

CHAPTER XVIII

WILD EDEN

The next day after our return from the trip above the cloud dome, and our astonishing reception (you will, of course, understand the sense in which I use the term "day"), Edmund sprang another surprise upon us.

"I have persuaded Ala," he said, "to make a trip in the car."

"You don't mean it!"

"Oh, yes, and I am sure she will be delighted."

"But she is not going alone?"

"Surely no; she will be accompanied by one of her women--and by Ingra."

"Ingra!"

"Of course. Did you suppose that he would consent to be left behind? Ala herself would refuse to go without him."

"Then," I said, with deep disappointment, "he has resumed all his influence over her."

"I'm not sure he ever lost it," returned Edmund. "You forget his rank, and his position as her destined consort. Whatever we do we have got to count him in."

Jack raged inwardly, but said nothing. For my part, I almost wished Jack's bullet had not gone astray at that first memorable shooting.

"Now," Edmund continued, "the car, as you know, has but a limited amount of room. I do not wish to crowd it uncomfortably, but I can take six persons. Ala's party comprises three, so there is room for just two besides myself. You will have to draw lots."

"Is Juba included in the drawing?"

"Yes, and I'm half inclined to take him anyway, and let you three draw for the one place remaining."

"You can count me out," said Henry. "If there is another to stay with me I prefer to remain."

"Very well," said Edmund, "then Peter and Jack can draw lots."

"Since we can't all go," said Jack, "and since that fellow is to be of the party, I'll stay with Henry."

So it was settled without an appeal to chance, and I went with Edmund and Juba. As usual Edmund immediately put his project into execution. It showed an astonishing confidence in us that Ala should consent to make such a trip, and that her people, and especially Ingra, should assent to it, and I could not sufficiently wonder at the fact. But we were now at the summit of favor and influence, and it is impossible to guess what thoughts may have been in their minds. At any rate, it showed how completely Edmund had established himself in Ala's esteem, and I suspect that her woman's curiosity had played a large part in the decision. There was another thing which astonished me yet more, and, in fact, awakened a good deal of apprehension in my mind. I could not but wonder that Edmund,

after all the precautions that he had previously taken, should now think of admitting these people into the car, where they could witness his manipulations of the mechanism. I spoke to him about it. "Rest your mind easy about that," he said. "Now that everything goes like a charm, they will suspect nothing. It will be all a complete mystery to them. Even the gods used natural agencies when they visited the earth without shaking the belief of mankind in them. I employ no force of which they have the least idea, and if they see me touch a button, or pull a knob, what can that convey to their minds except an impression of mysterious power?"

I said no more, but I was not convinced, and the sequel proved that, for once, Edmund had made a serious mistake, the more amazing because he had been the first to detect the exceptional intelligence and shrewdness of Ingra. But, no doubt, in the exultation of his recent triumph, he counted

upon the strength of the superstitious regard in which we were held.

Our departure from the tower was the signal for the assembling of great crowds of spectators again, and we sailed away with the utmost éclat.

Ala at once showed all the eager excitement of a child over so novel and enjoyable an experience. The motion of the car was entirely unlike that of the air ships. Perfectly steady, it skimmed along at a speed which filled her with amazement and delight. The city, with its towers, seemed to fly away from us by magic, and the trees and fields beneath ran into streaming lines. The windows were thrown wide open, and all stood by them, watching the scene. Finally Ala wished to go out on the window ledges, where one was perfectly secure if he kept a firm hold on the supports. Edmund was most of the time with us outside, only stepping within when he wished to change the course. I thought that he showed a disposition to conceal his manipulations as much as possible, as if what I had said had made an impression. But all were so much occupied with their novel sensations that, for the time at least, there was no danger of their taking note of anything else.

I believe that it must have been some intimation from Ala which finally led Edmund to hold his course toward the mountains, but in a direction different from that which led to the mines. When he had once chosen this direction he worked up the speed to fully a hundred miles an hour, and all were compelled to go inside on account of the wind created by our rush through the air. We held on thus for five hours. During this time Edmund spread a repast made up of dishes chosen from the supplies in the

car, and, of course, utterly strange to our guests. They found them to their taste, however, and were delighted with Edmund's entertainment. We spent a long time at our little table, and I was surprised at the variety of delicious things which Edmund managed to extract from his stores. There was even some champagne, and I noticed that Edmund urged it upon Ingra, who, nothing loth, drank enough to make him decidedly tipsy, a fact which was not surprising since we had found that the wines of Venus were very light, and but slightly alcoholized.

At length we began to approach what proved to be the goal of our journey. Before us spread a vast extent of forest composed of trees of the most beautiful forms and foliage. Some towered up to a great height, spreading their pendulous branches over the less aspiring forms, like New England elms; others were low and bushy, and afire with scarlet blossoms, whose perfume filled the air; a few resembled gigantic grasses or great timothy stems, surmounted with nodding plumes of golden leaves, streaming out like gilt gonfalons in the breeze; but there was one species, as tall and massive as oaks, and scattered everywhere through the forest, that I could liken to nothing but enormous rose bushes in the full bloom of June. When we began to pass above this strange woodland, Ala made some communication to Edmund which caused him to slow down the movement of the car. By almost imperceptible touches he controlled the motive power, and presently we came to rest above a delightful glade, where a small stream ran at the foot of a gravelly slope, crowned with grass and overhung by trees.

Here the car was allowed to settle gently upon the ground, and all alighted. Ingra, over whom the influence of the champagne had been growing, tottered on his legs in a way that would have filled Jack with uncontrollable delight, but Edmund gravely helped him out of the car and steadied him to a seat on the soft turf under the tree. I saw Ala regarding Ingra with a puzzled look, and no wonder, for Edmund had been careful that no one else should take enough of the wine to produce more than the slightest exhilaration of spirits. It is possible that Edmund had plied Ingra with the idea of rendering him less observant, and it probably had that effect; but it resulted, as you will see presently, in a revelation which finally put Edmund on guard against the very danger to which he had seemed so insensible when I mentioned it to him before our start.

The place where we now were was, beyond comparison, the most charming that we had yet seen. A very Eden it seemed, wild, splendid, and remote from all cultivation. The air was loaded with indescribable fragrance shed from the thousands of strange blossoms that depended from trees and shrubs, and starred the rich grass. I learned afterwards from Edmund, who had it from Ala, that the spot was famous for its beauty and other attractions, and was sometimes visited in air ships from the capital. But for them, what took us but a few hours was a trip extending over several days of time. One would have said that the forest was imbedded in a garden of the most extraordinary orchids. The shapes of some of the flowers were so fantastic that it seemed impossible that Nature could

have produced them. And their colors were no less unparalleled, inimitable, and incredible.

The flowery bank on which we had chosen our resting place was removed a few yards from the spot where the car rested, and the latter was hidden from view by intervening branches and huge racemes of gorgeous flowers, hanging like embroidered curtains about us. A peculiarity of the place was that little zephyr-like breezes seemed to haunt it, coming one could not tell whence, and they stirred the hanging blossoms, keeping them in almost continual rhythmic motion. The effect was wonderfully charming, but I observed that Ala was especially influenced by it. She sat with her maid beside her, and fixed her eyes, with an expression of ecstasy, upon the swinging flowers. I whispered to Edmund to regard her singular absorption. But he had already noticed it, and seemed to be puzzling his brain with thoughts that it suggested to him.

Thus as we sat, the leaves of a tree over our heads were lightly stirred, and a bird, adorned with long plumes more beautiful than those of a bird of paradise, alighted on a branch, and began to ruffle its iridescent feathers in a peculiar way. With every movement waves of color seemed to flow over it, merging and dissolving in the most marvelous manner. As soon as this bird appeared, Ala gave it all her attention, and the pleasure which she experienced in watching it was reflected upon her countenance. She seemed positively enraptured. After a few moments the conviction came to me that she was listening! Her whole attitude expressed it. And yet not an audible sound came from the bird. At last I

whispered to Edmund:

"Edmund, I believe that Ala hears something which we do not."

"Of course she does," was his reply. "There is music here, such music as was never heard on earth. That bird is singing, but our ears are not attuned to its strain. You know the peculiarity of this atmosphere with regard to sound, and that all of these people have a horror of loud noises. But their ears detect sounds which are beyond the range of the vibrations that affect ours. If you will observe the bird closely you will perceive that there is a slight movement of its throat. But that is not the greatest wonder, by any means. I am satisfied that there is a direct relation here between sounds and colors. The swaying of the flowers in the breeze and the rhythmic motion of the bird's plumage produce harmonious combinations and recombinations of colors which are transformed into sounds as exquisite as those of the world of insects. A cluster of blossoms, when the wind stirs them, shake out a kind of aeolian melody, and it was that which so entranced Ala a few moments ago. She hears it still, but now it is mastered by the more perfect harmonies that come from the bird, partly from its throat but more from the agitation of its delicate feathers."

You may imagine the wonder with which I listened to this. It immediately recalled what Jack and I had observed at the shop of the bird fancier, and when the lady carried off her seemingly mute pets in the palanquin.

"But," I said, after a moment of reflection, "how can such a thing be? To me it seems surely impossible."

"I can only try to explain it by an analogy," said Edmund. "You know how, by a telephone, sounds are first transmuted into electric vibrations and afterwards reshaped into sonorous waves. You know, also, that we have used a ray of light to send telephonic messages, through the sensitiveness of a certain metal which changes its electric resistance in accord with the intensity of the light that strikes it. Thus with a beam of light we can reproduce the human voice. Well, what we have done awkwardly and tentatively by the aid of imperfect mechanical contrivances, Nature has here accomplished perfectly through the peculiar composition of the air and some special adjustment of the auditory apparatus of this people.

"Light and sound, color and music, are linked for them in a manner entirely beyond our comprehension. It is plain to me now that the music of color which we witnessed at the capital, was something far more complete and wonderful than I then imagined. Together with the pleasure which they derive from the harmonic combinations of shifting hues, they drink in, at the same time, the delight arising from sounds which are associated with, and, in many cases, awakened by, those very colors. It is probable that all their senses are far more fully, though more delicately, developed than ours. The perfume of these wonderful flowers is probably more delightful to Ala than to us. As there are sounds which they hear though inaudible to us, and colors visible to them which lie

beyond the range of our vision, so there may be vibrations affecting the olfactory nerves which make no impression upon our sense of smell."

"Well, well," I exclaimed, "this seems appropriate to Venus."

"Yes," said Edmund with a smile, "it is appropriate; and yet I am not sure that some day we may not arrive at something of the kind on the earth."

I was about to ask him what he meant when there came an exciting interruption. Ingra, who had fallen more and more under the influence of the champagne, had stumbled to the other side of the little glade, virtually unnoticed, and Juba had wandered out of sight. Suddenly there came from the direction of the car the sound of a struggle mingled with inarticulate cries. We sprang to our feet, and, running to the car, found both Ingra and Juba inside it. The former had his hands on one of the knobs controlling the mechanism, and Juba had grasped him round the waist and was trying to drag him away. Ingra was resisting with all his strength, and uttering strange noises, whose sense, if they had any, we, of course, did not comprehend. Just as we reached the door, Juba succeeded in wrenching his opponent from his hold, and immediately gave him a fling which sent him clear out of the car, tumbling in a heap at our feet. Juba's eyes were ablaze with a dangerous light, but the moment he encountered Edmund's gaze he quietly walked away and sat down on the bank. Ala was immediately by our side, and I thought that I could read

embarrassment as well as surprise in her looks. Fortunately the knob that Ingra had grasped had been thrown out of connection; else he and Juba might have made an involuntary voyage through space.

We picked up Ingra, found a seat for him, and Edmund, going down to the brook, filled a pocket flask with water and flung it in the fellow's face. This was repeated several times with the effect of finally straightening out his muddled senses sufficiently to warrant us in embarking for the return trip. All the way home Ingra was in a sulky mood, like any terrestrial drunkard after a debauch, but he kept his eyes on all Edmund's movements with an expression of cunning, which he had not sufficient self-command to conceal, and which could leave no doubt in our minds as to the nature of the quest which had led him into the car. As to Juba--although his interference had been of no practical benefit, since Ingra, especially in his present state, could surely have made no discovery of any importance--the devotion which he had again shown to our interests endeared him the more to us. Ala's manner showed that she was deeply chagrined, and thus our trip, which had opened so joyously, ended in gloom, and we were glad when the car again touched the platform, and our guests departed.