

CHAPTER XX

THE CORYBANTIA OF THE SUN

I have several times mentioned Edmund's half-formed impression that there was some very remarkable ceremony connected with the cyclical apparition of the sun before the eyes of its worshipers. He had said, you may recall, that it seemed probable that the religious rites on these rare occasions bore some resemblance to the bacchanalia, or dionysia, of ancient Greece. How he had derived that idea I do not know, but it proved to have been but too well founded---only he had not guessed the full truth. The followers of Dionysus made themselves drunken with the wine of their god and then indulged in the wildest excesses. Here, as we were now to learn, the worshipers of the sun were seized with another kind of madness, leading to scenes that I believe, and hope, have never had their parallel upon the earth.

With our hearts sore for Juba, we had completed our preparations for departure within six hours after his tragic death. Ala had been informed of the tragedy, and had visited the car and looked upon the dead form, which I thought greatly affected her. Edmund held little communication with her, but it was evidently with her cooperation that he was able to procure a kind of coffin, in which we placed Juba's body. I do not know whether Edmund informed her of his purpose to quit the planet, but she must have known that we were going to convey our friend somewhere for

interment.

We were actually on the point of casting loose the car, Ala and a crowd of attendants watching our movements, when there came the second great sound of united voices which we had heard in this speechless world. It rose like a sudden wail from the whole city. There was a rushing to and fro, Ala's face grew as pale as death, and her attendants fell upon their knees and began to lift their hands heavenward, with an expression of terror and wild appeal.

At the same time we noticed a sudden brightening about us, and Edmund stepping out on the platform, immediately beckoned, with the first signs of uncontrollable excitement that I had ever seen him display. I was instantly at his side, and a single glance told the story.

High in the heavens, the sun had burst forth in all its marvelous splendor!

A vast rift was open in the cloud dome, through which the gigantic god of day poured down his rays with a fierceness that was inconceivable. The heat was like the blast of a furnace, and I felt my head beginning to swim.

"Quick!" cried Edmund, grasping my sleeve and pulling me into the car.

"These rays are fatal! My God, what a sight!"

As by magic the atmosphere had become crowded with air ships, and throngs of thousands were pouring from them upon the great platform and the other stages, as well as upon the surrounding towers. Every available space was filling up with people hastening from below. As fast as they arrived they threw themselves into the most extraordinary postures of adoration, lifting hands and eyes to the sun. I remember thinking, in a flash, that the intense glare of light must burn to the very sockets of their eyes--but they did not flinch. It was evident, however, that those who looked directly in the sun's face were blinded.

I looked round for Ala, and noticed with a thrill that her beautiful eyes were wide open and glancing with an expression that I cannot describe, over her kneeling people. Beside her was the towering form of the great priest, who was staring straight at the sun--and yet, although his eyes were open, it was evident that they were not rendered altogether sightless even by that awful light. They burned like coals. He was making strange gestures with his long arms, and in unison with his every movement a low, heart-thrilling sound came from the throats of the multitude.

Edmund, at my shoulder, muttered under his breath:

"Shall I try to save her from this?--But to what good?"

For a moment he seemed to hesitate, and I thought that he was about to

rush out upon the platform and seize Ala in order to rescue her from some danger that he foresaw; when, all at once, the multitude rose to its feet, staggering, and began to rush to and fro, colliding with one another, falling, rising again, grappling, struggling, uttering terrible cries--and then I saw the flash of knives.

"Good heavens!" shouted Edmund. "It is the ultraviolet rays! They have gone mad!"

In the meantime the gigantic high priest whirled upon his heel, swinging his arms abroad and uttering a kind of chant which was audible above the dreadful clamor of the rabid multitude. Though he had no weapon, he seemed the inspirer of this Aceldama, and around him its fury raged. Presently he drew close to Ala, who still stood motionless, as if petrified by the awful scene. I felt Edmund give a violent start, and before I comprehended his intention, he had dashed from the car, and was forcing his way through the struggling throng toward the queen.

"Edmund!" I shouted. "For God's sake, come back!"

Jack started to follow him, but I held him back with all my strength.

"Let me go!" he yelled. "Edmund will be killed!"

"And you, too!" I answered. "Break open the locker and get the guns!"

Jack threw himself upon the door of the locker, and strove to wrench it open. Meanwhile, half paralyzed with excitement, I remained standing at the door. I saw Edmund hurl aside those who attacked him, and push on toward his goal. But a minute later a knife reached him, and he fell.

"Quick, Jack, quick!" I shouted; "Edmund is down!"

He had not got the locker open, but he darted to my side, and together we rushed out into the press. Shall I ever forget that moment! We were pushed, hustled, struck, hurled to and fro; but we had only a few steps to go, and we reached our leader where he lay. Seizing him, we succeeded somehow in carrying him into the car. Our clothes were torn, our hands and faces were bleeding, and there was blood on Jack's shoulder. Edmund was alive. We placed him on a bench, and then the fascination of the spectacle without again enchained us.

Suddenly my eyes fell upon Ingra, who had not previously made his appearance. He was as insane as the others, and like many of them had a knife in his hand. In a moment he pushed his way toward Ala, and my heart rose in my throat, for I did not know what mad thought might be in his mind. If I had had a weapon, I believe I should have shot him, but before he had arrived within three yards of the queen there came an explosion of flame--I do not know how else to describe it, for it was so sudden--and the great platform was instantly wrapped in licking tongues of fire.

The wickerwork caught like tinder, and the gauzy screws threw off streams

of sparks like so many Fourth of July pinwheels. The gush of heat from the conflagration was terrible, and I turned my eyes in horror from the stricken multitude which seemed to have been shocked back into sanity by the sudden universal danger only to find itself a helpless prey to the flames.

"It's all over with them!" cried Jack.

His words awoke me to our own danger. We must get away instantly. Knowing

the proper button to touch to throw the mechanism into action, I pushed it forcibly and pulled out a knob which I had often seen Edmund manipulate in starting the car. It responded immediately, and in a second we were afloat, and clear of the tower. Seeing that the direction which the car was taking would remove us from the reach of the flames, and that there was nothing ahead to obstruct its progress, and knowing that Edmund often left it to run of itself when the speed was slow, and there was no occasion to change its course, I now hurried with Jack to Edmund's side. Henry all this time had been lying on a bench like one in a trance.

Jack and I stripped off Edmund's coat, and at once saw the nature of his wound. A knife had penetrated his side, and there was considerable effusion of blood, but I was surgeon enough to feel sure that the wound was not mortal. He roused up as he felt us working over him, and opening his eyes, said faintly:

"You will find bandages under the locker. What has happened? We are moving."

"The tower is all in flames!" exclaimed Jack, before I could interrupt him, for I should have preferred not to tell Edmund the real situation just at that moment.

Jack's words roused him like an electric shock. He pushed us aside, and struggled to his feet. Then he sprang to a knob, and brought the car to rest.

We had been moving slowly, and had not gone more than a quarter of a mile from the tower. The car had swung round so that the fire was not visible from the open door, but now, as Edmund arrested its progress, it swayed back again and the spectacle burst into view. The heat smote us in the face even at this distance. In the few minutes since I had last seen the tower the flames had made incredible progress. The whole of the immense structure was blazing. Spires of flame leaped and swayed from its summit, partitions were falling, platforms giving way, and hundreds of air ships caught by the sheets of fire were crumpling and falling in swooping curves like birds whose wings had been seared. I was thankful that we could not see the unfortunates who were perishing in that furnace. It was but too evident that not a soul on the tower could have escaped.

I glanced at Edmund's face. It was pale and set--the face of a man gazing upon an awful tragedy with which he is absolutely powerless to interfere.

His breath came quick, but he did not utter a word. Then came the reaction, and, staggering, he leaned on my shoulder, and I led him to the bench from which he had risen. For a moment I thought he had fainted, but when I put a flask to his lips he swallowed a mouthful and immediately recovered sufficient strength to sit up, resting his head on his hand.

"Had we not better go on?" I asked.

"Ye-es," he replied, after a moment's hesitation. "We can do nothing. They are all gone; the queen has perished with the rest! Pull out that knob on the right, but gently, and then push this button. We must circle round the outskirts until we see whether the fire will seize upon the other towers and extend to the city below."

I followed his directions, and, as we started our circuit, the vast tower suddenly swayed aside, and then, tumbling in upon itself, it went down in a whirl of smoke and eddying sparks.

As far as we could see none of the other aerial structures had caught fire. The entire absence of wind was no doubt the favorable circumstance that saved them. But all the towers were swaying under the impulse imparted to them by the excited multitudes that crowded their platforms. Although the light of the conflagration faded as soon as the principal tower fell, the others continued to shine brilliantly in the solar rays, but suddenly, as we watched, the splendor failed, and the subdued illumination characteristic of the endless daylight under the great dome

took its place. The rift in the clouds above had closed as unexpectedly as it had recently opened, and the sun was no longer visible. It had been in view less than an hour, but in that brief space what scenes had been enacted!

Presently Edmund, shaking his head sadly, said:

"It is useless to stay longer. Even if the conflagration should spread we could do nothing to help the unfortunates. They must depend upon themselves."

He then gave me directions for changing our course to a direct line away from the city, at the same time increasing the speed. In the meantime he himself aided in binding up his wound.

"If there were the slightest chance that Ala could have escaped," he said, after a few minutes, "I would remain here, and search for her, but it is only too clear what her fate has been. She was really our only friend, and now that she is gone, we must get away from the sight and memory of these things as quickly as possible."

Seeing that his strength was gradually coming back to him, and secretly rejoicing that he bore this terrible blow so stoically, I felt that we might now converse about the catastrophe which we had witnessed.

"What do you think was the cause of the sudden outburst of fire?" I

asked.

"It could hardly have been the direct action of the sunlight," he replied. "It must have resulted from some accidental concentration of the solar rays upon an inflammable substance by a mirror."

"I recall seeing a large concave glass on the principal platform in which they were fond of looking at their magnified images," I said.

"Yes, and no doubt that was the instrument chosen by fate to bring about this terrible end. The power of the sunbeams is twice as great here as upon the earth, and the heat in the focus of a mirror a couple of feet in diameter would suffice to set fire to the flimsy materials which abounded on the tower. Once started in such a place it ran like sparks in a train of gunpowder."

"But the madness that seized the multitude before the catastrophe--what did you mean by saying that it was the ultraviolet rays?"

"I used the term," Edmund replied slowly, "without attaching a very clear meaning to it. It simply expressed the general thought that was in my mind. It may be some other form of solar radiation to which we are not accustomed on the earth, but which is specially effective here when the sun is uncovered because of the greater nearness of Venus. This atmosphere, notwithstanding its density, may well be diaphanous to the ultraviolet rays, owing to some peculiarity in its composition which I

have not had time to study. At any rate, it is evident, from what we have seen, that the rays of the unclouded sun almost instantly affect the brain. I, myself, felt them as if a thousand needles had been thrust through my skull; and I believe that they are responsible, rather than the shock of the wound in my side, for my present weakness."

"And did you foresee the consequences of the uncovering of the sun?"

"Not altogether. I had been led to think that something extraordinary must accompany the periodical appearances of the great orb, and if I could have known that an apparition was at hand I might have made preparations for it and we might have been able to save Ala. When I saw what was going on, I tried to reach her, and you know the result."

"But is it not incredible that a people of so peaceable a disposition should be seized with such murderous instincts when driven out of their senses by the effect of the rays?"

"No, it does not seem so to me. You know the general tendency of sudden madness, which usually produces a complete reversal of the ordinary instincts of the demented persons, making them dangerous to their dearest friends. But why talk longer of this? It is too painful--too overwhelming. What can man do against the great forces of Nature? At this moment I solemnly declare to you that I regret that I ever entered upon this expedition."

While we had been talking, the car had receded to a great distance from the city, and now all but the tops of a few of the airy pinnacles were lost to our sight forever. But as we gazed, straining our sight for a last look, we perceived a familiar flickering of prismatic lightning on the horizon. We glanced at each other meaningly. It was the color speech again. But, oh, what must be the burden of their communications now! Suddenly, Edmund, whose eyes were fixed with intensity upon the scene, remarked, half shuddering:

"It is the great Paean."

Seized with curiosity, I pressed the magic box to my ear, and faintly there echoed in my brain a few disconnected strains of that solemn music. But now, more than ever, it was insufferable to me, and I dropped the box with a crash.

As Edmund recovered his strength he once more took charge of the car, and in a little while he had risen to a great height in order to take advantage of the easier going in the lighter atmosphere above. Thus we ran on for several hours until we began to catch sight of the sea, which was soon beneath us, while far ahead we saw the tumbling clouds marking the location of the belt of tempests behind which we knew lay the range of the crystal mountains. At length we issued from beneath the cloud dome, and then we saw the sun again, and the storms whipping the waters, whose waves occasionally flashed up at us through rifts in the streaming clouds beneath. And at last the icy peaks began to glitter on the

horizon, and we knew that we were nearing the world of eternal night and frost. It was with strange feelings that we once more beheld the crystal mountains, for our minds were filled with the recollection of the scenes that had occurred among them when we were helpless in the grasp of their tempests. But now there was a certain exhilaration in the thought that this time we could safely sail over their summits. As we passed over them we looked eagerly for landmarks that might show where our former passage had occurred, and as Edmund purposely dropped as close to their summits as it was safe to go, I at last believed that I recognized the mighty peak of rainbows that had so nearly wrecked us.

When we had left the mountains behind and entered into the region of night, I asked Edmund how he would proceed in order to find the location of the caverns.

"I shall go by the stars," he said. "I noted the bearing of the place, and I have no doubt that I can find it again."