

CHAPTER XVI

DREADFUL CREATURES OF THE GLOOM

The deck of the air ship was tipped up at an angle of forty-five degrees by the pressure, and with inarticulate cries most of those on board tumbled off, some falling into the water and some disappearing amidst the tangled vegetation. Ala was visible, as the machine sank lower, and crashed through the branches, clinging to an upright on the sloping deck, while Juba, who hung on like a huge baboon, was helping her to maintain her place.

Almost at the same moment I caught sight of the head of the monstrous animal which had caused the disaster. It was as massive as that of an elephant or mammoth; and the awful arm resembled a trunk, but was of incredible size. Moreover, it was covered with sucking mouths or disks. The creature apparently had four eyes ranged round the conical front of the head where it tapered into the trunk, and two of these were visible, huge, green, and deadly bright in the gleam of the lantern.

For a moment we all stood as if petrified; then the great arm was thrown with a movement quick as lightning round both Ala and Juba as they clung to the upright! My heart shot into my mouth, but before the animal could haul in its prey, a series of terrific reports rattled like the discharge of a machine gun at my ear. The monstrous arm released the victims, and

waved in agony, breaking the thick, clammy branches of the vegetation, and the vast head disappeared. Edmund had fired all the ten shots in his automatic pistol with a single pressure of the double trigger and an unvarying aim, directed, no doubt, at one of the creature's eyes.

"Quick!" he shouted, as the air ship, relieved from the stress, righted itself; "climb aboard."

The vessel had sunk so low, and the vegetation was so crowded about it, that we had no great difficulty in obeying his commands. He was the last aboard, and instantly he grasped the controlling apparatus, and we rose out of the tangle. We could hear the wounded monster thrashing in the swamp, but saw only the reflection of its movements in the commotion of the branches.

I had expected that Edmund would immediately fly at top speed away from the dreadful place, but, instead, as soon as we were at a safe elevation, he brought the air ship to a hover, circling slowly above the comparatively open spot of dry ground at the edge of the swamp.

"We cannot leave the poor fellows who have fallen overboard," he said, as quietly as if he had been safely aboard his own car. "We must stay here and find them."

Soon their cries came to our ears, and turning down the light of the lantern we saw five of them collected together on the solid ground, and

gesticulating to us in an agony of terror. Edmund swept the ship around until we were directly over the poor fellows, and then allowed it to settle until it rested on the ground beside them. I trembled with apprehension at this bold maneuver, but Edmund was as steady as a rock. Ala instantly comprehended his intention, and encouraged her followers, who were all but paralyzed with fright, to clamber aboard. A momentary communication of the eyes took place between Edmund and Ala, and I understood that he was demanding if all had been found.

There was another--and not a trace of him could be seen.

"We must wait a moment," said Edmund, reloading the chamber of his pistol while he spoke. "I'll look about for him."

"In God's name, Edmund! You don't think of going down there!"

"But I do," he said firmly, and before I could put my hand on his arm he had dropped from the deck. The gigantic creature that he had wounded was still thrashing about a little distance off, occasionally making horrible sounds, but Edmund seemed to have no fear. We saw him, with amazement, walk collectedly round the ground encircled by the swamp, peering into the tangle, and frequently uttering a call. But his search was vain, and after five minutes of the most intense nervous strain that I ever endured, I thanked Heaven for seeing him return in safety, and come slowly aboard. There was another consultation with Ala, which evidently related to the ability of the engineer of the ship to resume his

functions. This had a satisfactory result, for the fellow took his place, and the vessel finally quitted the ground. But, at Edmund's request, it rose only to a moderate height, and then began again to circle about. He would not yet give up the search.

We flew in widening circles, Edmund keeping his lantern directed toward the ground, and the full horror of these interminable morasses now became plain. I was in a continual shudder at the evidence of Ingra's pitiless scheme for our destruction. He had meant that we should be the prey of the unspeakable inhabitants of the fens, and had believed that there was no possibility of escape from them. We became aware that there was a great variety of them in the swamps and thickets beneath through the noises that they made--heart-quaking cries, squealing sounds, gruntings, and, most trying of all, a loud, piercing whistle whose sibilant pulsations penetrated the ear like thrusts of a needle. I pictured to myself a colossal serpent as the most probable author of this terrifying sound, but the error of my fancy was demonstrated by a tragedy which shook even Edmund's iron nerves.

Always circling, and always watching what was below by the light of the lantern, which was of extraordinary power for so small an instrument, we saw occasionally a curling trunk uplifted above the vegetation, as if its owner imagined that the strange light playing on the branches was some delicate prey that could be grasped, and sometimes a gliding form whose details escaped detection, when, upon passing over a relatively open place, like that where our adventure had occurred, a blood-curdling sight

met our eyes.

Directly ahead, in the focus of the reflector of the lantern, and not more than a hundred feet distant, stood a prodigious black creature, on eight legs, rolling something in its mandibles, which were held close to what seemed to be its mouth.

"Good Lord!" cried Jack. "It's a tarantula as big as a buffalo!"

"It has caught the missing man!" said Edmund. "Look!"

He pointed to a shred of garment dangling on a thorny branch. I felt sick at heart, and I heard a groan from Jack. After all, these people were like us, and our feelings would not have been more keenly agitated if the victim had been a descendant of Adam.

"He is beyond all help," I faltered.

"But he can be avenged," said Edmund, in a tone that I had never heard him use before.

As he spoke he whipped out his pistol, and crash! crash! crash! sounded the hurrying shots. As their echo ceased, the giant arachnid dropped his prey, and then there came from him--clear, piercing, quivering through our nerves--that arrowy whistle that had caused us to shudder as we unwillingly listened to it darting out of the gloom of the impenetrable

thickets.

Then, to our horror, the creature, which, if touched at all by the shots, had not been seriously injured, picked up its prey and bounded away in the darkness. Edmund instantly turned to Ala, and I knew as well as if he had spoken, what his demand was. He wished to follow, and his wish was obeyed. We swooped ahead, and in a minute we saw the creature again. It had stopped on another oasis of dry land, and it still carried its dreadful burden. Its head was toward us, and it appeared to be watching our movements. Its battery of eyes glittered wickedly, and I noticed the bristle of stiff hairs, like wires, that covered its body and legs.

Again Edmund fired upon it, and again it uttered its stridulous pipe of defiance, or fear, and leaped away in the tangle. We sped in pursuit, and when we came upon it for the third time it had stopped in an opening so narrow that the bow of the air ship almost touched it before we were aware of its presence. This time its prey was no longer visible. There was no question now that its attitude meant defiance. Cold shivers ran all over me as, with fascinated eyes, I gazed at its dreadful form. It seemed to be gathering itself for a spring, and I shrank away in terror.

Crash! bang! bang! bang! sounded the shots once more, and in the midst of them there came a blinding tangle of bristled, jointed legs that thrashed the deck, a thud that shook the air ship to its center, and a cry from Jack, who fell on his back with a crimson line across his face.

"Give me your pistol!" shouted Edmund, snatching my arm.

I hardly know how I got it out of my pocket, I was so unnerved, but it was no sooner in Edmund's hand than he was leaning over the side of the deck and pouring out the shots. When the pistol was emptied he straightened up, and said simply:

"That devil is ended."

Then he turned to where Jack lay on the deck. We all bent over him with anxious hearts, even Ala sharing our solicitude. He had lost his senses, but a drop from Edmund's flask immediately brought him round, and he rose to his feet.

"I'm all right," he said, with a rather sickly smile; "but," drawing his hand across his brow and cheek, "he got me here, and I thought it was a hot iron. Where is he now?"

"Dead," said Edmund.

"Jo, I'd have liked to finish him myself!"

We were worried by the appearance of the wound, like a long, deep scratch, on Jack's face, but, of course, we said nothing about our worryment to him. Edmund bound it up, as best he could, and it afterwards

healed, but it took a long time about it, and left a mark that never disappeared. There was probably a little poison in it.

Edmund himself needed the attention of a surgeon, for his wrists had been cruelly burned by the matches, but he would not allow us to speak of his sufferings, and putting on some slight bandages, he declared that it was time now to get out of this wilderness of horrors. He communicated with Ala, and in a few minutes we were speeding, at a high elevation, toward the land of the opaline dome. So far above the morasses we no longer heard the brute voices of its terrible inhabitants, nor saw the swaying of the branches as they looked about in search of prey.

"This," said Edmund, "exceeds everything that I could have imagined. I do not know in what classification to put any of the strange beasts that we have seen. They can only be likened to the monsters of the early dawn on the earth, in the age of the dinosaurs. But they are *sui generis*, and would make our anatomists and paleontologists stare. I am only surprised that we have encountered no flying dragons here."

"But was it really a--a giant spider that captured Ala's man?" I asked with a shudder.

"God knows what it was! It had the form of a spider, and it leaped like one. If it had been armored I could never have killed it. I think the shock of its impact against the air ship helped to finish it."

It was only after we had issued from under the curtain of twilight that we learned the story of the chase which had brought our salvation. Edmund first obtained it from Ala and Juba, filling out the outlines of their wordless narrative with his ready power of interpretation, and then he told it to us."

"We owe our lives to Juba," he said. "Ala had just returned to the mine from the capital when our abduction took place. Juba, who had wandered out on our track, saw from a distance the seizure, and a few minutes afterwards Ala's air ship arrived. He instantly communicated the facts to her, and without losing an instant the chase was begun. Ingra's delay in choosing his course was the thing that saved us. They knew that they must not lose sight of us for an instant, and their motors were driven to their highest capacity. Fortunately, Ala's vessel is one of the speediest, and they were able to gain on us from the start. Slowly they drew up until the border of the twilight zone was reached. Then as we entered under the clouds we were swallowed from the sight of all except Juba. But for his wonderful eyes, there would have been no hope of continuing the chase. He had lived all his life in a land of darkness and now he began to feel himself at home. Throwing off the shades which he has worn since our arrival, he had no difficulty in following the movements of Ingra, even after our vessel had completely faded from the view of all the others. So, without abating their fearful speed, they plunged into the gloom straight upon our track. The nose of the bloodhound is not more certain in the chase than were Juba's eyes in that terrible flight through the darkness. When Ingra changed his course and

doubled, Juba saw the maneuver and turned the dodge against its inventor, for now Ingra could not see them, and did not know that they were still on his track. They cut off the corners, and gained so rapidly that they were close at hand when Ingra rose from the swamp after pitching us overboard. They had heard Henry's cry, which served to tell them what had happened, and to direct them to the spot. But even Juba could not discern us in the midst of the vegetation, and it was the sudden flashing out of our lamp which revealed our location when they were about to pass directly over us."

I need not say with what breathless attention we listened to this remarkable story, which Edmund's scientific imagination had constructed out of the bones of fact that he had been able to gather.

"Jo," said Jack, "our luck is simply outlandish!"

Then he broke out in one of his fits of enthusiasm. Slapping Juba on the shoulder, he danced around him, laughing joyously, and exclaiming:

"Bully old boy! Oh, you're a trump! Wait till I get you in New York, and I'll give you the time of your life! Eh, Edmund, won't we make him a member of Olympus? Golly, won't he make a sensation!"

And Jack hugged himself again with delight. His reference to home threw us into a musing. At length I asked:

"Shall we ever see the earth again, Edmund?"

"Why, of course we shall," he replied heartily. "I have the material I need, and it only remains to repair the car. I shall set about it the moment we reach the capital. Do you know," he continued, "this adventure has undoubtedly been a benefit to us."

"How so?"

"By increasing our prestige. They have seen the terrible power of the pistols. They have seen us conquer monsters that they must have regarded as invincible. When they see what the car can do, even Ingra will begin to fear us, and to think that we are more than mortal."

"But what will Ala think of Ingra now?"

"Ah, I cannot tell; but, at any rate, he cannot have strengthened himself in her regard, for it is plain that she, at least, has no desire to see us come to harm. But he is a terrible enemy still, and we must continue to be on our guard against him."

"I should think that he would hardly dare to show himself now," I remarked.

"Don't be too sure of that. After all, we are interlopers here, and he has all the advantages of his race and his high rank. Ala is interested

in us because she has, I believe I may say, a philosophical mind, with a great liking for scientific knowledge. It was she who planned and personally conducted the expedition toward the dark hemisphere. From me she has learned a little. She appreciates our knowledge and our powers, and would ask nothing better than to learn more about us and from us. Her prompt pursuit and interference to save us when she must have understood,

perfectly, Ingra's design, shows that she will go far to protect us; but we must not presume too much on her ability to continue her protection, nor even on her unvarying disposition to do so. For the present, however, I think that we are safe, and I repeat that our position has been strengthened. Ingra made a great mistake. He should have finished us out of hand."

"His leaving us to be devoured by those fearful creatures showed an inexplicable cruelty on his part; he chose the most horrible death he could think of for us," I said.

"Oh, I don't know," replied Edmund. "Did you ever see a laughing boy throw flies into a spider's den? It is my idea that he simply wished to have us disappear mysteriously, and then he would never have offered an explanation, unless it might have been the malicious suggestion that we had suddenly decamped to return to the world we pretended to have come from. And but for Ala's unexpected return to the mine he would have succeeded. No doubt his crew were pledged to secrecy."