

CHAPTER XV

AT THE MERCY OF FEARFUL ENEMIES

If we could have foreseen what was to happen during this trip, even Edmund, I believe, would have shrunk from undertaking it. But we all embarked upon it gladly, because we had conceived the highest expectations of the delight that it would afford us; and at the news that we were to visit mines of gold richer than any on the earth, Henry exhibited the first enthusiasm that he had shown since our departure from home.

Embarked on Ala's splendid "yacht," as Jack called it, and attended by her usual companions, we rapidly left the city behind, and sped away toward the purple mountains, so often seen in the distance. The voyage was a long one, but at length we drew near the foothills, and beheld the mountains towering into peaks behind. Lofty as they looked, there was no snow on their summits. We now descended where plumes of smoke had for some time attracted our attention, and found ourselves at one of the mines. It was a gold mine. The processes of extracting the ore, separating the metal, etc., were conducted with remarkable silence, but they showed a knowledge of metallurgy that would have amazed us if we had not already seen so much of the capacity of this people. Yet similarly to the scene in the library, its earth-likeness was startling.

"This sort of thing is uncanny," said Jack, as we were led through the works. "It makes me creep to see them doing things just as we do them at home, except that they are so quiet about it. If everything was different from our ways it would seem more natural."

"Anyhow," I replied, "we may take it as a great compliment to ourselves, for it shows that we have found out ways of doing things which cannot be improved even in Venus."

I should like to describe in detail the wonders of this mine, but I have space for only a few words about it. It was, Edmund learned, the richest on the planet, and was the exclusive property of the government, furnishing the larger part of its revenues, which were not comparable with those of a great terrestrial nation because of the absence of all the expenditures required by war. No fleets and no armies existed here, and no tariffs were needed where commerce was free. This great mine was the Laurium of Venus. The display of gold in the vaults connected with it exceeded a hundredfold all that the most imaginative historian has ever written of the treasures of Montezuma and Atahualpa. Henry's eyes fairly shone as he gazed upon it, and he could not help saying to Edmund:

"You might have had riches equal to this if you had stayed at home and developed your discovery."

Edmund contemptuously shrugged his shoulders, and turned away without a word.

We were afterwards conducted to a silver mine, which we also inspected, and finally to a lead mine in another part of the hills. This was in reality the goal at which Edmund had been aiming, for he had told us that uranium was sometimes found in association with lead. Our joy was very great when, after a long inspection, he informed us that he had discovered uranium, and that it now remained only to submit it to certain operations in a laboratory in order to prepare the substance that was to give renewed life to those lilliputian monsters in the car, which fed upon men's breath and begot power illimitable.

"I must now contrive," said Edmund, "to get admission to the laboratory connected with the mine, and to do my work without letting them suspect what I am about."

He managed it somehow, as he managed all things that he undertook, and within forty-eight hours after our arrival he was hard at work, evidently exciting the admiration of the native chemists by the knowledge and skill which he displayed. At first they crowded around him so that he was hampered in his efforts to conceal the real object of his labors; but at last they left him comparatively alone, and I could see by his expression whenever I visited the laboratory that things were going to his liking. But the work was long and delicate. Edmund had to fabricate secretly some

of the chemical apparatus he needed, destroying it as fast as it served its purpose, so that weeks of time rolled by before he had what he called the "thimbleful of omnipotence" that was to make us masters of our fate. As fast as he produced it he put it in a metal box, shaped like a snuffbox, and covertly he showed it to us. It consisted of brilliant black grains, finer than millet seeds.

"Every one of those minute grains," he told us, "is packed with as much potential energy as that of a ton's weight suspended a mile above the earth."

But while the little box was being gradually filled with crystallized powder, we, who could lend no aid in the fabrication of Edmund's miracle, improved the opportunity to make acquaintance with the beauties of the surrounding country. Ala had returned to the capital, leaving an air ship at our disposal, and, of all persons in the world, Ingra in command! We refused all invitations to accompany him in the air ship, preferring to make our excursions on foot, accompanied at first by some of the attendants that Ala had left. Edmund did not share our fears that Ingra meditated mischief.

"He doesn't dare," was his reply to all our representations. But nothing could induce Jack and me to trust to Ingra's tender mercies.

Among the favorite spots which we had found to visit in the neighborhood of the mine was a little knoll crowned with a group of the most beautiful

trees that I ever saw, and washed at its base by a brook of exquisitely transparent water which tinkled over a bed of white and clear-yellow pebbles, sparkling like jewels. More than once at the beginning I fished some of them out in the belief that they were nuggets of pure gold polished by the water. In a pool under the translucent shadow of the overhanging trees played small fish so splendid in their varied hues that they looked like miniature rainbows darting about beneath the water. Birds of vivid color sometimes flitted among the branches overhead. There was but one "rainy day" while we were at the mine; all the rest of the time not a cloud appeared under the great dome, and a scented zephyr continually drew down from the mountains and fanned us. Here, then, we passed many hours and many days, chatting of our adventures and our chances, drowsily happy in the pure physical enjoyment which this charming spot afforded.

When at last Edmund informed us that his box was full, and he was ready to return to the capital, we would not let him go without first conducting him to our little paradise. All together, then, with the exception of Juba, who, by some interference of an overlooking providence, was left at the mine, we set out in the highest spirits to be for once our leader's leaders in the exploration of some of the charms of Venus. Edmund was no less delighted than we had been with the place, and yielding to its somnolent influences we were soon stretched side by side on the spreading roots of a giant tree, and sleeping the sleep of sensuous languor.

Our waking was as terrible as it was sudden. I heard a cry, and at the same instant felt an irresistible hand grasping me by the throat. As I opened my eyes I saw that the whole party were prisoners. Nearby an air ship was quivering, as, held in leash, it lightly touched the ground; and a dozen gigantic fellows, whipping our hands behind our backs, hurried us aboard, the great mechanical bird, which instantly rose, describing a circle that carried us above the treetops. I did not try to struggle, for I felt how vain would be any effort that I could make.

Glancing about me, the very first features I recognized were those of Ingra. At last he had us in his power!

I looked at Edmund, but his face was set in thought, and he did not return my glance. Henry, as usual, had plunged into silent hopelessness, and Jack was a picture of mingled rage and despair. Although we were loosely fastened side by side to a rail on the deck, neither of us spoke for perhaps half an hour. In the meantime the air ship rose to a height greater than that of the nearby mountains, and then more slowly approached them. At last it began to circle, as if an uncertainty concerning the route to be chosen had arisen, and I observed, for we could look all about in spite of our bonds, that Ingra and one who appeared to be his lieutenant were engaged in an animated discussion. They pointed this way and that, and the debate grew every moment more earnest. This continued for a long time, while the ship hovered, running slowly in the wide circles. We could not then know how much this hesitation meant for us. If Ingra had been as rapid in his decision now

as he was in the act of taking us prisoners, this history would never have been written. I watched Edmund, and saw that his attention was absorbed by what our captors were about, and even in that emergency I felt a touch of comfort through my unfailing confidence in our leader.

Finally a decision seemed to have been reached, and we set off over the crest of the range. As its huge peaks towered behind us and we descended nearer the ground, my heart sank again, for now we were cut off from the world beyond, and in the improbable event of any pursuit, how could the pursuers know what course we had taken, or where to look for us? And, then, who would pursue? Juba could do nothing, Ala was far away at the capital, even supposing that she should be disposed to set out in search of us, and hours, perhaps days, must elapse before she could be informed of what had happened. Not even when Jack and I were in the dungeon had our case seemed so desperate.

But how the gods repent when they have sunk men in the blackest pit of despair, sending them a messenger of hope to steady their hearts!

Good fortune had willed that we should be so placed upon the deck that we faced most easily sternward. Suddenly, as I gazed despondently at the serrated horizon receding in the distance, a thrill ran through my nerves at the sight of a dark speck in the sky, which seemed to float over one of the highest peaks. A second look assured me that it was moving; a third gave birth to the wild thought that it was in chase. Then I turned to Edmund and whispered:

"There is something coming behind us."

"Very well, do nothing to attract attention," he returned. "I have seen it. They are following us."

I said nothing to Jack or Henry, who had not yet caught sight of the object; but I could not withdraw my eyes from it. Sometimes I persuaded myself that it was growing larger, and then, with the intensity of my gaze, it blurred and seemed to fade. At last Jack spied it, and instantly, in his impetuous way, he exclaimed:

"Edmund! Look there!"

His voice drew Ingra's attention, and immediately the latter observed the direction of our glances, and himself saw the growing speck. He turned with flushed face to his lieutenant and in a trice the vessel began fairly to leap through the air.

"Ah, Jack," said Edmund reproachfully, but yet kindly, "if only you could always think before you speak! It is certain from Ingra's alarm that we are pursued by somebody whom he does not wish to meet. Most likely it is the queen, although it seems impossible that she could so quickly have learned of our mishap. Peter and I have been watching that object, which is unquestionably an air ship, in silence for the last twenty minutes, during which it has perceptibly gained upon us. But for your lack of

caution it might have come within winning distance before it was discovered by Ingra, but now--"

The rebuke was deserved, perhaps, but yet I wished that Edmund had not given it, so painful was the impression that it made upon Jack's generous heart. His countenance was convulsed, and a tear rolled down his cheek--all the more pitiful to see because his arms were pinioned, and he could do nothing to conceal his agitation. Edmund was stricken with remorse when he saw the effect of his words.

"Jack," he said, "forgive me; I am sorry from the bottom of my heart. I should not have blamed you for a little oversight, when I alone am to blame for the misfortunes of us all."

"All right, Edmund, all right," returned Jack in his usual cheerful tones. "But, see here, I don't admit that you are to blame for anything. We're all in this boat together and hanged if we won't get out of it together, too, and you'll be the man to fetch us out."

Edmund smiled sadly, and shook his head.

Meanwhile Ingra, with the evident intention of concealing the movements of the vessel, dropped her so low that we hardly skipped the tops of the trees that we were passing over, for now we had entered a wide region of unbroken forest. Still that black dot followed straight in our wake, and I easily persuaded myself that it was yet growing larger. Edmund declared

that I was right, and expressed his surprise, for we were now flying at the greatest speed that could be coaxed out of the motors. Suddenly a shocking thought crossed my mind. I tried to banish it, fearing that Ingra might read it in my eyes, and act upon it. Suppose that he should hurl us overboard! It was in his power to do so, and it seemed a quick and final solution. But he showed no intention to do anything of the kind. He may have had good reasons for refraining, but, at the time I could only ascribe his failure to take a summary way out of his difficulty to a protecting hand which guarded us even in this extremity.

On we rushed through the humming air, and still the pursuing speck chased

us. And minute by minute it became more distinct against the background of the great cloud dome. Presently Edmund called our attention to something ahead.

"There," he said, "is Ingra's hope and our despair."

I turned my head and saw that in front the sky was very dark. Vast clouds seemed to be rolling up and obscuring the dome. Already there was a twilight gloom gathering about us.

"This," said Edmund, "is apparently the edge of what we may call the temperate zone, which must be very narrow, surrounding in a circle the great central region that lies under the almost vertical sun. The clouds ahead indicate the location of a belt of contending air currents,

resembling that which we crossed after floating out of the crystal mountains. Having entered them, we shall be behind a curtain where our enemy can work his will with us."

Was it knowledge of this fact which had restrained Ingra from throwing us overboard? Was he meditating for us a more dreadful fate?

It was, indeed, a land of shadow which we now began to enter, and we could see that ahead of us the general inclination of the ground was downward. I eagerly glanced back to see if the pursuers were yet in sight. Yes! There was the speck, grown so large now that there could be no doubt that it was an air ship, driven at its highest speed. But we had entered so far under the curtain that the greater part of the dome was concealed, the inky clouds hanging like a penthouse roof far behind. We could plainly perceive the chasers; but could they see us? I tried to hope that they could, but reason was against it. Still they were evidently holding the course.

But even this hope faded when Ingra cunningly changed our course, turning abruptly to the left in the gloom. He knew, then, that we were invisible to the pursuers. But not content with one change, he doubled like a hunted fox. We watched for the effect of these maneuvers upon those behind us, and to our intense disappointment, though not to our surprise, we saw that they were continuing straight ahead. They surely could not have seen us, and even if they anticipated Ingra's ruse, how could they baffle it, and find our track again? At last the spreading darkness

swallowed up the arc of illuminated sky behind, and then we were alone in the gloom.

This, you will understand, was not the deep night of the other side of the planet; it was rather a dusky twilight, and as our eyes became accustomed to it, we could begin to discern something of the character of our surroundings. We flew within a hundred yards of the ground, which appeared to be perfectly flat, and soon we were convinced by the pitchy-black patches which frequently interrupted the continuity of the umbrageous surface beneath, that it was sprinkled with small bodies of water--in short, a gigantic Dismal Swamp, or Everglade. I need hardly say that it was Edmund who first drew this inference, and when its full meaning burst upon my mind I shuddered at the hellish design which Ingra evidently entertained. Plainly, he meant to throw us into the morass, either to drown in the foul water, whose miasma now assailed our nostrils, or to starve amidst the fens! But his real intention, as you will perceive in a little while, was yet more diabolical.

The bird ship stooped lower, just skimming the tops of strange trees, the most horrible vegetable forms that I have ever beheld. And then, without warning, we were seized and pushed overboard, while the vessel, making a broad sloop, quickly disappeared. Henry alone uttered a loud cry as we fell.

We crashed through the clammy branches and landed close together in a swamp. Fortunately the water was not deep, and we were able to struggle

upon our feet and make our way to a comparatively dry open place, perhaps half an acre in extent. No sooner were we all safe on the land than I noticed Edmund struggling violently and then he exclaimed:

"Here, quick! Hold a hand here!"

As he spoke he backed up to me.

"Take a match from this box which I have twisted out of my pocket, and while I hold the box, scratch it, and hold the flame against the bonds around my wrists."

I managed to get out a match, and scratched it. But the match broke. Edmund, with the skill of a prestidigitator, got out another match, and pushed it into my fingers. It failed again.

"It's got to be done!" he said. "Here, Jack, you try."

Again he extracted a match, as Jack backed up in my place. Whether his hands happened to be less tightly bound, or whether luck favored him, Jack, on a second attempt, succeeded in illuminating a match.

"Don't lose it," urged Edmund, as the light flashed out; "burn the cord."

Jack tried. The smell of burning flesh arose, but Edmund did not wince. In a few seconds the match went out.

"Another!" said Edmund, and the operation was repeated. A dozen separate attempts of this kind had been made, and I believe that I felt the pain inflicted by them more than Edmund did, when, making a tremendous effort,

he burst the charred cord. His hands and wrists must have been fearfully burned, but he paid no attention to that. In a flash he had out his knife and cut us all loose. It was a mercy that they had not noticed the flame of the matches from the air ship, for if they had, unquestionably Ingra would have returned and made an end of us.

After our release we stood a few moments in silence, awaiting our leader's next move. Presently a sonorous sign startled us, followed by a sticky, tramping sound.

"In God's name, what's that?" exclaimed Jack.

"We'll see," said Edmund quietly, and threw open his pocket lantern.

As the light streamed out there was a rustle in the branches above us, and the form of an air ship pushed into view.

Ingra!

No, it was not Ingra! Thank God, there was the bushy head of Juba visible on the deck as the ship drifted over us! And near him stood Ala and a half dozen attendants.

As one man we shouted, but the sound had not ceased to echo when, out of the horrible tangle about us, rose, with a swift, sinuous motion, a monstrous anacondalike arm, flesh pink in the electric beam, but covered with spike-edged spiracles! It curled itself over the edge of the hovering air ship and drew it down.