

CHAPTER FIVE

THE FOOTPRINT ON THE MOON

To prevent accidents, it had been arranged that the ships should keep a considerable distance apart. Some of them gradually drifted away, until, on account of the neutral tint of their sides, they were swallowed up in the abyss of space. Still it was possible to know where every member of the squadron was through the constant interchange of signals. These, as I have explained, were effected by means of mirrors flashing back the light of the sun.

But, although it was now unceasing day for us, yet, there being no atmosphere to diffuse the sun's light, the stars were visible to us just as at night upon the earth, and they shone with extraordinary splendor against the intense black background of the firmament. The lights of some of the more distant ships of our squadron were not brighter than the stars in whose neighborhood they seemed to be. In some cases it was only possible to distinguish between the light of a ship and that of a star by the fact that the former was continually flashing while the star was steady in its radiance.

The most uncanny effect was produced by the absence of atmosphere around us. Inside the car, where there was air, the sunlight, streaming through one or more of the windows, was diffused and produced ordinary daylight.

But when we ventured outside we could only see things by halves. The side of the car that the sun's rays touched was visible, the other side was invisible, the light from the stars not making it bright enough to affect the eye in contrast with the sun-illuminated half.

As I held up my arm before my eyes, half of it seemed to be shaved off lengthwise; a companion on the deck of the ship looked like half a man. So the other electrical ships near us appeared as half ships, only the illuminated sides being visible.

We had now gotten so far away that the earth had taken on the appearance of a heavenly body like the moon. Its colors had become all blended into a golden-reddish hue, which overspread nearly its entire surface, except at the poles, where there were broad patches of white. It was marvelous to look at this huge orb behind us, while far beyond it shone the blazing sun like an enormous star in the blackest of nights. In the opposite direction appeared the silver orb of the moon, and scattered all around were millions of brilliant stars, amid which, like fireflies, flashed and sparkled the signal lights of the squadron.

A danger that might easily have been anticipated, that perhaps had been anticipated, but against which it had been difficult, if not impossible, to provide, presently manifested itself.

Looking out of a window toward the right, I suddenly noticed the lights

of a distant ship darting about in a curious curve. Instantly afterward, another member of the squadron, nearer by, behaved in the same inexplicable manner. Then two or three of the floating cars seemed to be violently drawn from their courses and hurried rapidly in the direction of the flagship. Immediately I perceived a small object, luridly flaming, which seemed to move with immense speed in our direction.

The truth instantly flashed upon my mind, and I shouted to the other occupants of the car:

"A meteor!"

And such indeed it was. We had met this mysterious wanderer in space at a moment when we were moving in a direction at right angles to the path it was pursuing around the sun. Small as it was, and its diameter probably did not exceed a single foot, it was yet an independent little world, and as such a member of the solar system. Its distance from the sun being so near that of the earth, I knew that its velocity, assuming it to be travelling in a nearly circular orbit, must be about eighteen miles in a second. With this velocity, then, it plunged like a projectile shot by some mysterious enemy in space directly through our squadron. It had come and was gone before one could utter a sentence of three words. Its appearance, and the effect it had produced upon the ships in whose neighborhood it passed, indicated that it bore an intense and tremendous charge of electricity. How it had become thus charged I cannot pretend to say. I simply record the fact. And this charge, it was

evident, was opposite in polarity to that which the ships of the squadron bore. It therefore exerted an attractive influence upon them and thus drew them after it.

I had just time to think how lucky it was that the meteor did not strike any of us, when, glancing at a ship just ahead, I perceived that an accident had occurred. The ship swayed violently from its course, dazzling flashes played around it, and two or three of the men forming its crew appeared for an instant on its exterior, wildly gesticulating, but almost instantly falling prone.

It was evident at a glance that the car had been struck by the meteor. How serious the damage might be we could not instantly determine. The course of our ship was immediately altered, the electric polarity was changed and we rapidly approached the disabled car.

The men who had fallen lay upon its surface. One of the heavy circular glasses covering a window had been smashed to atoms. Through this the meteor had passed, killing two or three men who stood in its course. Then it had crashed through the opposite side of the car, and, passing on, had disappeared into space. The store of air contained in the car had immediately rushed out through the openings, and when two or three of us, having donned our air-tight suits as quickly as possible, entered the wrecked car we found all its inmates stretched upon the floor in a condition of asphyxiation. They, as well as those who lay upon the exterior, were immediately removed to the flagship, restoratives were

applied, and, fortunately, our aid had come so promptly that the lives of all of them were saved. But life had fled from the mangled bodies of those who had stood directly in the path of the fearful projectile.

This strange accident had been witnessed by several of the members of the fleet, and they quickly drew together, in order to inquire for the particulars. As the flagship was now overcrowded by the addition of so many men to its crew, Mr. Edison had them distributed among the other cars. Fortunately it happened that the disintegrators contained in the wrecked car were not injured. Mr. Edison thought that it would be possible to repair the car itself, and for that purpose he had it attached to the flagship in order that it might be carried on as far as the moon. The bodies of the dead were transported with it, as it was determined, instead of committing them to the fearful deep of space, where they would have wandered forever, or else have fallen like meteors upon the earth, to give them interment in the lunar soil.

As we now rapidly approached the moon the change which the appearance of its surface underwent was no less wonderful than that which the surface of the earth had presented in the reverse order while we were receding from it. From a pale silver orb, shining with comparative faintness among the stars, it slowly assumed the appearance of a vast mountainous desert. As we drew nearer its colors became more pronounced; the great flat regions appeared darker; the mountain peaks shone more brilliantly. The huge chasms seemed bottomless and blacker than midnight. Gradually separate mountains appeared. What seemed like expanses of snow and

immense glaciers streaming down their sides sparkled with great brilliancy in the perpendicular rays of the sun. Our motion had now assumed the aspect of falling. We seemed to be dropping from an immeasurable height, and with an inconceivable velocity, straight down upon those giant peaks.

Here and there curious lights glowed upon the mysterious surface of the moon. Where the edge of the moon cut the sky behind it, it was broken and jagged with mountain masses. Vast crater rings overspread its surface, and in some of these I imagined I could perceive a lurid illumination coming out of their deepest cavities, and the curling of mephitic vapors around their terrible jaws.

We were approaching that part of the moon which is known to the astronomers as the Bay of Rainbows. Here a huge semi-circular region, as smooth almost as the surface of a prairie, lay beneath our eyes, stretching southward into a vast ocean-like expanse, while on the north it was enclosed by an enormous range of mountain cliffs, rising perpendicularly to a height of many thousands of feet, and rent and gashed in every direction by forces which seemed at some remote period to have labored at tearing this little world in pieces.

It was a fearful spectacle; a dead and mangled world, too dreadful to look upon. The idea of the death of the moon was, of course, not a new one to many of us. We had long been aware that the earth's satellite was a body which had passed beyond the stage of life, if indeed it had ever

been a life supporting globe; but none of us were prepared for the terrible spectacle which now smote our eyes.

At each end of the semi-circular ridge that encloses the Bay of Rainbows there is a lofty promontory. That at the northwestern extremity had long been known to the astronomers under the name of Cape Laplace. The other promontory, at the southeastern termination, is called Cape Heraclides. It was toward the latter that we were approaching, and by interchange of signals all the members of the squadron had been informed that Cape Heraclides was to be our rendezvous upon the moon.

I may say that I had been somewhat familiar with the scenery of this part of the lunar world, for I had often studied it from the earth with a telescope, and I had thought that if there was any part of the moon where one might, with fair expectation of success, look for inhabitants, or if not inhabitants, at least for relics of life no longer existant there, this would surely be the place. It was, therefore, with no small degree of curiosity, notwithstanding the unexpectedly frightful and repulsive appearance that the surface of the moon presented, that I now saw myself rapidly approaching the region concerning whose secrets my imagination had so often busied itself. When Mr. Edison and I had paid our previous trip to the moon on our first experimental trip of the electrical ship we had landed at a point on its surface remote from this, and, as I have before explained, we then made no effort to investigate its secrets. But now it was to be different, and we were at length to see something of the wonders of the moon.

I had often on the earth drawn a smile from my friends by showing them Cape Heraclides with a telescope, and calling their attention to the fact that the outline of the peak terminating the cape was such as to present a remarkable resemblance to a human face, unmistakably a feminine countenance, seen in profile, and possessing no small degree of beauty. To my astonishment, this curious human semblance still remained when we had approached so close to the moon that the mountains forming the cape filled nearly the whole field of view of the window from which I was watching it. The resemblance, indeed, was most startling.

"Can this indeed be Diana herself?" I said half-aloud, but instantly afterward I was laughing at my fancy, for Mr. Edison had overheard me and exclaimed, "Where is she?"

"Who?"

"Diana."

"Why, there," I said, pointing to the moon. But lo! the appearance was gone even while I spoke. A swift change had taken place in the line of sight by which we were viewing it, and the likeness had disappeared in consequence.

A few moments later my astonishment was revived, but the cause this time was a very different one. We had been dropping rapidly toward the

mountains, and the electrician in charge of the car was swiftly and constantly changing his potential, and, like a pilot who feels his way into an unknown harbor, endeavoring to approach the moon in such a manner that no hidden peril should surprise us. As we thus approached I suddenly perceived, crowning the very apex of the lofty peak near the termination of the cape, the ruins of what appeared to be an ancient watch tower. It was evidently composed of Cyclopean blocks larger than any that I had ever seen even among the ruins of Greece, Egypt and Asia Minor.

Here, then, was visible proof that the moon had been inhabited, although probably it was not inhabited now. I cannot describe the exultant feeling which took possession of me at this discovery. It settled so much that learned men had been disputing about for centuries.

"What will they say," I exclaimed, "when I show them a photograph of that?"

Below the peak, stretching far to right and left, lay a barren beach which had evidently once been washed by sea waves, because it was marked by long curved ridges such as the advancing and retiring tide leaves upon the shore of the ocean.

This beach sloped rapidly outward and downward toward a profound abyss, which had once, evidently, been the bed of a sea, but which now appeared to us simply as the empty, yawning shell of an ocean that had long

vanished.

It was with no small difficulty, and only after the expenditure of considerable time, that all the floating ships of the squadron were gradually brought to rest on this lone mountain top of the moon. In accordance with my request, Mr. Edison had the flagship moored in the interior of the great ruined watch tower that I have described. The other ships rested upon the slope of the mountain around us.

Although time pressed, for we knew that the safety of the earth depended upon our promptness in attacking Mars, yet it was determined to remain here at least two or three days in order that the wrecked car might be repaired. It was found also that the passage of the highly electrified meteor had disarranged the electrical machinery in some of the other cars, so that there were many repairs to be made besides those needed to restore the wreck.

Moreover, we must bury our unfortunate companions who had been killed by the meteor. This, in fact, was the first work that we performed. Strange was the sight, and stranger our feelings, as here on the surface of a world distant from the earth, and on soil which had never before been pressed by the foot of man, we performed that last ceremony of respect which mortals pay to mortality. In the ancient beach at the foot of the peak we made a deep opening, and there covered forever the faces of our friends, leaving them to sleep among the ruins of empires, and among the graves of races which had vanished probably ages before Adam and Eve

appeared in Paradise.

While the repairs were being made several scientific expeditions were sent out in various directions across the moon. One went westward to investigate the great ring of Plato, and the lunar Alps. Another crossed the ancient Sea of Showers toward the inner Appenines.

One started to explore the immense Crater of Copernicus, which, yawning fifty miles across, presents a wonderful appearance even from the distance of the earth. The ship in which I, myself, had the good fortune to embark, was bound for the mysterious inner mountain Aristarchus.

Before these expeditions started, a careful exploration had been made in the neighborhood of Cape Heraclides. But, except that the broken walls of the watch tower on the peak, composed of blocks of enormous size, had evidently been the work of creatures endowed with human intelligence, no remains were found indicating the former presence of inhabitants upon this part of the moon.

But along the shore of the old sea, just where the so-called Bay of Rainbows separates itself from the abyss of the Sea of Showers, there were found some stratified rocks in which the fascinated eyes of the explorer beheld the clear imprint of a gigantic human foot, measuring five feet in length from toe to heel.

The most minute search failed to reveal another trace of the presence of

the ancient giant, who had left the impress of his foot in the wet sands of the beach here so many millions of years ago that even the imagination of the geologists shrank from the task of attempting to fix the precise period.

Around this gigantic footprint gathered most of the scientific members of the expedition, wearing their oddly shaped air-tight suits, connected with telephonic wires, and the spectacle, but for the impressiveness of the discovery, would have been laughable in the extreme. Bending over the mark in the rock, nodding their heads together, pointing with their awkwardly accoutered arms, they looked like an assemblage of antediluvian monsters collected around their prey. Their disappointment over the fact that no other marks of anything resembling human habitation could be discovered was very great.

Still this footprint in itself was quite sufficient, as they all declared, to settle the question of the former habitation of the moon, and it would serve for the production of many a learned volume after their return to earth, even if no further discoveries should be made in other parts of the lunar world.

It was the hope of making such other discoveries that led to the dispatch of the other various expeditions which I have already named. I was chosen to accompany the car that was going to Aristarchus, because, as every one who had viewed the moon from the earth was aware, there was something very mysterious about that mountain. I knew that it was a

crater nearly thirty miles in diameter and very deep, although its floor was plainly visible.

What rendered it remarkable was the fact that the floor and the walls of the crater, particularly on the inner side, glowed with a marvelous brightness which rendered them almost blinding when viewed with a powerful telescope.

So bright were they, indeed, that the eye was unable to see many of the details which the telescope would have made visible but for the flood of light which poured from the mountains. Sir William Herschel had been so completely misled by this appearance that he supposed he was watching a lunar volcano in eruption.

It had always been a difficult question what caused the extraordinary luminosity of Aristarchus. No end of hypothesis had been invented to account for it. Now I was to assist in settling these questions forever.

From Cape Heraclides to Aristarchus the distance in air line was something over 300 miles. Our course lay across the northeastern part of the Sea of Showers, with enormous cliffs, mountain masses and peaks shining on the right, while in the other direction the view was bounded by the distant range of the lunar Appenines, some of whose towering peaks, when viewed from our immense elevation, appeared as sharp as the Swiss Matterhorn.

When we had arrived within about a hundred miles of our destination we found ourselves, floating directly over the so-called Harbinger Mountains. The serrated peaks of Aristarchus then appeared ahead of us, fairly blazing in the sunshine.

It seemed as if a gigantic string of diamonds, every one as great as a mountain peak, had been cast down upon the barren surface of the moon and left to waste their brilliance upon the desert air of this abandoned world.

As we rapidly approached the dazzling splendor of the mountain became almost unbearable to our eyes, and we were compelled to resort to the device, practised by all climbers of lofty mountains, where the glare of sunlight on snow surfaces is liable to cause temporary blindness, of protecting our eyes with neutral-tinted glasses.

Professor Moissan, the great French chemist and maker of artificial diamonds, fairly danced with delight.

"Voila! Voila! Voila!" was all that he could say.

When we were comparatively near, the mountain no longer seemed to glow with a uniform radiance, evenly distributed over its entire surface, but now innumerable points of light, all as bright as so many little suns, blazed away at us. It was evident that we had before us a mountain composed of, or at least covered with, crystals.

Without stopping to alight on the outer slopes of the great ring-shaped range of peaks which composed Aristarchus, we sailed over their rim and looked down into the interior. Here the splendor of the crystals was greater than on the outer slopes, and the broad floor of the crater, thousands of feet beneath us, shone and sparkled with overwhelming radiance, as if it were an immense bin of diamonds, while a peak in the center flamed like a stupendous tiara incrusting with selected gems.

Eager to see what these crystals were, the car was now allowed rapidly to drop into the interior of the crater. With great caution we brought it to rest upon the blazing ground, for the sharp edges of the crystals would certainly have torn the metallic sides of the car if it had come into violent contact with them.

Donning our air-tight suits and stepping carefully out upon this wonderful footing we attempted to detach some of the crystals. Many of them were firmly fastened, but a few--some of astonishing size--were readily loosened.

A moment's inspection showed that we had stumbled upon the most marvelous work of the forces of crystalization that human eyes had ever rested upon. Some time in the past history of the moon there had been an enormous outflow of molten material from the crater. This had overspread the walls and partially filled up the interior, and later its surface had flowered into gems, as thick as blossoms in a bed of pansies.

The whole mass flashed prismatic rays of indescribable beauty and intensity. We gazed at first speechless with amazement.

"It cannot be, surely it cannot be," said Professor Moissan at length.

"But it is," said another member of the party.

"Are these diamonds?" asked a third.

"I cannot yet tell," replied the Professor. "They have the brilliancy of diamonds, but they may be something else."

"Moon jewels," suggested a third.

"And worth untold millions, whatever they are," remarked another. These magnificent crystals, some of which appeared to be almost flawless, varied in size from the dimensions of a hazelnut to geometrical solids several inches in diameter. We carefully selected as many as it was convenient to carry and placed them in the car for future examination. We had solved another long standing lunar problem and had, perhaps, opened up an inexhaustible future mine of wealth which might eventually go far toward reimbursing the earth for the damage which it had suffered from the invasion of the Martians.

On returning to Cape Heraclides we found that the other expeditions had

arrived at the rendezvous ahead of us. Their members had wonderful stories to tell of what they had seen, but nothing caused quite so much astonishment as that which we had to tell and to show.

The party which had gone to visit Plato and the lunar Alps brought back, however, information which, in a scientific sense, was no less interesting than what we had been able to gather.

They had found within this curious ring of Plato, which is a circle of mountains sixty miles in diameter, enclosing a level plain remarkably smooth over most of its surface, unmistakable evidences of former habitation. A gigantic city had evidently at one time existed near the center of this great plain. The outlines of its walls and the foundation marks of some of its immense buildings were plainly made out, and elaborate plans of this vanished capitol of the moon were prepared by several members of the party.

One of them was fortunate enough to discover an even more precious relic of the ancient lunarians. It was a piece of petrified skullbone, representing but a small portion of the head to which it had belonged, but yet sufficient to enable the anthropologists, who immediately fell to examining it, to draw ideal representations of the head as it must have been in life--the head of a giant of enormous size, which, if it had possessed a highly organized brain, of proportionate magnitude, must have given to its possessor intellectual powers immensely greater than any of the descendants of Adam have ever been endowed with.

Indeed, one of the professors was certain that some little concretions found on the interior of the piece of skull were petrified portions of the brain matter itself, and he set to work with the microscope to examine its organic quality.

In the meantime, the repairs to the electrical ships had been completed, and, although these discoveries on the moon had created a most profound sensation among the members of the expedition, and aroused an almost irresistible desire to continue the explorations thus happily begun, yet everybody knew that these things were aside from the main purpose in view, and that we should be false to our duty in wasting a moment more upon the moon than was absolutely necessary to put the ships in proper condition to proceed on their warlike voyage.

Everything being prepared then, we left the moon with great regret, just forty-eight hours after we had landed upon its surface, carrying with us a determination to revisit it and to learn more of its wonderful secrets in case we should survive the dangers which we were now going to face.