

CHAPTER XXI

THE EARTH

Edmund's reference to the stars instantly drew my attention to the heavens. They were ablaze with amazing gems, but at first I could not see the earth among them.

"I know what you are looking for," said Edmund. "Here, look through the peephole in the bow. From our present position the earth appears but little elevated above the horizon, but when we reach the caverns, which are in the center of the dark hemisphere, we shall see her overhead."

I knelt at the peephole, and my heart was in my throat. There was our glorious planet, oh, so bright! and close beside her the moon. At the sight, an irrepressible longing arose in me to be once more at home. Jack and Henry took their turns at looking, and they were no less affected than I had been. But Edmund retained a perfect self-command:

"Do you know," he asked with an odd smile (for now the lamps were glowing, and we had plenty of light in the car), "how long we have been absent from home?"

Not one of us had kept a record.

"It is just six hundred and four days," he continued, "since we left New York. We were sixteen days on our way to Venus; six days after our arrival at the caverns occurred the conjunction of the earth, and the ceremonies that Peter will not forget as long as he refrains from hair dye; two days later we departed for the sun lands; and since then five hundred and eighty days have passed. Now, between one conjunction of the earth and Venus to the next, five hundred and eighty-four days elapse. Already five hundred and eighty-two of those days have passed, so that within two days another conjunction will occur, and if we are then at the caverns we shall doubtless witness another sacrifice to the earth and the moon."

"God forbid!" I exclaimed.

"I feel as you do," said Edmund. "We have seen enough of such things. In order, then, to hasten our arrival at the caverns, where we must bury Juba, for on that I insist, I am going to rise up out of the atmosphere, in order that we may fly with planetary speed. We can thus reach the caverns, traversing the five thousand miles of distance that yet remain, in something like an hour, for some time must be lost in rising out of and returning into the atmosphere, and in the meantime I must make observations to determine our location. Having found the caverns we will complete our rites at Juba's grave, and get away for good before the sacrificial ceremonies begin."

It was a programme that suited us all, and it was quickly carried out. I

had not thought that my admiration of Edmund's ability could be increased, but it was carried a notch higher when I saw how easily, guiding himself by the ever-visible stars, he located the caverns. When he knew that he was directly over them he dropped the car swiftly, and we could not repress a cry as we saw directly beneath us the familiar shafts of light issuing from the ground.

"We may have to do a little searching," said Edmund, as we approached the lights, "for, of course, my observations are not accurate enough to enable me to locate the exact spot where we landed before."

But fortune favored us marvelously, and the very first opening that we approached was at once recognized, for there stood the sacrificial altar.

We anchored the car near the shaft, and carried out Juba's coffin.

"Wait here," said Edmund, "while I descend."

"No, you're not going alone," exclaimed Jack. "I'll go with you."

Edmund made no objection and he and Jack descended the steps. Half an hour elapsed before they returned, accompanied by a dozen of the natives, stolid, and not exhibiting the signs of surprise over our return which I had expected to see. Edmund had now made so much progress in their strange means of communication that he had little difficulty in causing them to comprehend what was wanted. They easily carried the coffin, and

all of us followed down into the depths. It was the strangest funeral procession that ever a man saw!

While the grave was being prepared in the underground cemetery where we had witnessed the interment of the first victim of our pistols, Henry and I remained as a sort of guard of honor for Juba in the lower of the two great chambers which have been described in the earlier chapters of this history, and there a most singular thing occurred. We were startled by a low whining, and looking about saw one of the doglike creatures which appeared to be the only inhabitants of the caverns except the natives seated on its haunches close to the coffin, and exhibiting exactly the signs of distress that a dog sometimes displays over its dead master. That we were taken aback by this scene I need not assure you. We had never observed, during our former visit, that either Juba or any of his people was followed by these creatures; in fact, they had always fled at our approach, and we had paid little attention to them.

But now, if the poor animal could have spoken, he could not more plainly have told us that, by means of the mysterious instinct which beings of his kind possess, he had recognized the presence of his old master, and was mourning for him. It was truly a touching spectacle, and Henry was hardly less moved by it than I. When Edmund and Jack came back, having superintended the preparations, Jack was cut to the heart by the sight. Immediately he declared that the "dog" must accompany us in the car, and Edmund assented by a grave inclination of the head. The animal followed us to the grave, and remained there watching us intently. He seemed to

have dismissed his fear, as if he comprehended that we were friends of his master.

There were not more than twenty of the natives present at the interment, and none of them showed signs of sorrow. And when the grave was closed and we turned away, the little creature followed at our heels. Edmund had carved on a flat stone the word "JUBA," and left it lying on the grave, and Jack, having nothing else, threw a silver dollar on top of it. The natives probably regarded these things as talismans, or religious symbols, for they treated them with the greatest deference, and no doubt they lie there yet, and will continue to lie there through all the eons, for in those dry caverns the progress of decay can hardly be perceptible even after the passage of ages. It was a singular fact, noted by Edmund, that the natives exhibited not the slightest curiosity concerning their comrades who had been lost in the crystal mountains, and I really doubt whether they knew what the coffin contained.

When we had paid the last honors to Juba, we began to think of our final departure. This place had become disagreeable to us. After the brilliant scenes that we had witnessed on the other side of the planet, the gloom here, and the absence of all that had made the land of perpetual daylight seem a paradise of beauty, were intensely oppressive to our spirits. But Edmund still wished to make some investigations, and we were compelled to await his movements. What the nature of his investigations was I do not know, for I was devoured by the desire to get away, and did not inquire. But fully twenty-four hours had elapsed before our leader was ready to

depart. In the meanwhile "Juba's dog" had become firmly attached to Jack, who petted it as probably no creature of its race had ever been petted before. It was a strange-looking animal; about as large as a terrier, with a big square head, covered with long black hair, while, in startling imitation of the hirsute adornment of the natives themselves, its body was clothed with a golden-white pelt of silky texture. It would eat anything we offered it, and seemed immensely pleased with its new master, as it had every reason for being.

During the last hours of our stay we noticed unmistakable indications of preparation for the dreaded ceremonies of the conjunction, and our departure was hastened on that account. The priests, whom Edmund had been compelled to put out of the way of further mischief on the former occasion, had been replaced by others, and we thought that, perhaps, this being the first opportunity for the display of their functions, they would try to make it memorable--which presented a still stronger reason why we should not delay. But, with one thing and another, we were held back until the very eve of the ceremonies.

When we finally stood ready to enter the car, with Juba's dog at Jack's heels, the procession up the steps had already begun. Edmund decided to wait until the multitude had all assembled. They came trooping up into the starlight, and I am sure that they had no idea of what we intended to do. Undoubtedly they must have recalled what had happened on the other occasion, but they showed no sign of either regret or anxiety on that

account. They arranged themselves in a dense circle, as before, and the priests took their place in the center. At this moment Edmund gave the word to enter the car. We sprang into it, and immediately Jack and I went out on a window ledge in order to get a better view of the scene. Edmund started the car, and we rose straight toward the earth which glowed in the zenith. Our movement was unexpected, and we at once arrested the attention even of the priests. The beginning of the ceremony was stopped short. All eyes were evidently drawn to us, and when they saw the direction that we were taking a low murmur arose.

"Let me give them a parting salute," said Jack.

Edmund thought a moment, and then said:

"Very well, take a gun, but don't fire at them. If it terrifies them into abandoning their sacrifice we shall have done one good thing in this world."

Jack instantly had the gun roaring, and although we were now high above their heads, we could see that they were seized with consternation, rising from their knees, and running wildly about. Whether the noise and the sight of us flying toward the earth, had the effect which Edmund had hoped for, will never be known; but the last sight we had of living beings on Venus was the spectacle of those white forms darting about in the starry gloom.

Our long journey home was interrupted by one more almost tragic episode. When we had been ten days in flight, and the earth had become like a round moon of dazzling brilliance, Juba's dog, which had grown feeble and refused to eat, died. Jack was broken-hearted, and protested when Edmund said that the body of the animal must be thrown out. He would have liked to try to stuff the skin, but Edmund was firm.

"But if you open a window," I said, "the air will escape."

"Some of it will undoubtedly escape," Edmund replied. "But, luckily, this is the air of Venus which we are carrying, and being very dense, we can spare a little of it without serious results. I shall be quick, and there will be no danger."

It was as he had said. When the window was partially opened, for only a second or two, we distinctly felt a lowering of the atmospheric pressure that made us gasp for a moment, but instantly Edmund had the window closed again, and we were all right. As we shot away we saw the little white body gleaming in the sunlight like a thistledown, and then it disappeared forever.

"It is a new planet born," said Edmund, "and the law of gravitation will pay it as much attention as if it were a Jupiter. It may wander in space for untold ages, and sometime it may even fall within the sphere of the earth's attraction, and then Jack's wish will have been fulfilled; but it will be but a flying spark, flashing momentarily in the heavens as it

shoots through the air."

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Our home-coming was a strange one. For some reason of his own Edmund did

not wish to take the car to New York. He landed in the midst of the Adirondack woods, far from any habitation, and there, concealed in a swamp, he insisted upon leaving the car. We made our way out of the wilderness to the nearest railway station, and our first care was to visit a barber and a clothing merchant. Probably, as we carried some of the guns, they took us for a party of hunters who wished to furbish up before revisiting civilization.

On reaching New York, we went, in the evening, straight to the Olympus Club, where our arrival caused a sensation. We found Church in the old corner, staring dejectedly at a newspaper. He did not see who was approaching him. Jack slapped him on the shoulder, and as he looked up and recognized us he fell back nearly fainting, and with mouth open, unable to utter a word.

"Come, old man," said Jack, "so we've found you! What did you run away for? Let me introduce you to the Columbus of Space, and don't you forget that I'm one of his lieutenants."

I don't think that Church has ever fully believed our story. He thinks,

to this day, that we lost our "balloon," as he calls it, and invented the rest. We purposely allowed the newspaper reporters to take the same view of the case, but when we four were alone we unburdened our hearts, and relived the marvelous life of Venus. I use the past tense, because I have yet to tell you most disquieting news.

Edmund has disappeared.

Within three months after our return he bade us good night at an unusually early hour and we have never seen him since, although more than a year has now elapsed since he went out of the room at the Olympus. Jack and I have made every effort to find a trace of him, without avail. Led by a natural suspicion, we have ransacked the Adirondack woods, but we could never satisfy ourselves that we had found the place where the car was left. Henry persists in the belief that Edmund is trying in secret to develop his invention, with the intention of "revolutionizing industry and making himself a multibillionaire." But Jack and I know better! Wherever he may be, whatever may occupy his wonderful powers, we feel that the ordinary concerns of the earth have no interest for him. Yet we are sure that if he is alive he often thinks of us.

Last night as Jack and I were walking to the club with my completed manuscript under my arm, a falling star shot across the sky.

"Do you know what that recalls to me?" asked Jack, with a far-off

expression in his eyes.

"What?"

"Juba's dog."

Neither of us spoke again before we reached the clubhouse steps, but I am certain that through both our minds there streamed a glittering procession of such memories as life on this planet could never give birth to. And they ended with a sigh.

THE END