

CHAPTER XIX

THE SECRET OF THE CAR

Jack and Henry were overjoyed to see us again, for after our departure they had fallen into a despondent mood, and began to imagine all sorts of evil.

"Jo!" was Jack's greeting; "I never was so glad to see anybody in my life. Edmund, don't you ever go off and leave any of us alone again."

"I'll never leave you again," responded Edmund. "You can count on that."

Then we told them the story of what we had seen, and of what had happened

in the wild Eden that we had visited. They were not so much interested in the most wonderful thing of all--the combination of sound and color--as they were in the conduct of Ingra. Jack laughed until he was tired over Ingra's drunkenness, but he drew a long face when he heard of the adventure in the car.

"Edmund," he said earnestly, "I am beginning to be of Henry's opinion; you had better get away from here without losing a moment."

"No," said Edmund, "we'll not go yet. The time hasn't come to run away."

What difference does it make even if Ingra does suspect that the car is moved by some mechanism instead of by pure magic? He could not understand it if I should explain it to him."

"But you have said that he is extraordinarily intelligent."

"So he is, but his intelligence is limited by the world he lives in, and while there are many marvelous things here, nobody has the slightest conception of inter-atomic force. They have never heard even of radioactivity. At the same time I don't mean that they shall go nosing about the car. I'll take care of that."

"But," said Jack, "it grinds me to see that brute Ingra get off scot-free after trying to murder us. And what has he got against us, anyway? But for him we should never have had any trouble. He was against us from the beginning."

"I don't think he was particularly against us at the start," said Edmund. "Only he was for treating us with less consideration than Ala was disposed to show. But after the first accidental shooting, and the drubbing that Juba gave him, naturally his prejudices were aroused, and he could hardly be blamed for thinking us dangerous. Then, when he found himself defeated, and his wishes disregarded, on all sides, he began to hate us. It is easy enough to account for his feelings. Now, since our recent astonishing triumph, being himself incredulous about our celestial

origin, he will try to undermine us by showing that our seeming miracle is no miracle at all."

"And you gave him the chance by taking him in the car!" I could not help exclaiming.

"Yes," said Edmund, with a smile. "I admit that I made a mistake. I counted too much upon the influence of the sense of mystery. But it will come out all right."

"I doubt it," I persisted. "He will never rest now until he has found out the secret."

Nothing more was said on the subject, but Edmund was careful not to leave the car unguarded. It was always kept afloat, though in contact with the landing. The expenditure of energy needed to keep it thus anchored without support was, Edmund assured us, insignificant in comparison with the quantity stored in his mysterious batteries.

We were not long in finding, on all sides, evidence that our trip up through the cloud dome had been a master stroke, and that the presumable incredulity of Ingra with regard to our claims was not shared by others. He might have his intimates, who entertained prejudices against us resembling his own, but if so we saw nothing of them. In fact, Ingra was much less in evidence than before, but I did not feel reassured by that; on the contrary, it made me all the more fearful of some plot on his

part, and Jack was decidedly of my opinion.

"Hang him!" he said, "he's up to some mischief, and I know it. Much as I detest him, I'd rather have him in sight than out, just now. He makes me feel like a snake in a bush; if he'd only show his ugly head, or spring his rattle, I'd be more comfortable."

But the kindness and deference with which we were treated, and the new wonders that were shown to us in the capital, gradually drove Ingra from our minds. Now we were permitted to enter the temples without opposition, our presence there according with our new character of "children of the sun." We saw the worship that was offered before the solar images by family parties, and attended, as favored guests, the periodical ceremonies in the great temple. Edmund confessed that the high priest greatly embarrassed him by staring into his eyes, and plainly assuming that he knew things of which he was profoundly ignorant.

"The hardest thing I ever undertook," he said, "is to hold my mind in suspense during these trying interviews, when he endeavors to read the depths of my soul, and I to throw a veil over them which he cannot penetrate."

In some way, Edmund discovered that the high priest and all the priests connected with the sun worship (and they certainly bore a family likeness) belonged to a special race, whose roots ran back into the most remote antiquity, and about whose persons clung a sacredness that placed

them, in some respects, above the royal family itself. We frequently visited the great library, where Edmund undertook a study of the language of the printed rolls, though what he made of it I never clearly understood. I do not think that he succeeded in deciphering any of it. He also spent much time studying their mechanics and engineering, for which he professed great admiration.

But most interesting of all to us was what Edmund himself accomplished. I have told you of his remark about the color-sound music, viz., that he thought it not impossible that even human senses might be enabled to appreciate it. Well, he actually realized that wildly improbable dream! He fitted up a laboratory of his own in which he labored sometimes for twenty hours at a stretch, and at last he brought to us the astonishing invention he had made.

I can make no pretense of understanding it; although Edmund declared that, in substance, it was no more wonderful than a telephone. The machine consisted of a little metal box. (He made three of them, and I have mine yet, but it will not work on the earth, and it lies on my table as I write, serving for the most wonderful paper weight that a man ever possessed.) When this box was pressed against the ear in front of one of the revolving disks that threw out blending colors, or in the presence of a "singing" bird, the most divine harmonies seemed to awake in the brain. I cannot make the slightest approach to a description of the marvelous phenomenon. One felt his whole being infused with ecstatic joy. It was the very soul of music itself, celestial, ineffable! The

wonder-box also enabled us to catch many sounds peculiar to the atmosphere of Venus, formed of vibrations, as Edmund had explained, that lie outside our gamut. But to these, apart from the music, I could never listen. They were too abnormal, filling one with inexplicable terror, as if he had been snatched out of nature and compelled to listen to the sounds of a preternatural world. The only sound that I ever heard with my natural ear which bore the slightest resemblance to these was the awful piercing whistle of the monster that killed Ala's man.

Yet we derived immense pleasure from the possession of those little boxes. With their aid, we could appreciate the exquisite melodies that were played everywhere--in great halls where thousands were assembled, in the temples great and small, and in the homes of the people, to which we were often admitted. In every house there was on one of the walls a "musical rose," whose harmonies entranced the visitor. And the variety of musical motifs seemed to be absolutely without limit. One was never tired of the entertainment because there was so little repetition.

On one ever-memorable occasion we heard the great national, or, as Edmund preferred to call it, "racial" hymn, played in the air from the principal tower. When we had only beheld the play of colors characterizing this composition we had found it altogether delightful, although, as I have said, Edmund detected, even then, some underlying tone of sadness or despair; but when its sounds broke into the brain the effect was overwhelming. The entire thing seemed to have been "written in a minor

key," of infinite world-embracing pathos. The listener was plunged into depths of feeling that seemed unfathomable, eternal--and unendurable.

"Heavens!" whispered Jack to me in an awed voice, dropping the box from his ear, "I can't stand it!"

I saw tears running down his face, and felt them on my own. Edmund and Henry were equally affected, and could not continue to listen. Edmund said nothing, but I recalled his words about the traditional belief of this people that their world had entered upon the last stage of its existence. Then I watched the countenances about us; they wore an expression of solemnity, and yet there was something which spoke of an uplifting pride, awakened by the great paeon, and swelling the heart with memories of interminable ages of past glory.

"Come," said Edmund at last, turning away, "this is not for us. The measureless sadness we feel, but the triumphant reflection of ancestral greatness is for them alone. Heavens! what an artist he must have been who composed this!--if it be not like the Iliad, the work of an age rather than of a man."

We almost forgot the passage of time in the enjoyment of our now delightful and untroubled existence, but there came at last a rude awakening from this life, which had become for us like a dream.

As I have said, we had ceased to worry about Ingra, whom we seldom saw,

and who, when we did see him, gave no indication of continued enmity. At first we had kept the car under continual surveillance, but as time went on we became careless in this respect, and at last we did not guard it at all.

One day, during the time of repose, I happened to be, with Juba, in our room on that stage of the great tower where the car was anchored, while Edmund and the others were below in the palace. Juba was already asleep, and I was lying down and courting drowsiness, when a slight noise outside attracted my attention. I stepped softly to the door and looked out. The door of the car was open! Supposing that Edmund was there I approached to

speak to him. By good fortune I was wearing the soft slippers worn by everybody here, and which we had adopted, so that my footsteps made no sound.

As I reached the car door and looked in, I nearly dropped in the intensity of my surprise and consternation. There, at the farther end, was Ingra, on his knees before the mechanical mouths which swallowed the invisible elements of power from the air; and beside him was another, also on his knees, and busy with tools, apparently trying to detach the things. The explanation flashed over my mind; Ingra had brought a skilled engineer to aid him in discovering the secret of the car, and, no doubt, to rob it of its mysterious mechanism. They seemed to fear no interruption, because Ingra had undoubtedly informed himself of the fact that for a day or two past we had abandoned the use of our room in the

tower, and taken our repose in our apartments in the palace. It was by mere chance that Juba and I had, on this occasion, remained so long aloft that I had decided to take our sleep in the tower room.

Anticipating no surveillance, Ingra was not on his guard, and had no idea that I was behind him. Instinctively I grasped for my pistol but instantly remembered that it was with my coat in the room. I tiptoed back, awoke Juba, making him a sign to be noiseless, got the pistol, and returned, without a sound, to the open door of the car with Juba at my heels. They were yet on their knees, with their heads under the shelf, and I heard the slight grating made by the tool that Ingra's assistant was using. The pistol was in my hand. What should I do? Shoot him down without warning, or trust to the strength of Juba to enable us to overcome them both and make them prisoners?

While I hesitated, and it was but a moment, Ingra suddenly rose to his feet and confronted us. An exclamation burst from his lips, and the other sprang up. I covered Ingra with the pistol and pulled the trigger. There was not a sound! The sickening remembrance then burst over me that I had not reloaded the pistol since Edmund had emptied its whole chamber in the closing fight with the tarantula of the swamps. Ingra, followed by his man, sprang upon me like a tiger. In a twinkling I lay on my back, and before I could recover my feet, I saw Juba and Ingra in a deadly struggle, while the other ran away and disappeared. Jumping up I ran to Juba's assistance, but the fight was so furious, and the combatants whirled so rapidly, that I could get no hold. I saw, however, that Juba

was more than a match for his opponent, and I darted into the car to get one of the automatic rifles, thinking that I could use it as a club to put an end to the struggle if the opportunity should offer. But the locker was firmly closed and I could not open it. After a minute of vain efforts I returned to the combatants and found that Juba had nearly completed his mastery. He had Ingra doubled over his knee and was endeavoring to pinion his hands.

At this instant, when the victory seemed complete, and our enemy in our power, Juba uttered a faint cry and fell in a heap. Blood instantly stained the floor around him, and Ingra, with a bound, dropping a long knife, attained the door of a nearby chamber, and was out of sight before I could even start to pursue him. Nevertheless, I ran after him, but quickly became involved in a labyrinth where it was useless to continue the search, and where I nearly lost my way.

I then returned to see how seriously Juba had been wounded. He had crawled into the car. I bent over him--he was dead! The knife had inflicted a fearful wound, and it seemed wonderful that he could have made his way unassisted even over the short distance from where he was struck down to the door of the car.

Juba dead! I felt faint and sick! But the critical nature of the emergency helped to steady my nerves by giving me something else to think of and to do. Edmund must be called at once. There were no "elevators" running regularly during the general hours of repose, and I did not know

the way up and down the tower by the ladder-like stairways which connected the stages. But there were signals by which the little craft that served as elevators could be summoned in case of necessity, and I pulled one of the signal cords. It seemed an age before the air ship came, and another before I could reach Edmund.

His great self-control enabled him to conceal his grief at my news, but Jack was overcome. He had really loved Juba almost as if he had been human and a brother. The big-hearted fellow actually sobbed as if his heart would break. Then came the reaction, and I should never have believed that Jack Ashton could exhibit such malevolent ferocity. His lips all but foamed, as he fairly shouted, striking his big fists together:

"This'll be my job! Edmund! Peter! You hear me! Don't either of you dare to lay a hand on that devil! He's mine! Oh! I'll--" But he could not finish his sentence for gnashing his teeth.

We calmed him as best we could and then summoned an air ship. While we waited, Edmund suddenly put his hand in his pocket, and withdrawing it quickly, said, with a bitter smile:

"What a fool I have been in my carelessness. Ingra has had the key abstracted from my pocket by some thief. That explains how he got the car open."

The moment the ship came we hurriedly ascended to the platform. When Edmund saw poor Juba's body lying in the car and learned how he had made his way there to die, he was more affected than when he first heard of his death.

"He has died for us," he said solemnly; "he has crawled here as to a refuge, and here he shall remain until I can bury him among his people in his old home. Would to God I had never taken him from it!"

"Then you will start at once for the dark hemisphere?" I asked.

"At the earliest possible moment; and it shall be on the way to our own home."

But we were not to depart before even a more terrible tragedy had darkened over us, for now the tide of fate was suddenly running at flood.