CHAPTER NINE

JOURNEY'S END

"All aboard!" was the signal, and the squadron having assembled under the lead of the flagship, we started again for Mars.

This time, as it proved, there was to be no further interruption, and when next we paused it was in the presence of the world inhabited by our enemies, and facing their frowning batteries.

We did not find it so easy to start from the asteroid as it had been to start from the earth; that is to say, we could not so readily generate a very high velocity.

In consequence of the comparatively small size of the asteroid, its electric influence was very much less than that of the earth, and notwithstanding the appliances which we possessed for intensifying the electrical effect, it was not possible to produce a sufficient repulsion to start us off for Mars with anything like the impulse which we had received from the earth on our original departure.

The utmost velocity that we could generate did not exceed three miles in a second, and to get this required our utmost efforts. In fact, it had not seemed possible that we should attain even so great a speed as that.

It was far more than we could have expected, and even Mr. Edison was surprised, as well as greatly gratified, when he found that we were moving with the velocity that I have named.

We were still about 6,000,000 miles from Mars, so that, traveling three miles in a second, we should require at least twenty-three days to reach the immediate neighborhood of the planet.

Meanwhile we had plenty of occupation to make the time pass quickly. Our prisoner was transported along with us, and we now began our attempts to ascertain what his language was, and, if possible, to master it ourselves.

Before quitting the asteroid we had found that it was necessary for him to swallow one of his "air pills," as Professor Moissan had called them, at least three times in the course of every twenty-four hours. One of us supplied him regularly and I thought that I could detect evidences of a certain degree of gratitude in his expression. This was encouraging, because it gave additional promise of the possibility of our being able to communicate with him in some more effective way than by mere signs. But once inside the car, where we had a supply of air kept at the ordinary pressure experienced on the earth, he could breathe like the rest of us.

The best linguists in the expedition, as Mr. Edison had suggested, were now assembled in the flagship, where the prisoner was, and they set to

work to devise some means of ascertaining the manner in which he was accustomed to express his thoughts. We had not heard him speak, because until we carried him into our car there was no atmosphere capable of conveying any sounds he might attempt to utter.

It seemed a fair assumption that the language of the Martians would be scientific in its structure. We had so much evidence of the practical bent of their minds, and of the immense progress which they had made in the direction of the scientific conquest of nature, that it was not to be supposed their medium of communication with one another would be lacking in clearness, or would possess any of the puzzling and unnecessary ambiguities that characterized the languages spoken on the earth.

"We shall not find them making he's and she's of stones, sticks and other inanimate objects," said one of the American linguists. "They must certainly have gotten rid of all that nonsense long ago."

"Ah," said a French Professor from the Sorbonne, one of the makers of the never-to-be-finished dictionary. "It will be like the language of my country. Transparent, similar to the diamond, and sparkling as is the fountain."

"I think," said a German enthusiast, "that it will be a universal language, the Volapuk of Mars, spoken by all the inhabitants of that planet."

"But all these speculations," broke in Mr. Edison, "do not help you much. Why not begin in a practical manner by finding out what the Martian calls himself, for instance."

This seemed a good suggestion, and accordingly several of the bystanders began an expressive pantomime, intended to indicate to the giant, who was following all their motions with his eyes, that they wished to know by what name he called himself. Pointing their fingers to their own breast they repeated, one after the other, the word "man."

If our prisoner had been a stupid savage, of course any such attempt as this to make him understand would have been idle. But it must be remembered that we were dealing with a personage who had presumably inherited from hundreds of generations the results of a civilization, and an intellectual advance, measured by the constant progress of millions of years.

Accordingly we were not very much astonished, when, after a few repetitions of the experiment, the Martian--one of whose arms had been partially released from its bonds in order to give him a little freedom of motion--imitated the action of his interrogators by pressing his finger over his heart.

Then, opening his mouth, he gave utterance to a sound which shook the air of the car like the hoarse roar of a lion. He seemed himself

surprised by the noise he made, for he had not been used to speak in so dense an atmosphere.

Our ears were deafened and confused, and we recoiled in astonishment, not to say, half in terror.

With an ugly grin distorting his face as if he enjoyed our discomfiture, the Martian repeated the motion and the sound.

"R-r-r-r-r-r-h!"

It was not articulate to our ears and not to be represented by any combination of letters.

"Faith," exclaimed a Dublin University professor, "if that's what they call themselves, how shall we ever translate their names when we come to write the history of the conquest?"

"Whist, mon," replied a professor from the University of Aberdeen, "let us whip the gillravaging villains first, and then we can describe them by any intitulation that may suit our deesposition."

The beginning of our linguistic conquest was certainly not promising, at least if measured by our acquirement of words, but from another point of view it was very gratifying, inasmuch as it was plain that the Martian understood what we were trying to do, and was, for the present, at

least, disposed to aid us.

These efforts to learn the language of Mars were renewed and repeated every few hours, all the experience, learning and genius of the squadron being concentrated upon the work, and the result was that in the course of a few days we had actually succeeded in learning a dozen or more of the Martian's words and were able to make him understand us when we pronounced them, as well as to understand him when our ears had become accustomed to the growling of his voice.

Finally, one day the prisoner, who seemed to be in an unusually cheerful frame of mind, indicated that he carried in his breast some object which he wished us to see.

With our assistance he pulled out a book!

Actually, it was a book, not very unlike the books which we have upon the earth, but printed, of course, in characters that were entirely strange and unknown to us. Yet these characters evidently gave expression to a highly intellectual language. All those who were standing by at the moment uttered a shout of wonder and of delight, and the cry of "a book! a book!" ran around the circle, and the good news was even promptly communicated to some of the neighboring electric ships of the squadron. Several other learned men were summoned in haste from them to examine our new treasure.

The Martian, whose good nature had manifestly been growing day after day, watched our inspection of his book with evidences of great interest, not unmingled with amusement. Finally he beckoned the holder of the book to his side, and placing his broad finger upon one of the huge letters--if letters they were, for they more nearly resembled the characters employed by the Chinese printer--he uttered a sound which we, of course, took to be a word, but which was different from any we had yet heard. Then he pointed to one after another of us standing around.

"Ah," explained everybody, the truth being apparent, "that is the word by which the Martians designate us. They have a name, then, for the inhabitants of the earth."

"Or, perhaps, it is rather the name for the earth itself," said one.

But this could not, of course, be at once determined. Anyhow, the word, whatever its precise meaning might be, had now been added to our vocabulary, although as yet our organs of speech proved unable to reproduce it in a recognizable form.

This promising and unexpected discovery of the Martian's book lent added enthusiasm to those who were engaged in the work of trying to master the language of our prisoner, and the progress that they made in the course of the next few days was truly astonishing. If the prisoner had been unwilling to aid them, of course, it would have been impossible to proceed, but, fortunately for us, he seemed more and more to enter into

the spirit of the undertaking, and actually to enjoy it himself. So bright and quick was his understanding that he was even able to indicate to us methods of mastering his language that would otherwise, probably, never have occurred to our minds.

In fact, in a very short time he had turned teacher and all these learned men, pressing around him with eager attention, had become his pupils.

I cannot undertake to say precisely how much of the Martian language had been acquired by the chief linguists of the expedition before the time when we arrived so near to Mars that it became necessary for most of us to abandon our studies in order to make ready for the more serious business which now confronted us.

But, at any rate, the acquisition was so considerable as to allow of the interchange of ordinary ideas with our prisoner, and there was no longer any doubt that he would be able to give us much information when we landed on his native planet.

At the end of twenty-three days as measured by terrestrial time, since our departure from the asteroid, we arrived in the sky of Mars.

For a long time the ruddy planet had been growing larger and more formidable, gradually turning from a huge star into a great red moon, and then expanding more and more until it began to shut out from sight

the constellations behind it. The curious markings on its surface, which from the earth can only be dimly glimpsed with a powerful telescope, began to reveal themselves clearly to our naked eyes.

I have related how even before we had reached the asteroid, Mars began to present a most imposing appearance as we saw it with our telescopes. Now, however, that it was close at hand, the naked eye view of the planet was more wonderful than anything we had been able to see with telescopes when at a greater distance.

We were approaching the southern hemisphere of Mars in about latitude 45 degrees south. It was near the time of the vernal equinox in that hemisphere of the planet, and under the stimulating influence of the spring sun, rising higher and higher every day, some such awakening of life and activity upon its surface as occurs on the earth under similar circumstances was evidently going on.

Around the South Pole were spread immense fields of snow and ice, gleaming with great brilliance. Cutting deep into the borders of these ice-fields, we could see broad channels of open water, indicating the rapid breaking of the grip of the frost.

Almost directly beneath us was a broad oval region, light red in color, to which terrestrial astronomers had given the name of Hellas. Toward the south, between Hellas and the borders of the polar ice, was a great belt of darkness that astronomers had always been inclined to regard as

a sea. Looking toward the north, we could perceive the immense red expanses of the continent of Mars, with the long curved line of the Syrtis Major, or "The Hour-glass Sea," sweeping through the midst of them toward the north until it disappeared under the horizon.

Crossing and recrossing the red continent, in every direction, were the canals of Schiaparelli.

Plentifully sprinkled over the surface we could see brilliant points, some of dazzling brightness, outshining the daylight. There was also an astonishing variety in the colors of the broad expanses beneath us. Activity, vivacity and beauty, such as we were utterly unprepared to behold, expressed their presence on all sides.

The excitement on the flagship and among the other members of the squadron was immense. It was certainly a thrilling scene. Here, right under our feet, lay the world we had come to do battle with. Its appearances, while recalling in some of their broader aspects those which it had presented when viewed from our observatories, were far more strange, complex and wonderful than any astronomer had ever dreamed. Suppose all of our anticipations about Mars should prove to have been wrong, after all?

There could be no longer any question that it was a world which, if not absolutely teeming with inhabitants, like a gigantic ant-hill, at any rate bore on every side the marks of their presence and of their

incredible undertakings and achievements.

Here and there clouds of smoke arose and spread slowly through the atmosphere beneath us. Floating higher above the surface of the planet were clouds of vapor, assuming the familiar forms of stratus and cumulus with which we were acquainted upon the earth.

These clouds, however, seemed upon the whole to be much less dense than those to which we were accustomed at home. They had, too, a peculiar iridescent beauty as if there was something in their composition or their texture which split up the chromatic elements of the sunlight and thus produced internal rainbow effects that caused some of the heavier cloud masses to resemble immense collections of opals, alive with the play of ever-changing colors and magically suspended above the planet.

As we continued to study the phenomena that was gradually unfolded beneath us we thought we could detect in many places evidences of the existence of strong fortifications. The planet of war appeared to be prepared for the attacks of enemies. Since, as our own experience had shown, it sometimes waged war with distant planets, it was but natural that it should be found prepared to resist foes who might be disposed to revenge themselves for injuries suffered at its hands.

As had been expected, our prisoner now proved to be of very great assistance to us. Apparently he took a certain pride in exhibiting to strangers from a distant world the beauties and wonders of his own

planet.

We could not understand by any means all that he said, but we could readily comprehend, from his gestures, and from the manner in which his features lighted up at the recognition of familiar scenes and objects, what his sentiments in regard to them were, and, in a general way, what part they played in the life of the planet.

He confirmed our opinion that certain of the works which we saw beneath us were fortifications, intended for the protection of the planet against invaders from outer space. A cunning and almost diabolical look came into his eyes as he pointed to one of these strongholds.

His confidence and his mocking looks were not reassuring to us. He knew what his planet was capable of, and we did not. He had seen, on the asteroid, the extent of our power, and while its display served to intimidate him there, yet now that he and we together were facing the world of his birth, his fear had evidently fallen from him, and he had the manner of one who feels that the shield of an all-powerful protector had been extended over him.

But it could not be long now before we could ascertain, by the irrevocable test of actual experience, whether the Martians possessed the power to annihilate us or not.

How shall I describe our feelings as we gazed at the scene spread

beneath us? They were not quite the same as those of the discoverer of new lands upon the earth. This was a whole new world that we had discovered, and it was filled, as we could see, with inhabitants.

But that was not all. We had not come with peaceful intentions.

We were to make war on this new world.

Deducting our losses we had not more than 940 men left. With these we were to undertake the conquest of a world containing we could not say how many millions!

Our enemies, instead of being below us in the scale of intelligence were, we had every reason to believe, greatly our superiors. They had proved that they possessed a command over the powers of nature such as we, up to the time when Mr. Edison made his inventions, had not even dreamed that it was possible for us to obtain.

It was true that at present we appeared to have the advantage, both in our electrical ships and in our means of offense. The disintegrator was at least as powerful an engine of destruction as any that the Martians had yet shown that they possessed. It did not seem that in that respect they could possibly excel us.

During the brief war with the Martians upon the earth it had been gunpowder against a mysterious force as much stronger than gunpowder as

the latter was superior to the bows and arrows that preceded it.

There had been no comparison whatever between the offensive means employed by the two parties in the struggle on the earth.

But the genius of one man had suddenly put us on the level of our enemies in regard to fighting capacity.

Then, too, our electrical ships were far more effective for their purpose than the projectile cars used by the Martians. In fact, the principle upon which they were based was, at bottom, so simple that it seemed astonishing the Martians had not hit upon it.

Mr. Edison himself was never tired of saying in reference to this matter:

"I cannot understand why the Martians did not invent these things. They have given ample proof that they understand electricity better than we do. Why should they have resorted to the comparatively awkward and bungling means of getting from one planet to another that they have employed when they might have ridden through the solar system in such conveyances as ours with perfect ease?"

"And besides," Mr. Edison would add, "I cannot understand why they did not employ the principle of harmonic vibrations in the construction of their engines of war. The lightning-like strokes which they dealt from

their machines are no doubt equally powerful, but I think the range of destruction covered by the disintegrators is greater."

However, these questions must remain open until we could effect a landing on Mars, and learn something of the condition of things there.

The thing that gave us the most uneasiness was the fact that we did not yet know what powers the Martians might have in reserve. It was but natural to suppose that here, on their own ground, they would possess means of defense even more effective than the offensive engines they had employed in attacking enemies so many millions of miles from home.

It was important that we should waste no time, and it was equally important that we should select the most vulnerable point for attack. It was self-evident, therefore, that our first duty would be to reconnoiter the surface of the planet and determine its weakest point of defense.

At first Mr. Edison contemplated sending the various ships in different directions around the planet in order that the work of exploration might be quickly accomplished. But upon second thought it seemed wiser to keep the squadron together, thus diminishing the chance of disaster.

Besides, the commander wished to see with his own eyes the exact situation of the various parts of the planet, where it might appear advisable for us to begin our assault.

Thus far we had remained suspended at so great a height above the planet that we had hardly entered into the perceptible limits of its atmosphere and there was no evidence that we had been seen by the inhabitants of Mars; but before starting on our voyage of exploration it was determined to drop down closer to the surface in order that we might the more certainly identify the localities over which we passed.

This maneuver nearly got us into serious trouble.

When we had arrived within a distance of three miles from the surface of Mars we suddenly perceived approaching from the eastward a large airship which was navigating the Martian atmosphere at a height of perhaps half a mile above the ground.

This airship moved rapidly on to a point nearly beneath us, when it suddenly paused, reversed its course, and evidently made signals, the purpose of which was not at first evident to us.

But in a short time their meaning became perfectly plain, when we found ourselves surrounded by at least twenty similar aerostats approaching swiftly from different sides.

It was a great mystery to us where so many airships had been concealed previous to their sudden appearance in answer to the signals.

But the mystery was quickly solved when we saw detaching itself from the

surface of the planet beneath us, where, while it remained immovable, its color had blended with that of the soil so as to render it invisible, another of the mysterious ships.

Then our startled eyes beheld on all sides these formidable-looking enemies rising from the ground beneath us like so many gigantic insects, disturbed by a sudden alarm.

In a short time the atmosphere a mile or two below us, and to a distance of perhaps twenty miles around in every direction, was alive with airships of various sizes, and some of most extraordinary forms, exchanging signals, rushing to and fro, but all finally concentrating beneath the place where our squadron was suspended.

We had poked the hornet's nest with a vengeance!

As yet there had been no sting, but we might quickly expect to feel it if we did not get out of range.

Quickly instructions were flashed to the squadrons to rise as rapidly as possible to a great height.

It was evident that this maneuver would save us from danger if it were quickly effected, because the airships of the Martians were simply airships and nothing more. They could only float in the atmosphere, and had no means of rising above it, or of navigating empty space.

To have turned our disintegrators upon them, and to have begun a battle then and there, would have been folly.

They overwhelmingly outnumbered us, the majority of them were yet at a considerable distance and we could not have done battle, even with our entire squadron acting together, with more than one-quarter of them simultaneously. In the meantime the others would have surrounded and might have destroyed us. We must first get some idea of the planet's means of defence before we ventured to assail it.

Having risen rapidly to a height of twenty-five or thirty miles, so that we could feel confident that our ships had vanished at least from the naked eye view of our enemies beneath, a brief consultation was held.

It was determined to adhere to our original program and to circumnavigate Mars in every direction before proceeding to open the war.

The overwhelming forces shown by the enemy had intimidated even some of the most courageous of our men, but still it was universally felt that it would not do to retreat without a blow struck.

The more we saw of the power of the Martians, the more we became convinced that there would be no hope for the earth, if these enemies ever again effected a landing upon its surface, the more especially

since our squadron contained nearly all of the earth's force that would be effective in such a contest.

With Mr. Edison and the other men of science away, they would not be able at home to construct such engines as we possessed, or to manage them even if they were constructed.

Our planet had staked everything on a single throw.

These considerations again steeled our hearts, and made us bear up as bravely as possible in the face of the terrible odds that confronted us.

Turning the noses of our electrical ships toward the west, we began our circumnavigation.