

CHAPTER XVII

EARTH MAGIC ON VENUS

We were no sooner installed again at the capital than Edmund began his "readjustment of the atomic energies."

"Blessed if I know what he means," said Jack; "but he gets the goods, and that's enough for me."

In reality I did not understand it any better than Jack did, only I had more knowledge than he of the nature of the forces that Edmund employed. We went with him to the place in the great tower where the car had been stored, and where it seemed to be regarded with a good deal of superstitious awe. But they had not yet the least idea of its marvelous powers. We were preparing for them the greatest surprise of their lives, and our impatience to see the effect that would be produced when we made our first flight grew by day, while Edmund, shut up alone in the car, labored away at his task.

"I wonder what they think he is doing in there," I said, the third day after our return, as we sat on a balcony of the floating tower, with our feet nonchalantly elevated on a railing, and our eyes drinking in the magnificent prospect of the vast city, as brilliant in variegated colors as a flower garden, while a soft breeze, that gently swayed the gigantic

gossamer, soothed us like a perfumed fan.

"Worshipping the sun god, I reckon," laughed Jack. "But, see here, Peter, what do you make of this religion of theirs, anyway?"

"I don't know what to make of it," I replied. "But if the sun really does appear to them once in a lifetime, or so, as Edmund thinks, it seems to me natural enough that they should worship it. We have done more surprising things of the kind on the earth."

"Not civilized people like these."

"Oh, yes. The Egyptians were civilized, and the Romans, and they worshipped all sorts of strange things that struck their fancy. And what can you say to the Greeks--they were civilized enough, and look what a collection of gods they had."

"But the wise heads among them didn't really believe in their gods."

"I'm not sure of that; at any rate they had to pretend that they believed. No doubt there were some who secretly scoffed at the popular belief, and it may be the same here. I shouldn't wonder if Ingra were one of the scoffers. Edmund has a great opinion of his intelligence, and if he really doesn't believe in the thing, he is all the more dangerous for us, because you know that now we are depending a good deal on their superstition for our safety."

"But Ala is very intelligent, a regular wonder, I should think, from what Edmund says; and yet she accepts their superstition as gospel."

"Lucky for us that she does believe," I said. "But there's some great mystery behind all this; Edmund has convinced me of that. We don't begin to understand it yet, and there are moments when I think that Edmund is afraid of the whole thing. He seems dimly to foresee some catastrophe connected with it, though what it may be I cannot imagine, and I think he doesn't know himself."

Henry listened to our conversation without proffering a remark--quite the regular thing with him--and at this point Jack, yielding to the overpowering sense of well-being, and the soothing influence of the delicious air and delightful view, closed his eyes for a nap.

Presently Edmund came and roused us all up with the remark that he had finished his work. Jack was instantly on his feet:

"Hurrah!" he exclaimed. "Now for another trip that will open the eyes of these Venusians. Where shall we go, Edmund?"

"We shall go nowhere just at present. I want first to make sure by a trial trip that everything is in perfect shape. For that purpose I shall wait for the hours of repose when there will be nobody to watch us."

I must here explain more fully what I have already said--that in this land of unceasing daylight, everybody took repose as regularly as on the earth. That is a necessity for all physical organisms. When they slept, they retired into darkened chambers, and passed several hours in peaceful slumber. We had learned the time when this periodical need for sleep seized upon the entire population, and although, naturally, there were a few wide-awakes who kept "late hours," yet within a certain time after the habitual hour for repose had arrived it was a rare thing to see anybody stirring. We had, then, only to wait until "the solemn dead of night" came on in order that Edmund might try his experiment with almost a certainty of not being observed. This was the easier, since latterly there had been no guard kept over our movements. We were not confined in any way, and could go and come as we pleased. Evidently, if anybody thought of such a thing as an attempt to escape on our part, they trusted to the fact that we had no means of getting away, for after our first exploit of that kind, all the air ships were carefully guarded, and placed beyond our reach. As to the car, there was nothing about it to suggest that it could fly, and probably they took it simply for some kind of boat, since they had seen us employ it only in navigating the sea. I have often thought, with wonder, of their unsuspectingness in permitting Edmund to spend so much time alone and undisturbed in the car. Possibly, there was something in Jack's suggestion, that they supposed it to be connected with our religious observances. Anyhow, so it was; and I can only ascribe the fact to the kindness of that overlooking Power which so often interfered in our behalf, making it no disparagement of our claim upon its protection that we had abandoned our mother earth and ventured

so far away into space!

One thing decidedly in our favor was that, since our return from the mine (the adventure in the land of bogs and monsters was, as far as Edmund could ascertain, unknown at the capital, except by those who had taken part in it), we had been accustomed to pass the hours of repose in the tower. We should thus be close to the car when we got ready to start. Another equally favorable circumstance--and perhaps it was even more important--was the absence of Ingra, who, either because he did not care just now to face Ala, or because he had gone off somewhere after throwing us to the animals and was not yet aware of our escape, had not shown himself. If he had been present it might not have been so easy for Edmund to make his preparations.

Never had the great city seemed to me so long in quieting down for its periodical rest as on this occasion. After all was deserted in the streets below, people were still moving about on the tower, and it did seem as if they had taken a fit of wakefulness expressly to annoy us and interfere with our plans. We kept stealing out of our sleeping room, and looking cautiously about, for at least two hours, but always there was some one stirring in the immediate neighborhood. At last a tall fellow, who had been standing an interminable time at the rail directly in front of the storage place of the car, and whom Jack had half seriously threatened to throttle if he stood there any longer, turned and went yawning away. No sooner was he out of sight than Edmund led the way, and with the slightest possible noise, aided by Juba, who was as strong as

three men, we got the car out on the platform. I was in a fever lest there should be a squeak from the little wheels that carried it. But they ran as still as rubber.

"Get in," whispered Edmund; and we obeyed him with alacrity.

Would it go?

Even Edmund could not answer that question. He pulled a knob, and I held my breath. There was the slightest perceptible tremor. Was it going to balk? No, thank Heaven! It was under way. In a few seconds we were off the tower in the free air. Edmund pressed a button, and the speed instantly increased. The gorgeous tower seemed to be flying away from us like a soap bubble. Jack, in ecstasy, could hardly repress a cheer.

"Hurrah, if you want to," said Edmund.

"They won't hear you, and now I don't care if they do. The apparatus is all right, and we'll give them something to wake up for. My only anxiety was lest they should witness a failure, which might have led to disagreeable consequences. There must be no dropping of knives in our juggling."

"Good!" cried Jack. "Then let's give 'em a salute."

Edmund smiled and nodded his head:

"The guns are in the locker," he said.

Jack had one of the automatic rifles out in a hurry.

"Shoot high," said Edmund, "and off toward the open country. The projectiles fly far, and I guess we can take the risk."

He threw both windows open, and Jack aimed skyward and began to pull the trigger.

Bang! bang! bang! Heavens, what a noise it was! The car must have seemed a flying volcano. And it woke them up! The sleeping city poured forth its millions to gaze and wonder. Surely they had never heard such a thundering. Within five minutes we saw them on the roofs and in the towers. Many were staring at us through a kind of opera glasses which they had. Then from a dozen aerial pavilions the colors broke forth and quivered through the air.

"Saluting us!" exclaimed Jack, delighted.

"Asking one another questions, rather," said Edmund.

They certainly asked enough of them, and I wondered what answers they returned.

"Probably they think we're off for good," said I.

"And aren't we?" asked Henry anxiously.

"Not yet," Edmund replied, and Henry's countenance fell.

The car turned and approached the great tower again. We swept round it within a hundred yards, and could see the amazement in the faces that watched us. But if they were astonished they were not terror-stricken. Within ten minutes twenty air ships were swiftly approaching us. Edmund allowed them to come within a few yards, and then darted away, rushed round the whole city like a flying cloud, and finally rose straight up with dizzying velocity, which made the vast metropolis shrink to a colored patch, as if we had been viewing it through the wrong end of a telescope.

"I'll go right up through the cloud dome now," he said. "Nothing could more impress them with a sense of our power than that; and when we come back again they will know that we have no fear, and the very act will be a proof of origin from the sky."

When we were in the midst of the mighty curtain of vapor, I was interested in noticing the peculiar quality of the light that surrounded us. We seemed to be immersed in a rose-pink mist.

"I do not understand," I said to Edmund, "how this dome is maintained at so great an elevation, and in apparent independence of the rain clouds which sometimes form beneath. No rain ever falls from the dome itself, and yet it consists of true clouds."

"I think," he replied, "that the dome is due to vapors which assemble at a general level of condensation, and do not form raindrops, partly because of the absence of dust to serve as nuclei at this great height, and partly because of some peculiar electrical condition of the air, arising from the relative nearness of Venus to the sun, which prevents the particles of vapor from gathering into drops heavy enough to fall. You will observe that there is a peculiar inner circulation in the vapor surrounding us, marked by ascending and descending currents which are doubtless limited by the upper and lower surfaces of the dome. The true rain clouds form in the space beneath the dome, where there seems to be an independent circulation of the winds."

On entering the cloud vault Edmund had closed the windows, explaining that it was not merely the humidity which led him to do so, but the diminishing density of the air which, when we had risen considerably above the dome, would become too rare for comfortable breathing. In a little while his conjecture about a peculiar electrical condition was justified by a pale-blue mist which seemed to fill the air in the car; but we felt no effects and the mechanism was not disturbed. Owing to our location on Venus, still at a long distance from the center of the sunward hemisphere, the sun was not directly overhead, but inclined at a

large angle to the vertical, so that when we began to approach the upper surface of the vault, and the vapor thinned out, we saw through one of the windows a pulsating patch of light, growing every moment brighter and more distinct, until as we shot out of the clouds it instantly sharpened into a huge round disk of blinding brilliance.

"The sun! The sun!" we cried.

We had not seen it for months. When it had gleamed out for a short time during our drift across the water from the land of ice into the belt of tempests, we had been too much occupied with our safety to pay attention to it; but now the wonder of it awed us. Four times as large and four times as bright and hot as it appears from the earth, its rays seemed to smite with terrific energy. Juba, wearing his eye shades, shrank into a corner and hid his face.

"It is well that we are protected by the walls of the car and the thick glass windows," said Edmund, "for I do not doubt that there are solar radiations in abundance here which scarcely affect us on the earth, but which might prove dangerous or even mortal if we were exposed to their full force."

Even at the vast elevation which we had now attained there was still sufficient air to diffuse the sunlight, so that only a few of the brightest stars could be glimpsed. Below us the spectacle was magnificent and utterly unparalleled. There lay the immense convex shield of Venus,

more dazzling than snow, and as soft in appearance as the finest wool. We gazed and gazed in silent admiration, until suddenly Henry, who had shown less enthusiasm over the view than the rest of us, said, in a doleful voice:

"And now that we are here--free, free, where we can do as we like--with all means at our command--oh! why will you return to that accursed planet? Edmund, in the name of God, I beseech you, go back to the earth! Go now! For the love of Heaven do not drag us into danger again! Go home! Oh, go home!"

The appeal was pitiful in its intensity of feeling, and a shade of hesitation appeared on Edmund's face. If it had been Jack or I, I believe that he would have yielded. But he slowly shook his head, saying in a sympathetic tone:

"I am sorry, Henry, that you feel that way. But I cannot leave this planet yet. Have patience for a little while and then we will go home."

I doubt whether afterwards, Edmund himself did not regret that he had refused to grant Henry's prayer. If we had gone now when it was in our power to go without interference, we should have been spared the most tragic and heart-rending event of all that occurred during the course of our wandering. But Edmund seemed to feel the fascination of Venus as a moth feels that of the candle flame.

When we emerged again on the lower side of the dome we were directly over the capital. We had been out of view for at least three hours, but many were still gazing skyward, toward the point where the car had disappeared, and when we came into sight once more there were signs of the utmost agitation. The prismatic signals began to flash from tower to tower, conveying the news of the reappearance of the car, and as we drew near we saw the crowds reassembling on every point of vantage. We went out on the window ledges to watch the display.

"Perhaps they think that we have been paying a visit to the sun," I suggested.

"Well, if they do I shall not undeceive them," said Edmund, "although it goes against the grain to make any pretense of the kind. Ala, particularly, is so intelligent, and has so genuine a desire for knowledge, that if I could only cause her to comprehend the real truth it would afford me one of the greatest pleasures of my life."

"I hope old Beak Nose is getting his fill of this show," put in Jack.

"He'll be likely to treat us with more respect after this. By the way, I wonder what's become of my money. I think I'll sue out a writ of replevin in the name of the sun to recover it."

Nobody replied to Jack's sally, and the car rapidly approached the great tower.

"Are you going to land there?" I asked.

"I certainly shall," Edmund responded with decision.

"But they'll seize the car!" exclaimed Henry in affright.

"No, they won't. They are too much afraid of it."

Any further discussion was prevented by a sight which arrested the eyes of all of us. On the principal landing of the tower, whence we had departed with the car, stood Ala with her suite, and by her side was Ingra!

His sudden apparition was a great surprise, as well as a great disappointment, for we had felt sure that he was not in the city, and I, at least, had persuaded myself that he might be in disgrace for his attempt on our lives. Yet here he was, apparently on terms of confidence with her whom we had regarded as our only sure friend.

"Hang him!" exclaimed Jack. "There he is! By Jo, if Edmund had only invented a noiseless gun of forty million atom power, I'd rid Venus of him, in the two-billionth part of a second!"

"Keep quiet," said Edmund, sternly, "and remember what I now tell you; in no way, by look or act, is any one of us to indicate to him the slightest resentment for what he did. Ignore him, as if you had never seen him."

By this time the car had nearly touched the landing. Edmund stepped inside a moment and brought it completely to rest, anchoring it, as he whispered to me, by "atomic attraction." When the throng on the tower saw the car stop dead still, just in contact with the landing, but manifestly supported by nothing but the air--no wings, no aeroplanes, no screws, no mechanism of any kind visible--there arose the first voice of a crowd that we had heard on the planet. It fairly made me jump, so unexpected, and so contrary to all that we had hitherto observed, was the sound. And this multitudinous voice itself had a quality, or timbre, that was unlike any sound that had ever entered my ears. Thin, infantine, low, yet multiplied by so many mouths to a mighty volume, it was fearful to listen to. But it lasted only a moment; it was simply a universal ejaculation, extorted from this virtually speechless people by such a marvel as they had never dreamed of looking upon. But even this burst of astonishment, as Edmund afterwards pointed out, was really a tribute to their intelligence, since it showed that they had instantly appreciated both the absence of all mechanical means of supporting the car and the fact that here was something that implied a power infinitely exceeding any that they possessed. And to have produced in a world where aerial navigation was the common, everyday means of conveyance, such a sensation by a performance in the air was an enormous triumph for us!

No sooner had we gathered at the door of the car to step out upon the platform than an extraordinary thing occurred. The front of the crowd

receded into the form of a semicircle, of which the point where we stood marked the center, and in the middle of the curve, slightly in advance of the others, stood forth the tall form of the eagle-beaked high priest with the terrible face, flanked on one side by Ala and on the other by the Jovelike front of the aged judge before whom our first arraignment had taken place. Directly behind Ala stood Ingra. The contrast between the three principal personages struck my eye even in that moment of bewilderment--Ala stately, blonde, and beautiful as a statue of her own Venus; the high priest ominous and terrifying in aspect, even now when we felt that he was honoring us; and the great judge, with his snow-white hair and piercing eyes, looking like a god from Olympus.

"Do you note the significance of that arrangement?" Edmund asked, nudging me. "Ala, the queen, yields the place of honor to the high priest. That indicates that our reception is essentially a religious one, and proves that our flight sunward has had the expected effect. Now we have the head of the religious order on our side. Human nature, if I may use such a term, is the same in whatever world you find it. Touch the imagination with some marvel and you awaken superstition; arouse superstition and you can do what you like."

It would be idle for me to attempt to describe our reception because Edmund himself could only make shrewd guesses as to the meaning of what went on, and you would probably not be particularly interested in his conjectures. Suffice it to say that when it was over, we felt that, for a

time at least, we were virtually masters of the situation.

Only one thing troubled my mind--what did Ingra think and what would he do? At any rate, he, too, for the time being, seemed to have been carried away with the general feeling of wonder, and narrowly as I watched him I could detect in his features no sign of a wish to renew his persecution.