

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE EARTH GIRL

It was a wild plunge. We kept off the decks while rushing through the blinding smoke, but the instant we emerged below, where we found ourselves still a mile above the ground, we were out again, ready to strike.

I have simply a confused recollection of flashing lights beneath, and a great, dark arch of clouds above, out of which our ships seemed dropping on all sides, and then the fray burst on and around us, and no man could see or notice anything except by half-comprehended glances.

Almost in an instant, it seemed, a swarm of airships surrounded us, while from what, for lack of a more descriptive name, I shall call the forts about the Lake of the Sun, leaped tongues of electric fire, before which some of our ships, were driven like bits of flaming paper in a high wind, gleaming for a moment, then curling up and gone forever!

It was an awful sight; but the battle fever was raging within us, and we, on our part, were not idle.

Every man carried a disintegrator, and these hand instruments, together with those of heavier caliber on the ship poured their resistless

vibrations in every direction through the quivering air.

The airships of the Martians were destroyed by the score, and yet they flocked upon us thicker and faster.

We dropped lower and our blows fell upon the forts, and upon the wide spread city bordering the Lake of the Sun. We almost entirely silenced the fire of one of the forts; but there were forty more in full action within reach of our eyes!

Some of the metallic buildings were partly unroofed by the disintegrators and some had their walls riddled and fell with thundering crashes, whose sound rose to our ears above the hellish din of battle. I caught glimpses of giant forms struggling in the ruins and rushing wildly through the streets, but there was no time to see anything clearly.

Our flagship seemed charmed. A crowd of airships hung upon it like a swarm of angry bees, and, at times, one could not see for the lightning strokes--yet we escaped destruction, while ourselves dealing death on every hand.

It was a glorious fight, but it was not war; no, it was not war. We really had no more chance of ultimate success amid that multitude of enemies than a prisoner running the gauntlet in a crowd of savages has of escape.

A conviction of the hopelessness of the contest finally forced itself upon our minds, and the shattered squadron, which had kept well together amid the storm of death, was signalled to retreat.

Shaking off their pursuers, as a hunted bear shakes off the dogs, sixty of the electrical ships rose up through the clouds where more than ninety had gone down!

Madly we rushed upward through the vast curtain and continued our flight to a great elevation, far beyond the reach of the awful artillery of the enemy.

Looking back it seemed the very mouth of hell from which we had escaped.

The Martians did not for an instant cease their fire, even when we were far beyond their reach. With furious persistence they blazed away through the cloud curtain, and the vivid spikes of lightning shuddered so swiftly on one another's track that they were like a flaming halo of electric lances around the frowning helmet of the War Planet.

But after a while they stopped their terrific sparring, and once more the immense globe assumed the appearance of a vast ball of black smoke still widely agitated by the recent disturbance, but exhibiting no opening through which we could discern what was going on beneath.

Evidently the Martians believed they had finished us.

At no time since the beginning of our adventure had it appeared to me quite so hopeless, reckless and mad as it seemed at present.

We had suffered fearful losses, and yet what had we accomplished? We had won two fights on the asteroid, it is true, but then we had overwhelming numbers on our side.

Now we were facing millions on their own ground, and our very first assault had resulted in a disastrous repulse, with the loss of at least thirty electric ships and 600 men!

Evidently we could not endure this sort of thing. We must find some other means of assailing Mars or else give up the attempt.

But the latter was not to be thought. It was no mere question of self-pride, however, and no consideration of the tremendous interests at stake, which would compel us to continue our apparently vain attempt.

Our provisions could last only a few days longer. The supply would not carry us one-quarter of the way back to earth, and we must therefore remain here and literally conquer or die.

In this extremity a consultation of the principal officers was called upon the deck of the flagship.

Here the suggestion was made that we should attempt to effect by strategy what we had failed to do by force.

An old army officer who had served in many wars against the cunning Indians of the West, Colonel Alonzo Jefferson Smith, was the author of this suggestion.

"Let us circumvent them," he said. "We can do it in this way. The chances are that all of the available fighting force of the planet Mars is now concentrated on this side and in the neighborhood of The Lake of the Sun.

"Possibly, by some kind of X-ray business, they can only see us dimly through the clouds, and if we get a little further away they will not be able to see us at all.

"Now, I suggest that a certain number of the electrical ships be withdrawn from the squadron to a great distance, while the remainder stay here; or, better still, approach to a point just beyond the reach of those streaks of lightning, and begin a bombardment of the clouds without paying any attention to whether the strokes reach through the clouds and do any damage or not.

"This will induce the Martians to believe that we are determined to press our attack at this point.

"In the meantime, while these ships are raising a hulabaloo on this side of the planet, and drawing their fire, as much as possible, without running into any actual danger, let the others which have been selected for the purpose, sail rapidly around to the other side of Mars and take them in the rear."

It was not perfectly clear what Colonel Smith intended to do after the landing had been effected in the rear of the Martians, but still there seemed a good deal to be said for his suggestion, and it would, at any rate, if carried out, enable us to learn something about the condition of things on the planet, and perhaps furnish us with a hint as to how we could best proceed in the further prosecution of the siege.

Accordingly it was resolved that about twenty ships should be told off for this movement, and Colonel Smith himself was placed in command.

At my desire I accompanied the new commander in his flagship.

Rising to a considerable elevation in order that there might be no risk of being seen, we began our flank movement while the remaining ships, in accordance with the understanding, dropped nearer the curtain of cloud and commenced a bombardment with the disintegrators, which caused a tremendous commotion in the clouds, opening vast gaps in them, and occasionally revealing a glimpse of the electric lights on the planet, although it was evident that the vibratory currents did not reach the

ground. The Martians immediately replied to this renewed attack, and again the cloud covered globe bristled with lightning, which flashed so fiercely out of the blackness below that the stoutest hearts among us quailed, although we were situated well beyond the danger.

But this sublime spectacle rapidly vanished from our eyes when, having attained a proper elevation, we began our course toward the opposite hemisphere of the planet.

We guided our flight by the stars, and from our knowledge of the rotation period of Mars, and the position which the principal points on its surface must occupy at certain hours, we were able to tell what part of the planet lay beneath us.

Having completed our semi-circuit we found ourselves on the night side of Mars, and determined to lose no time in executing our coup. But it was deemed best that an exploration should first be made by a single electrical ship, and Colonel Smith naturally wished to undertake the adventure with his own vessel.

We dropped rapidly through the black cloud curtain, which proved to be at least half a mile in thickness, and then suddenly emerged, as if suspended at the apex of an enormous dome, arching above the surface of the planet a mile beneath us, which sparkled on all sides with innumerable lights.

These lights were so numerous and so brilliant as to produce a faint imitation of daylight, even at our immense height above the ground, and the dome of cloud out of which we had emerged assumed a soft fawn color which produced an indescribably beautiful effect.

For a moment we recoiled from our undertaking, and arrested the motion of the electric ship.

But on closely examining the surface beneath us we found that there was a broad region, where comparatively few bright lights were to be seen. From my knowledge of the geography of Mars I knew that this was a part of the Land of Ausonia, situated a few hundred miles northeast of Hellas, where we had first seen the planet.

Evidently it was not so thickly populated as some of the other parts of Mars, and its comparative darkness was an attraction to us. We determined to approach within a few hundred feet of the ground with the electric ship, and then, in case no enemies appeared, to visit the soil itself.

"Perhaps we shall see or hear something that will be of use to us," said Colonel Smith, "and for the purposes of this first reconnaissance it is better that we should be few in number. The other ships will await our return, and at any rate we shall not be gone long."

As our car approached the ground we found ourselves near the tops of

some lofty trees.

"This will do," said Colonel Smith to the electrical steersman, "Stay right here."

He and I then lowered ourselves into the branches of the trees, each carrying a small disintegrator, and cautiously clambered down to the ground.

We believed we were the first of the descendants of Adam to set foot on the planet of Mars.

At first we suffered somewhat from the effects of the rare atmosphere. It was so lacking in density that it resembled the air on the summits of the loftiest terrestrial mountains.

Having reached the foot of the tree in safety, we lay down for a moment on the ground to recover ourselves and to become accustomed to our new surroundings.

A thrill, born half of wonder, half of incredulity, ran through me at the touch of the soil of Mars. Here was I, actually on that planet, which had seemed so far away, so inaccessible, and so full of mysteries when viewed from the earth. And yet, surrounding me, were things--gigantic, it is true--but still resembling and recalling the familiar sights of my own world.

After a little while our lungs became accustomed to the rarity of the atmosphere and we experienced a certain stimulation in breathing.

We then got upon our feet and stepped out from under the shadow of the gigantic tree. High above we could faintly see our electrical ship, gently swaying in the air close to the tree top.

There were no electric lights in our immediate neighborhood, but we noticed that the whole surface of the planet around us was gleaming with them, producing an effect like the glow of a great city seen from a distance at night. The glare was faintly reflected from the vast dome of clouds above, producing the general impression of a moonlight night upon the earth.

It was a wonderfully quiet and beautiful spot where we had come down. The air had a delicate feel and a bracing temperature, while a soft breeze soughed through the leaves of the tree above our heads.

Not far away was the bank of a canal, bordered by a magnificent avenue shaded by a double row of immense umbrageous trees.

We approached the canal, and, getting upon the road, turned to the left to make an exploration in that direction. The shadow of the trees falling upon the roadway produced a dense gloom, in the midst of which we felt that we should be safe, unless the Martians had eyes like those

of cats.

As we pushed along, our hearts, I confess, beating a little quickly, a shadow stirred in front of us.

Something darker than the night itself approached.

As it drew near it assumed the appearance of an enormous dog, as tall as an ox, which ran swiftly our way with a threatening motion of its head. But before it could even utter a snarl, the whirr of Colonel Smith's disintegrator was heard and the creature vanished in the shadow.

"Gracious, did you ever see such a beast?" said the Colonel. "Why he was as big as a grizzly."

"The people he belonged to must be near by," I said. "Very likely he was a watch on guard."

"But I see no signs of a habitation."

"True, but you observe there is a thick hedge on the side of the road opposite the canal. If we get through that perhaps we shall catch sight of something."

Cautiously we pushed our way through the hedge, which was composed of shrubs as large as small trees, and very thick at the bottom, and,

having traversed it, found ourselves in a great meadow-like expanse which might have been a lawn. At a considerable distance, in the midst of a clump of trees, a large building towered skyward, its walls of some red metal, gleaming like polished copper in the soft light that fell from the cloud dome.

There were no lights around the building itself, and we saw nothing corresponding to windows on that side which faced us, but toward the right a door was evidently open, and out of this streamed a brilliant shaft of illumination, which lay bright upon the lawn, then crossed the highway through an opening in the hedge, and gleamed on the water of the canal beyond.

Where we stood the ground had evidently been recently cleared, and there was no obstruction, but as we crept closer to the house--for our curiosity had now become irresistible--we found ourselves crawling through grass so tall that if we had stood erect it would have risen well above our heads.

"This affords good protection," said Colonel Smith, recalling his adventures on the western plains. "We can get close in to the Indians--I beg pardon, I mean the Martians--without being seen."

Heavens, what an adventure was this! To be crawling about in the night on the face of another world and venturing, perhaps, into the jaws of a danger which human experience could not measure!

But on we went, and in a little while we had emerged from the tall grass and were somewhat startled by the discovery that we had got close to the wall of the building.

Carefully we crept around to the open door.

As we neared it we suddenly stopped as if we had been stricken with instantaneous paralysis.

Out of the door floated, on the soft night air, the sweetest music to which I have ever listened.

It carried me back in an instant to my own world. It was the music of the earth. It was the melodious expression of a human soul. It thrilled us both to the heart's core.

"My God!" exclaimed Colonel Smith. "What can that be? Are we dreaming, or where in heaven's name are we?"

Still the enchanting harmony floated out upon the air.

What the instrument was I could not tell, but the sound seemed more nearly to resemble that of a violin than anything else of which I could think.

When we first heard it the strains were gentle, sweet, caressing and full of an infinite depth of feeling, but in a little while its tone changed, and it became a magnificent march, throbbing upon the air in stirring notes that set our hearts beating in unison with its stride and inspiring in us a courage that we had not felt before.

Then it drifted into a wild fantasia, still inexpressibly sweet, and from that changed again into a requiem or lament, whose mellifluous tide of harmony swept our thoughts back again to the earth.

"I can endure this no longer," I said. "I must see who it is that makes that music. It is the product of a human heart and must come from the touch of human fingers."

We carefully shifted our position until we stood in the blaze of light that poured out of the door.

The doorway was an immense arched opening, magnificently ornamented, rising to a height of, I should say, not less than twenty or twenty-five feet and broad in proportion. The door itself stood widely open and it, together with all of its fittings and surroundings, was composed of the same beautiful red metal.

Stepping out a little way into the light I could see within the door an immense apartment, glittering on all sides with metallic ornaments and gems and lighted from the center by a great chandelier of electric

candles.

In the middle of the great floor, holding the instrument delicately poised, and still awaking its ravishing voice, stood a figure, the sight of which almost stopped my breath.

It was a slender sylph of a girl!

A girl of my own race; a human being here upon the planet Mars!

Her hair was loosely coiled and she was attired in graceful white drapery.

"By God!" cried Colonel Smith, "she's human!"