

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE FLOOD GATES OF MARS

It was a curious scene when the momentous interview which was to determine our fate and that of Mars began. Aina had been warned of what was coming. We in the flagship had all learned to speak her language with more or less ease, but it was deemed best that the Heidelberg professor, assisted by one of his colleagues, should act as interpreter.

The girl, flushed with excitement of the novel situation, fully appreciating the importance of what was about to occur, and looking more charming than before, stood at one side of the principal apartment. Directly facing her were the interpreters, and the rest of us, all with ears intent and eyes focused upon Aina, stood in a double row behind them. As heretofore, I am setting down her words translated into our own tongue, having taken only so much liberty as to connect the sentences into a stricter sequence than they had when falling from her lips in reply to the questions which were showered upon her.

"You will never be victorious," she said, "if you attack them openly as you have been doing. They are too strong and too numerous. They are well prepared for such attacks, because they have had to resist them before.

"They have waged war with the inhabitants of the asteroid Ceres, whose

people are giants greater than themselves. Their enemies from Ceres have attacked them here. Hence these fortifications, with weapons pointing skyward, and the great air fleets which you have encountered."

"But there must be some point," said Mr. Edison, "where we can."

"Yes, yes," interrupted the girl quickly, "there is one blow you can deal them which they could not withstand."

"What is that?" eagerly inquired the commander.

"You can drown them out."

"How? With the canals?"

"Yes, I will explain to you. I have already told you, and, in fact, you must have seen for yourselves, that there are almost no mountains on Mars. A very learned man of my race used to say that the reason was because Mars is so very old a world that the mountains it once had have been almost completely leveled, and the entire surface of the planet had become a great plain. There are depressions, however, most of which are occupied by the seas. The greater part of the land lies below the level of the ocean. In order at the same time to irrigate the soil and make it fruitful, and to protect themselves from overflows by the ocean breaking in upon them, the Martians have constructed the immense and innumerable canals which you see running in all directions over the continents.

"There is one period in the year, and that period has now arrived when there is special danger of a great deluge. Most of the oceans of Mars lie in the southern hemisphere. When it is Summer in that hemisphere, the great masses of ice and snow collected around the south pole melt rapidly away."

"Yes, that is so," broke in one of the astronomers, who was listening attentively. "Many a time I have seen the vast snow fields around the southern pole of Mars completely disappear as the Summer sun rose high upon them."

"With the melting of these snows," continued Aina, "a rapid rise in the level of the water in the southern oceans occurs. On the side facing these oceans the continents of Mars are sufficiently elevated to prevent an overflow, but nearer the equator the level of the land sinks lower."

"With your telescopes you have no doubt noticed that there is a great bending sea connecting the oceans of the south with those of the north and running through the midst of the continents."

"Quite so," said the astronomer who had spoken before, "we call it the Syrtis Major."

"That long narrow sea," Aina went on, "forms a great channel through which the flood of waters caused by the melting of the southern polar

snows flows swiftly toward the equator and then on toward the north until it reaches the sea basins which exist there. At that point it is rapidly turned into ice and snow, because, of course, while it is Summer in the southern hemisphere it is Winter in the northern.

"The Syrtis Major (I am giving our name to the channel of communication in place of that by which the girl called it) is like a great safety valve, which, by permitting the waters to flow northward, saves the continents from inundation.

"But when mid-Summer arrives, the snows around the pole, having been completely melted away, the flood ceases and the water begins to recede. At this time, but for a device which the Martians have employed, the canals connected with the oceans would run dry, and the vegetation left without moisture under the Summer sun, would quickly perish.

"To prevent this they have built a series of enormous gates extending completely across the Syrtis Major at its narrowest point (latitude 25 degrees south). These gates are all controlled by machinery collected at a single point on the shore of the strait. As soon as the flood in the Syrtis Major begins to recede, the gates are closed, and, the water being thus restrained, the irrigating canals are kept full long enough to mature the harvests."

"The clue! The clue at last!" exclaimed Mr. Edison. "That is the place where we shall nip them. If we can close those gates now at the moment

of high tide we shall flood the country. Did you say," he continued, turning to Aina, "that the movement of the gates was all controlled from a single point?"

"Yes," said the girl. "There is a great building (power house) full of tremendous machinery which I once entered when my father was taken there by his master, and where I saw one Martian, by turning a little handle, cause the great line of gates, stretching a hundred miles across the sea, to slowly shut in, edge to edge, until the flow of the water toward the north had been stopped."

"How is the building protected?"

"So completely," said Aina, "that my only fear is that you may not be able to reach it. On account of the danger from their enemies on Ceres, the Martians have fortified it strongly on all sides, and have even surrounded it and covered it overhead with a great electrical network, to touch which would be instant death."

"Ah," said Mr. Edison, "they have got an electric shield, have they? Well, I think we shall be able to manage that."

"Anyhow," he continued, "we have got to get into that power house, and we have got to close those gates, and we must not lose much time in making up our minds how it is to be done. Evidently this is our only chance. We have not force enough to contend in open battle with the

Martians, but if we can flood them out, and thereby render the engines contained in their fortifications useless, perhaps we shall be able to deal with the airships, which will be all the means of defense that will then remain to them."

This idea commended itself to all the leaders of the expedition. It was determined to make a reconnaissance at once.

But it would not do for us to approach the planet too hastily, and we certainly could not think of landing upon it in broad daylight. Still, as long as we were yet a considerable distance from Mars, we felt that we should be safe from observation because so much time had elapsed while we were hidden behind Deimos that the Martians had undoubtedly concluded that we were no longer in existence.

So we boldly quitted the little satellite with our entire squadron and once more rapidly approached the red planet of war. This time it was to be a death grapple and our chances of victory still seemed good.

As soon as we arrived so near the planet that there was danger of our being actually seen, we took pains to keep continually in the shadow of Mars, and the more surely to conceal our presence all lights upon the ships were extinguished. The precaution of the commander even went so far as to have the smooth metallic sides of the cars blackened over so that they should not reflect light, and thus become visible to the Martians as shining specks, moving suspiciously among the stars.

The precise location of the great power house on the shores of the Syrtis Major having been carefully ascertained, the squadron dropped down one night into the upper limits of the Martian atmosphere, directly over the gulf.

Then a consultation was called on the flagship and a plan of campaign was quickly devised.

It was deemed wise that the attempt should be made with a single electric ship, but that the others should be kept hovering near, ready to respond on the instant to any signal for aid which might come from below. It was thought that, notwithstanding the wonderful defences, which, according to Aina's account surrounded the building, a small party would have a better chance of success than a large one.

Mr. Edison was certain that the electrical network which was described as covering the power house would not prove a serious obstruction to us, because by carefully sweeping the space where we intended to pass with the disintegrators before quitting the ship, the netting could be sufficiently cleared away to give us uninterrupted passage.

At first the intention was to have twenty men, each armed with two disintegrators (that being the largest number one person could carry to advantage) descend from the electrical ship and make the venture. But, after further discussion, this number was reduced; first to a dozen, and

finally, to only four. These four consisted of Mr. Edison, Colonel Smith, Mr. Sydney Phillips and myself.

Both by her own request and because we could not help feeling that her knowledge of the locality would be indispensable to us, Aina was also included in our party, but not, of course, as a fighting member of it.

It was about an hour after midnight when the ship in which we were to make the venture parted from the remainder of the squadron and dropped cautiously down. The blaze of electric lights running away in various directions indicated the lines of innumerable canals with habitations crowded along their banks, which came to a focus at a point on the continent of Aeria, westward from the Syrtis Major.

We stopped the electrical ship at an elevation of perhaps three hundred feet above the vast roof of a structure which Aina assured us was the building of which we were in search.

Here we remained for a few minutes, cautiously reconnoitering. On that side of the power house which was opposite to the shore of the Syrtis Major there was a thick grove of trees, lighted beneath, as was apparent from the illumination which here and there streamed up through the cover of leaves, but, nevertheless, dark and gloomy above the tree tops.

"The electric network extends over the grove as well as over the building," said Aina.

This was lucky for us, because we wished to descend among the trees, and, by destroying part of the network over the tree tops, we could reach the shelter we desired and at the same time pass within the line of electric defenses.

With increased caution, and almost holding our breath lest we should make some noise that might reach the ears of the sentinels below, we caused the car to settle gently down until we caught sight of a metallic net stretched in the air between us and the trees.

After our first encounter with the Martians on the asteroid, where, as I have related, some metal which was included in their dress resisted the action of the disintegrators, Mr. Edison had readjusted the range of vibrations covered by the instruments, and since then we had found nothing that did not yield to them. Consequently, we had no fear that the metal of the network would not be destroyed.

There was danger, however, of arousing attention by shattering holes through the tree tops. This could be avoided by first carefully ascertaining how far away the network was and then with the adjustable mirrors attached to the disintegrators focusing the vibratory discharge at that distance.

So successful were we that we opened a considerable gap in the network without doing any perceptible damage to the trees beneath.

The ship was cautiously lowered through the opening and brought to rest among the upper branches of one of the tallest trees. Colonel Smith, Mr. Phillips, Mr. Edison and myself at once clambered out upon a strong limb.

For a moment I feared our arrival had been betrayed on account of the altogether too noisy contest that arose between Colonel Smith and Mr. Phillips as to which of them should assist Aina. To settle the dispute I took charge of her myself.

At length we were all safely in the tree.

Then followed the still more dangerous undertaking of descending from this great height to the ground. Fortunately, the branches were very close together and they extended down within a short distance of the soil. So the actual difficulties of the descent were not very great after all. The one thing that we had particularly to bear in mind was the absolute necessity of making no noise.

At length the descent was successfully accomplished, and we all five stood together in the shadow at the foot of the great tree. The grove was so thick around that while there was an abundance of electric lights among the trees, their illumination did not fall upon us where we stood.

Peering cautiously through the vistas in various directions, we

ascertained our location with respect to the wall of the building. Like all the structures which we had seen on Mars, it was composed of polished red metal.

"Where is the entrance?" inquired Mr. Edison, in a whisper.

"Come softly this way, and look out for the sentinel," replied Aina.

Gripping our disintegrators firmly, and screwing up our courage, with noiseless steps we followed the girl among the shadows of the trees.

We had one-very great advantage. The Martians had evidently placed so much confidence in the electric network which surrounded the power house that they never dreamed of enemies being able to penetrate it--at least, without giving warning of their coming.

But the hole which we had blown in this network with the disintegrators had been made noiselessly, and Mr. Edison believed, since no enemies had appeared, that our operations had not been betrayed by any automatic signal to watchers inside the building.

Consequently, we had every reason to think that we now stood within the line of defense, in which they reposed the greatest confidence, without their having the least suspicion of our presence.

Aina assured us that on the occasion of her former visit to the power

house there had been but two sentinels on guard at the entrance. At the inner end of a long passage leading to the interior, she said, there were two more. Besides these there were three or four Martian engineers watching the machinery in the interior of the building. A number of airships were supposed to be on guard around the structure, but possibly their vigilance had been relaxed, because not long ago the Martians had sent an expedition against Ceres which had been so successful that the power of that planet to make any attack upon Mars had, for the present been destroyed.

Supposing us to have been annihilated in the recent battle among the clouds, they would have no fear or cause for vigilance on our account.

The entrance to the great structure was low--at least, when measured by the stature of the Martians. Evidently the intention was that only one person at a time should find room to pass through it.

Drawing cautiously near, we discerned the outlines of two gigantic forms, standing in the darkness, one on either side of the door. Colonel Smith whispered to me:

"If you will take the fellow on the right, I will attend to the other one."

Adjusting our aim as carefully as was possible in the gloom, Colonel Smith and I simultaneously discharged our disintegrators, sweeping them

rapidly up and down in the manner which had become familiar to us when endeavoring to destroy one of the gigantic Martians with a single stroke. And so successful were we that the two sentinels disappeared as if they were ghosts of the night.

Instantly we all hurried forward and entered the door. Before us extended a long, straight passage, brightly illuminated by a number of electric candles. Its polished sides gleamed with blood-red reflections, and the gallery terminated, at a distance of two or three hundred feet, with an opening into a large chamber beyond, on the further side of which we could see part of a gigantic and complicated mass of machinery.

Making as little noise as possible, we pushed ahead along the passage, but when we had arrived within the distance of a dozen paces from the inner end, we stopped, and Colonel Smith, getting down upon his knees, crept forward, until he had reached the inner end of the passage. There he peered cautiously around the edge into the chamber, and, turning his head a moment later, beckoned us to come forward. We crept to his side, and, looking out into the vast apartment, could perceive no enemies.

What had become of the sentinels supposed to stand at the inner end the passage we could not imagine. At any rate, they were not at their posts.

The chamber was an immense square room at least a hundred feet in height and 400 feet on a side, and almost filling the wall opposite to us was an intricate display of machinery, wheels, levers, rods and polished

plates. This we had no doubt was one end of the engine which opened and shut the great gates that could dam an ocean.

"There is no one in sight," said Colonel Smith.

"Then we must act quickly," said Mr. Edison.

"Where," he said, turning to Aina, "is the handle by turning which you saw the Martian close the gates?"

Aina looked about in bewilderment. The mechanism before us was so complicated that even an expert mechanic would have been excusable for finding himself unable to understand it. There were scores of knobs and handles, all glistening in the electric light, any one of which, so far as the uninstructed could tell, might have been the master key that controlled the whole complex apparatus.

"Quick," said Mr. Edison, "where is it?"

The girl in her confusion ran this way and that, gazing hopelessly upon the machinery, but evidently utterly unable to help us.

To remain here inactive was not merely to invite destruction for ourselves, but was sure to bring certain failure upon the purpose of the expedition. All of us began instantly to look about in search of the proper handle, seizing every crank and wheel in sight and striving to

turn it.

"Stop that!" shouted Mr. Edison, "you may set the whole thing wrong. Don't touch anything until we have found the right lever."

But to find that seemed to most of us now utterly beyond the power of man.

It was at this critical moment that the wonderful depth and reach of Mr. Edison's mechanical genius displayed itself. He stepped back, ran his eyes quickly over the whole immense mass of wheels, handles, bolts, bars and levers, paused for an instant, as if making up his mind, then said decidedly, "There it is," and stepping quickly forward, selected a small wheel amid a dozen others, all furnished at the circumference with handles like those of a pilot's wheel, and giving it a quick wrench, turned it half-way around.

At this instant, a startling shout fell upon our ears. There was a thunderous clatter behind us, and, turning, we saw three gigantic Martians rushing forward.