you to be on your guard, and to act only under my direction. It is all the more serious for us because I am convinced that Ingra has no faith whatever in the legend which protects us. He persists in believing that we are simply interlopers from the dark hemisphere, and the opposition between him and Ala has now become so sharp that he would gladly witness our destruction. I am sure that he will do his utmost to unmask us, and thus send us to our death."

"But--" I began.

"Wait a moment," said Edmund, "I have not yet finished. I must now tell you who Ingra is. He is the destined consort of Ala. That explains his influence over her. From what I can make out, it appears that he is of the royal blood, and that the marriage of the queen is arranged, not by her preference, but by an unwritten law, administered by the chief priest. She has no choice in the matter."

"I should say not," broke in Jack. "She never would have chosen that jackanapes! If you hadn't spoiled my aim I'd have relieved her of the burden."

"Not another word of that!" said Edmund severely. "In no manner, not even by a look, are you ever to express your dislike of him. And remember, you must govern your very thoughts, for here they lie open, as legible as print."

"Hang me," growled Jack, "if I like a world where a man can't even think his own thoughts because his mind goes bare! Take me back where you have to speak before you are understood."

"When you have wicked thoughts don't look them in the eyes," said Edmund, half smiling, "and then you will run no danger. It is through the eyes that they read. Now, to resume what I was saying, I am more than ever anxious to recover the car, and to find the materials that will enable me

to repair its machinery. With it in our possession, and in good shape, we shall be in a position to run away whenever it may seem necessary to do so, and in the meantime to impose our legend upon them by the possession of so apparently miraculous a means of conveying ourselves through space. It will be overwhelming proof of the truth of our assertion of an origin outside their world, and perhaps, upon the whole, it is just as well that they should think that we belong to the sun, of whose existence they have some knowledge, rather than to the earth, of which they know nothing, in spite of the inkling that Juba succeeded in conveying to them."

"The car is here, isn't it?" I asked.

"Yes, it is in the great tower, but it is useless in its present condition."

"And what materials do you want to find?"

"Primarily nothing but uranium. They understand chemistry here. They have the apparatus that I need, but they do not know how to use it as I do. The uranium certainly exists somewhere. They mine gold and silver, and other things, and when I can find their mines, without exciting their suspicion, and can get the use of a laboratory in secret, I shall soon have what I need. But I must be very circumspect, for it would not do to let them perceive that chemistry really lies at the basis of our miracle. It is this necessity for secrecy which troubles me most. But I shall find

a way."

"For God's sake, find it quick," Henry burst out. "And then get away from this accursed planet."

Edmund looked at him a moment before replying:

"We shall go when the necessity for going arises, and not before. We have not yet seen all the interesting things of this world."

I believe that even Jack and I shared to some extent Henry's disappointment on hearing this announcement. We should have been glad to know that we were to start on the return journey as soon as the car was in shape to transport us. But the event proved that Edmund's instinct was, as usual, right, and that the things which were yet to be seen and experienced were well worth the fearful risk we ran in remaining.

While Edmund undertook the delicate inquiries which were necessary in order to determine the direction that his search for uranium should take, and to enable him to conduct his chemical processes without awaking suspicion as to his real purpose, we were left much of the time in charge of a party of attendants who, by his intercession, had been selected to act as our guides when we wished to examine the wonders of the palace and the capital. Sometimes he accompanied us; but more often he was with Ala and her suite, including her uneludable satellite, Ingra.

"I bless my stars that he doesn't favor us with his delightful company," was Jack's comment, when he saw Ingra tagging along after Ala and Edmund.

I privately believed that Ingra had his spies among our attendants, but I was careful not to mention my suspicions to Jack.

But, oh, the delight of those excursions! Those streets; and those aerial towers, which rose like forests of coral in a gulf of liquid ether! They shine often in my dreams. A thousand times I have tried to put into words, simply for my own satisfaction, a description of the things that we saw, and the impressions that they made on my mind--but it is impossible. I understand now why the tales of travelers into strange lands never convey a tithe of what is in the writers' minds; they simply cannot; the necessary words and analogies do not exist. I can only use general terms, ransacking the vocabulary of adjectives--"beautiful," "wonderful," "fascinating," "marvelous," "indescribable," "magical," "enchanted," "amazing," "inexplicable," "sans pareil"--what you will--but all that says nothing except to my own mind. Only the language of Venus could describe the charms and the wonders of Venus!

There was one thing, however, which was sufficiently comprehensible--the great library. Edmund was not with us when we paid our first visit to it; but he had predicted its existence during one of our conversations, when we were talking of the silent language.

"This people," he had said, "has a great history behind it, extending over periods which would amaze our disinterrers of human antiquity, but an intelligent race cannot make history without also keeping records of it. Tradition alone, handed on from mind to mind, would not answer their requirements. The possession of the power to communicate thought without spoken language does not presuppose a power of memory any more perfect than we have. The brain forgets, the imagination misleads, with them as with us, and consequently they must have books of some kind--which implies a written or printed language. It is probable that this language does not correspond with the very meager one of which we occasionally hear them pronounce a few words. The latter is, I am convinced, used only for names and interjections, and sometimes to call the attention of the person addressed, while the former must be a rich and carefully elaborated system of literary expression, which may not be phonetic at all. We shall find that this is so; and there are unquestionably libraries--probably a great imperial library--devoted to history and science. There must be schools also."

Thus Edmund had spoken, and thus we found it to be. The great library was in a building separate from the palace. It was admirably lighted from without, and its nature was apparent the moment we were led into it. The "books" were long scrolls, which might have been taken for parchment or papyrus, and the characters written on them resembled those of the Chinese language, but worked out in exquisite colors, which might themselves have had a meaning. The rolls were kept in proper receptacles

under the charge of librarians, and we saw many grave persons at desks poring over them. Absolute silence reigned, and as I gazed at the scene I found admiration for this extraordinary people taking the place of the prejudice which I had recently been led to feel against them.

Jack, unusually impressed, whispered to me that Edmund must have been playing us some Hindoo bedevilment trick, for he could not believe that we were actually in a foreign world. The same impression came over me. This was too earthlike; too much as if, instead of being on the planet Venus, we had been transported to some land of antique civilization in our own world. But, after all, we knew where we were, and as the realization of that fact came to us we could only stare with increasing astonishment at the scene before us. I may say here that Edmund subsequently visited this great library, and also some of the schools, and I know that he made notes of what he discovered and learned in them, with the purpose, as I supposed, of writing upon the subject after his return. But the expected book, which would have supplemented and clarified much of what I have undertaken to tell, with but a half understanding of what we saw, never appeared.

Our wonderful excursions came to an end when Edmund at length announced

that he had obtained the information he needed, and that we were about to make a trip to some of the mines of Venus.

"I have discovered," he said, "that Venus is exceedingly rich in the

precious metals, as well as in iron and lead. They mine them all, and we shall visit the mines under Ala's escort. My real purpose, of course, is to find uranium, of whose properties, strangely--and for us luckily--enough, they seem to have no knowledge. Nevertheless, they are capital chemists as far as they go, and possess laboratories provided with all that I shall need. They refine the metals at the mines themselves, so that I am sure of finding everything necessary to do my work right on the ground. The substance which I obtain from uranium is so concentrated that I can carry in my pocket all that will be required to repair the damage done to the transformers in the car. A careful examination, which I have made of the car, proves that the terrific shocks the machinery suffered in the crystal mountains caused an atomic readjustment which destroyed the usefulness of the material in the transformers, and while I might, by laboratory treatment, possibly restore its properties, I think it safer to obtain an entirely fresh supply. We shall start with the queen's ship within a few hours; so you had better make your preparations at once."