

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE MONSTERS ON THE ASTEROID

A day or two after leaving the moon, we had another adventure with a wandering inhabitant of space which brought us into far greater peril than had our encounter with the meteor.

The airships had been partitioned off so that a portion of the interior could be darkened in order to serve as a sleeping chamber, wherein, according to the regulations prescribed by the commander of the squadron each member of the expedition in his turn passed eight out of every twenty-four hours--sleeping if he could, if not, meditating in a more or less dazed way, upon the wonderful things that he was seeing and doing--things far more incredible than the creations of a dream.

One morning, if I may call by the name morning the time of my periodical emergence from the darkened chamber, glancing from one of the windows, I was startled to see in the black sky a brilliant comet.

No periodical comet, as I knew, was at this time approaching the neighborhood of the sun, and no stranger of that kind had been detected from the observatories making its way sunward before we left the earth. Here, however, was unmistakably a comet rushing toward the sun, flinging out a great gleaming tail behind it and so close to us that I wondered

to see it remaining almost motionless in the sky. This phenomenon was soon explained to me, and the explanation was of a most disquieting character.

The stranger had already been perceived, not only from the flagship, but from the other members of the squadron, and, as I now learned, efforts had been made to get out of the neighborhood, but for some reason the electrical apparatus did not work perfectly--some mysterious disturbing force acting upon it--and so it had been found impossible to avoid an encounter with the comet, not an actual coming into contact with it, but a falling into the sphere of its influence.

In fact, I was informed that for several hours the squadron had been dragging along in the wake of a comet, very much as boats are sometimes towed off by a wounded whale. Every effort had been made to so adjust the electric charge upon the ships that they would be repelled from the cometic mass, but, owing apparently to electric changes affecting the clashing mass of meteoric bodies which constituted the head of the comet, we found it impossible to escape from its influence.

At one instant the ships would be repelled; immediately afterward they would be attracted again, and thus they were dragged hither and thither, but never able to break from the invisible leash which the comet had cast upon them. The latter was moving with enormous velocity toward the sun, and, consequently, we were being carried back again, away from the object of our expedition, with a fair prospect of being dissipated in

blazing vapors when the comet had dragged us, unwilling prisoners, into the immediate neighborhood of the solar furnace.

Even the most cool-headed lost his self control in this terrible emergency. Every kind of device that experience or the imagination could suggest was tried, but nothing would do. Still on we rushed with the electrified atoms composing the tail of the comet swinging to and fro over the members of the squadron, as they shifted their position, like the plume of smoke from a gigantic steamer, drifting over the sea birds that follow in its course.

Was this to end it all, then? Was this the fate that Providence had in store for us? Were the hopes of the earth thus to perish? Was the expedition to be wrecked and its fate to remain for ever unknown to the planet from which it had set forth? And was our beloved globe, which had seemed so fair to us when we last looked upon it nearby, and in whose defense we had resolved to spend our last breath, to be left helpless and at the mercy of its implacable foe in the sky?

At length we gave ourselves up for lost. There seemed to be no possible way to free ourselves from the baleful grip of this terrible and unlooked for enemy.

As the comet approached the sun its electrical energy rapidly increased, and watching it with telescopes, for we could not withdraw our fascinated eyes from it, we could clearly behold the fearful things that

went on in its nucleus.

This consisted of an immense number of separate meteors of no very great size individually, but which were in constant motion among one another, darting to and fro, clashing and smashing together, while fountains of blazing metallic particles and hot mineral vapours poured out in every direction.

As I watched it, unable to withdraw my eyes, I saw imaginary forms revealing themselves amid the flaming meteors. They seemed like creatures in agony, tossing their arms, bewailing in their attitudes the awful fate that had overtaken them, and fairly chilling my blood with the pantomime of torture which they exhibited. I thought of an old superstition which I had often heard about the earth, and exclaimed:

"Yes, surely, this is a flying hell!"

As the electric activity of the comet increased, its continued changes of potential and polarity became more frequent, and the electrical ships darted about with even greater confusion than before. Occasionally one of them, seized with a sudden impulse, would spring forward toward the nucleus of the comet with a sudden access of velocity that would fling every one of its crew from his feet, and all would lie sprawling on the floor of the car while it rushed, as it seemed, to inevitable and instant destruction.

Then, either through the frantic efforts of the electrician struggling with the controller or through another change in the polarity of the comet, the ship would be saved on the very brink of ruin and stagger away out of immediate danger.

Thus the captured squadron was swept, swaying and darting hither and thither, but never able to get sufficiently far from the comet to break the bond of its fatal attraction.

So great was our excitement and so complete our absorption in the fearful peril that we had not noticed the precise direction in which the comet was carrying us. It was enough to know that the goal of the journey was the furnace of the sun. But presently someone in the flagship recalled us to a more accurate sense of our situation in space by exclaiming:

"Why, there is the earth!"

And there, indeed, it was, its great globe rolling under our eyes, with the contrasted colors of the continents and clouds and the watery gleam of the oceans spread beneath us.

"We're going to strike it!" exclaimed somebody. "The comet is going to dash us into the earth."

Such a collision at first seemed inevitable, but presently it was

noticed that the direction of the comet's motion was such that while it might graze the earth it would not actually strike it.

And so, like a swarm of giant insects circling about an electric light from whose magic influence they could not escape, our ships went on, to be whipped against the earth in passing and then to continue their swift journey to destruction.

"Thank God, this saves us," suddenly cried Mr. Edison.

"What-what?"

"Why, the earth, of course. Do you not see that as the comet sweeps close to the great planet the superior attraction of the latter will snatch us from its grasp, and that thus we shall be able to escape."

And it was indeed as Mr. Edison had predicted. In a blaze of falling meteors the comet swept the outer limits of the earth's atmosphere and passed on, while the swaying ships, having been instructed by signals what to do, desperately applied their electrical machinery to reverse the attraction and threw themselves into the arms of their mother earth.

In another instant we were all free, settling down through the quiet atmosphere with the Atlantic Ocean sparkling in the morning sun far below.

We looked at one another in amazement. So this was the end of our voyage! This was the completion of our warlike enterprise. We had started out to conquer a world, and we had come back ignominiously dragged in the train of a comet.

The earth which we were going to defend and protect had herself turned protector, and reaching out her strong arm had snatched her foolish children from the destruction which they had invited.

It would be impossible to describe the chagrin of every member of the expedition.

The electric ships rapidly assembled and hovered high in the air, while their commanders consulted about what should be done. A universal feeling of shame almost drove them to a decision not to land upon the surface of the planet, and if possible not to let its inhabitants know what had occurred.

But it was too late for that. Looking carefully beneath us, we saw that fate had brought us back to our very starting point, and signals displayed in the neighborhood of New York indicated that we had already been recognized. There was nothing for us then but to drop down and explain the situation.

I shall not delay my narrative by undertaking to describe the astonishment and the disappointment of the inhabitants of the earth

when, within a fortnight from our departure, they saw us back again, with no laurels of victory crowning our brows.

At first they had hoped that we were returning in triumph, and we were overwhelmed with questions the moment we had dropped within speaking distance.

"Have you whipped them?"

"How many are lost?"

"Is there any more danger?"

"Faix, have ye got one of thim men from Mars?"

But their rejoicing and their facetiousness were turned into wailing when the truth was imparted.

We made a short story of it, for we had not the heart to go into details. We told of our unfortunate comrades whom we had buried upon the moon, and there was one gleam of satisfaction when we exhibited the wonderful crystals we had collected in the crater of Aristarchus.

Mr. Edison determined to stop only long enough to test the electrical machinery of the cars, which had been more or less seriously deranged during our wild chase after the comet, and then to start straight back



for Mars--this time on a through trip.

The astronomers, who had been watching Mars, since our departure, with their telescopes, reported that mysterious lights continued to be visible, but that nothing indicating the starting of another expedition for the earth had been seen.

Within twenty-four hours we were ready for our second start.

The moon was now no longer in a position to help us on our way. It had moved out of line between Mars and the earth.

High above us, in the center of the heavens, glowed the red planet which was the goal of our journey.

The needed computations of velocity and direction of flight having been repeated, and the ships being all in readiness, we started direct for Mars.

An enormous charge of electricity was imparted to each member of the squadron, in order that as soon as we had reached the upper limits of the atmosphere, where the ships could move swiftly, without danger of being consumed by the heat developed by the friction of their passage through the air, a very great initial velocity could be imparted.

Once started off by this tremendous electrical kick, and with no

atmosphere to resist our motion, we should be able to retain the same velocity, barring incidental encounters, until we arrived near the surface of Mars.

When we were free of the atmosphere, and the ships were moving away from the earth, with the highest velocity which we were able to impart to them, observations on the stars were made in order to determine the rate of our speed.

This was found to be ten miles in a second, or 864,000 miles in a day, a very much greater speed than that with which we had travelled on starting to touch at the moon. Supposing this velocity to remain uniform, and, with no known resistance, it might reasonably be expected to do so, we should arrive at Mars in a little less than forty-two days, the distance of the planet from the earth being at this time, about thirty-six million miles.

Nothing occurred for many days to interrupt our journey. We became accustomed to our strange surroundings, and many entertainments were provided to while away the time. The astronomers in the expedition found plenty of occupation in studying the aspects of the stars and the other heavenly bodies from their new point of view.

At the expiration of about thirty-five days we had drawn so near to Mars that with our telescopes, which, though small, were of immense power, we could discern upon its surface features and details which no one had

been able to glimpse from the earth.

As the surface of this world, that we were approaching as a tiger hunter draws near the jungle, gradually unfolded itself to our inspection, there was hardly one of us willing to devote to sleep or idleness the prescribed eight hours that had been fixed as the time during which each member of the expedition must remain in the darkened chamber. We were too eager to watch for every new revelation upon Mars.

But something was in store that we had not expected. We were to meet the Martians before arriving at the world in which they dwelt.

Among the stars which shone in that quarter of the heavens where Mars appeared as the master orb, there was one, lying directly in our path, which, to our astonishment, as we continued on, altered from the aspect of a star, underwent a gradual magnification, and soon presented itself in the form of a little planet.

"It is an asteroid," said somebody.

"Yes, evidently; but how does it come inside the orbit of Mars?"

"Oh, there are several asteroids," said one of the astronomers, "which travel inside the orbit of Mars, along a part of their course, and, for aught we can tell, there may be many which have not yet been caught sight of from the earth, that are nearer to the sun than Mars is."

"This must be one of them."

"Manifestly so."

As we drew nearer the mysterious little planet revealed itself to us as a perfectly formed globe not more than five miles in diameter.

"What is that upon it?" asked Lord Kelvin, squinting intently at the little world through his glass. "As I live, it moves."

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed several others, "there are inhabitants upon it, but what giants!"

"What monsters!"

"Don't you see?" exclaimed an excited savant. "They are the Martians!"

The startling truth burst upon the minds of all. Here upon this little planetoid were several of the gigantic inhabitants of the world that we were going to attack. There was more than one man in the flagship who recognized them well, and who shuddered at the recognition, instinctively recalling the recent terrible experience of the earth.

Was this an outpost of the warlike Mars?

Around these monstrous enemies we saw several of their engines of war. Some of these appeared to have been wrecked, but at least one, as far as we could see, was still in a proper condition for use.

How had these creatures got there?

"Why, that is easy enough to account for," I said, as a sudden recollection flashed into my mind. "Don't you remember the report of the astronomers more than six months ago, at the end of the conference in Washington, that something would seem to indicate the departure of a new expedition from Mars had been noticed by them? We have heard nothing of that expedition since. We know that it did not reach the earth. It must have fallen foul of this asteroid, run upon this rock in the ocean of space and been wrecked here."

"We've got 'em, then," shouted our electric steersman, who had been a workman in Mr. Edison's laboratory and had unlimited confidence in his chief.

The electrical ships were immediately instructed by signal to slow down, an operation that was easily affected through the electrical repulsion of the asteroid.

The nearer we got the more terrifying was the appearance of the gigantic creatures who were riding upon the little world before us like castaway sailors upon a block of ice. Like men, and yet not like men, combining

the human and the beast in their appearance, it required a steady nerve to look at them. If we had not known their malignity and their power to work evil, it would have been different, but in our eyes their moral character shone through their physical aspect and thus rendered them more terrible than they would otherwise have been.

When we first saw them their appearance was most forlorn, and their attitudes indicated only despair and desperation, but as they caught sight of us their malign power of intellect instantly penetrated the mystery, and they recognized us for what we were.

Their despair immediately gave place to reawakened malevolence. On the instant they were astir, with such heart-chilling movements as those that characterize a venomous serpent preparing to strike.

Not imagining that they would be in a position to make serious resistance, we had been somewhat incautious in approaching.

Suddenly there was a quicker movement than usual among the Martians, a swift adjustment of that one of their engines of war which, as already noticed, seemed to be practically uninjured, then there darted from it and alighted upon one of the foremost ships, a dazzling lightning stroke a mile in length, at whose touch the metallic sides of the car curled and withered and, licked for a moment by what seemed lambent flames, collapsed into a mere cinder.

For an instant not a word was spoken, so sudden and unexpected was the blow.

We knew that every soul in the stricken car had perished.

"Back! Back!" was the signal instantly flashed from the flagship, and reversing their polarities the members of the squadron sprang away from the little planet as rapidly as the electrical impulse could drive them.

But before we were out of reach a second flaming tongue of death shot from the fearful engine, and another of our ships, with all its crew, was destroyed.

It was an inauspicious beginning for us. Two of our electrical ships, with their entire crews, had been wiped out of existence, and this appalling blow had been dealt by a few stranded and disabled enemies floating on an asteroid.

What hope would there be for us when we came to encounter the millions of Mars itself on their own ground and prepared for war?

However, it would not do to despond. We had been incautious, and we should take good care not to commit the same fault again.

The first thing to do was to avenge the death of our comrades. The question whether we were able to meet these Martians and overcome them

might as well be settled right here and now. They had proved what they could do, even when disabled and at a disadvantage. Now it was our turn.