

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

VENGEANCE IS OURS

"Sweep them! sweep them!" shouted Colonel Smith, as he brought his disintegrator to bear. Mr. Phillips and I instantly followed his example, and thus we swept the Martians into eternity, while Mr. Edison coolly continued his manipulations of the wheel.

The effect of what he was doing became apparent in less than half a minute. A shiver ran through the mass of machinery and shook the entire building.

"Look! Look!" cried Sydney Phillips, who had stepped a little apart from the others.

We all ran to his side and found ourselves in front of a great window which opened through the side of the engine, giving a view of what lay in front of it. There, gleaming in the electric lights, we saw Syrtis Major, its waters washing high against the walls of the vast power house. Running directly out from the shore, there was an immense metallic gate at least 400 yards in length and rising three hundred feet above the present level of the water.

This great gate was slowly swinging upon an invisible hinge in such a

manner that in a few minutes it would evidently stand across the current of the Syrtis Major at right angles.

Beyond was a second gate, which was moving in the same manner. Further on was a third gate, and then another, and another, as far as the eye could reach, evidently extending in an unbroken series completely across the great strait.

As the gates, with accelerated motion when the current caught them, clanged together, we beheld a spectacle that almost stopped the beating of our hearts.

The great Syrtis seemed to gather itself for a moment, and then it leaped upon the obstruction and buried its waters into one vast foaming geyser that seemed to shoot a thousand feet skyward.

But the metal gates withstood the shock, though buried from our sight in the seething white mass, and the baffled waters instantly swirled around in ten thousand gigantic eddies, rising to the level of our window and beginning to inundate the power house before we fairly comprehended our peril.

"We have done the work," said Mr. Edison, smiling grimly. "Now we had better get out of this before the flood bursts upon us."

The warning came none too soon. It was necessary to act upon it at once

if we would save our lives. Even before we could reach the entrance to the long passage through which we had come into the great engine room, the water had risen half-way to our knees. Colonel Smith, catching Aina under his arm, led the way. The roar of the maddened torrent behind deafened us.

As we ran through the passage the water followed us, with a wicked swishing sound, and within five seconds it was above our knees; in ten seconds up to our waists.

The great danger now was that we should be swept from our feet, and once down in that torrent there would have been little chance of our ever getting our heads above its level. Supporting ourselves as best we could with the aid of the walls, we partly ran, and were partly swept along, until when we reached the outer end of the passage and emerged into the open air, the flood was swirling about our shoulders.

Here there was an opportunity to clutch some of the ornamental work surrounding the doorway, and thus we managed to stay our mad progress, and gradually to work out of the current until we found that the water, having now an abundance of room to spread, had fallen again as low as our knees.

But suddenly we heard the thunder of the banks tumbling behind us, and to the right and left, and the savage growl of the released water as it sprang through the breaches.

To my dying day, I think, I shall not forget the sight of a great fluid column that burst through the dike at the edge of the grove of trees, and, by the tremendous impetus of its rush, seemed turned into a solid thing.

Like an enormous ram, it plowed the soil to a depth of twenty feet, uprooting acres of the immense trees like stubble turned over by the plowshare.

The uproar was so awful that for an instant the coolest of us lost our self-control. Yet we knew that we had not the fraction of a second to waste. The breaking of the banks had caused the water again rapidly to rise about us. In a little while it was once more as high as our waists.

In the excitement and confusion, deafened by the noise and blinded by the flying foam, we were in danger of becoming separated in the flood. We no longer knew certainly in what direction was the tree by whose aid we had ascended from the electrical ship. We pushed first one way and then another, staggering through the rushing waters in search of it. Finally we succeeded in locating it, and with all our strength hurried toward it.

Then there came a noise as if the globe of Mars had been split asunder, and another great head of water hurled itself down upon the soil before us, and, without taking time to spread, bored a vast cavity in the

ground, and scooped out the whole of the grove before our eyes as easily as a gardener lifts a sod with his spade.

Our last hope was gone. For a moment the level of the water around us sank again, as it poured into the immense excavation where the grove had stood, but in an instant it was reinforced from all sides and began once more rapidly to rise.

We gave ourselves up for lost, and, indeed, there did not seem any possible hope of salvation.

Even in the extremity I saw Colonel Smith lifting the form of Aina, who had fainted, above the surface of the surging water, while Sydney Phillips stood by his side and aided him in supporting the unconscious girl.

"We stayed a little too long," was the only sound I heard from Mr. Edison.

The huge bulk of the power house partially protected us against the force of the current, and the water spun us around in great eddies. These swept us this way and that, but yet we managed to cling together, determined not to be separated in death if we could avoid it.

Suddenly a cry rang out directly above our heads:

"Jump for your lives, and be quick!"

At the same instant the ends of several ropes splashed into the water.

We glanced upward, and there, within three or four yards of our heads, hung the electrical ship, which we had left moored at the top of the tree.

Tom, the expert electrician from Mr. Edison's shop, who had remained in charge of the ship, had never once dreamed of such a thing as deserting us. The moment he saw the water bursting over the dam, and evidently flooding the building which we had entered, he cast off his moorings, as we subsequently learned, and hovered over the entrance to the power house, getting as low down as possible and keeping a sharp watch for us.

But most of the electric lights in the vicinity had been carried down by the first rush of water, and in the darkness he did not see us when we emerged from the entrance. It was only after the sweeping away of the grove of trees had allowed a flood of light to stream upon the scene from a cluster of electric lamps on a distant portion of the bank on the Syrtis that had not yet given way that he caught sight of us.

Immediately he began to shout to attract our attention, but in the awful uproar we could not hear him. Getting together all the ropes that he could lay his hands on, he steered the ship to a point directly over us, and then dropped down within a few yards of the boiling flood.

Now as he hung over our heads, and saw the water up to our very necks and still swiftly rising, he shouted again:

"Catch hold, for God's sake!"

The three men who were with him in the ship seconded his cries.

But by the time we had fairly grasped the ropes, so rapidly was the flood rising, we were already afloat. With the assistance of Tom and his men we were rapidly drawn up, and immediately Tom reversed the electric polarity, and the ship began to rise.

At that same instant, with a crash that shivered the air, the immense metallic power house gave way and was swept tumbling, like a hill torn loose from its base, over the very spot where a moment before we had stood. One second's hesitation on the part of Tom, and the electrical ship would have been battered into a shapeless wad of metal by the careening mass.

When we had attained a considerable height, so that we could see a great distance on either side, the spectacle became even more fearful than it was when we were close to the surface.

On all sides banks and dykes were going down; trees were being uprooted; buildings were tumbling, and the ocean was achieving that victory over

the land which had long been its due, but which the ingenuity of the inhabitants of Mars had postponed for ages.

Far away we could see the front of the advancing wave crested with foam that sparkled in the electric lights, and as it swept on it changed the entire aspect of the planet--in front of it all life, behind it all death.

Eastward our view extended across the Syrtis Major toward the land of Libya and the region of Isidis. On that side also the dykes were giving way under the tremendous pressure, and the floods were rushing toward the sunrise, which had just begun to streak the eastern sky.

The continents that were being overwhelmed on the western side of the Syrtis were Meroc, Aeria, Arabia, Edom and Eden.

The water beneath us continually deepened. The current from the melting snows around the southern pole was at its strongest, and one could hardly have believed that any obstruction put in its path would have been able to arrest it and turn it into these two all-swallowing deluges, sweeping east and west. But, as we now perceived, the level of the land over a large part of its surface was hundreds of feet below the ocean, so that the latter, when once the barriers were broken, rushed into depressions that yawned to receive it.

The point where we had dealt our blow was far removed from the great

capitol of Mars, around the Lake of the Sun, and we knew that we should have to wait for the floods to reach that point before the desired effect could be produced. By the nearest way, the water had at least 5,000 miles to travel. We estimated that its speed where we hung above it was as much as a hundred miles an hour. Even if that speed were maintained, more than two days and nights would be required for the floods to reach the Lake of the Sun.

But as the water rushed on it would break the banks of all the canals intersecting the country, and these, being also elevated above the surface, would add the impetus of their escaping waters to hasten the advance of the flood. We calculated, therefore, that about two days would suffice to place the planet at our mercy.

Half way from the Syrtis Major to the Lake of the Sun another great connecting link between the Southern and Northern ocean basins, called on our maps of Mars the Indus, existed, and through this channel we knew that another great current must be setting from the south toward the north. The flood that we had started would reach and break the banks of the Indus within one day.

The flood traveling in the other direction, toward the east, would have considerably further to go before reaching the neighborhood of the Lake of the Sun. It, too, would involve hundreds of great canals as it advanced and would come plunging upon the Lake of the Sun and its surrounding forts and cities, probably about half a day later than the

arrival of the deluge that traveled toward the west.

Now that we had let the awful destroyer loose we almost shrank from the thought of the consequences which we had produced. How many millions would perish as the result of our deed we could not even guess. Many of the victims, so far as we knew, might be entirely innocent of enmity toward us, or of the evil which had been done to our native planet. But this was a case in which the good--if they existed--must suffer with the bad on account of the wicked deeds of the latter.

I have already remarked that the continents of Mars were higher on their northern and southern borders where they faced the great oceans. These natural barriers bore to the main mass of land somewhat the relation of the edge of a shallow dish to its bottom. Their rise on the land side was too gradual to give them the appearance of hills, but on the side toward the sea they broke down in steep banks and cliffs several hundred feet in height. We guessed that it would be in the direction of these elevations that the inhabitants would flee, and those who had timely warning might thus be able to escape in case the flood did not--as it seemed possible it might in its first mad rush--overtop the highest elevations on Mars.

As day broke and the sun slowly rose upon the dreadful scene beneath us, we began to catch sight of some of the fleeing inhabitants. We had shifted the position of the fleet toward the south, and were now suspended above the southeastern corner of Aeria. Here a high bank of

reddish rock confronted the sea, whose waters ran lashing and roaring along the bluffs to supply the rapid drought produced by the emptying of Syrtis Major. Along the shore there was a narrow line of land, hundreds of miles in length, but less than a quarter of a mile broad, which still rose slightly above the surface of the water, and this land of refuge was absolutely packed with the monstrous inhabitants of the planet who had fled hither on the first warning that the water was coming.

In some places it was so crowded that the later comers could not find standing ground on dry land, but were continually slipping back and falling into the water. It was an awful sight to look at them. It reminded me of pictures I had seen of the deluge in the days of Noah, when the waters had risen to the mountain tops, and men, women and children were fighting for a foothold upon the last dry spots the earth contained.

We were all moved by a desire to help our enemies, for we were overwhelmed with feelings of pity and remorse, but to aid them was now utterly beyond our power. The mighty floods were out, and the end was in the hands of God.

Fortunately, we had little time for these thoughts, because no sooner had the day begun to dawn around us than the airships of the Martians appeared. Evidently the people in them were dazed by the disaster and uncertain what to do. It is doubtful whether at first they comprehended the fact that we were the agents who had produced the cataclysm.

But as the morning advanced the airships came flocking in greater and greater numbers from every direction, many swooping down close to the flood in order to rescue those who were drowning. Hundreds gathered along the slip of land which was crowded as I have described, with refugees, while other hundreds rapidly assembled about us, evidently preparing for an attack.

We had learned in our previous contests with the airships of the Martians that our electrical ships had a great advantage over them, not merely in rapidity and facility of movement, but in the fact that our disintegrators could sweep in every direction, while it was only with much difficulty that the Martian airships could discharge their electrical strokes at an enemy poised directly above their heads.

Accordingly, orders were instantly flashed to all the squadrons to rise vertically to an elevation so great that the rarity of the atmosphere would prevent the airships from attaining the same level.

This maneuver was executed so quickly that the Martians were unable to deal us a blow before we were poised above them in such a position that they could not easily reach us. Still they did not mean to give up the conflict.

Presently we saw one of the largest of their ships maneuvering in a very peculiar manner, the purpose of which we did not at first comprehend.

Its forward portion commenced slowly to rise, until it pointed upward like the nose of a fish approaching the surface of the water. The moment it was in this position, an electrical bolt was darted from its prow, and one of our ships received a shock which, although it did not prove fatal to the vessel itself, killed two or three men aboard it, disarranged its apparatus, and rendered it for the time being useless.

"Ah, that's their trick, is it?" said Mr. Edison. "We must look out for that. Whenever you see one of the airships beginning to stick its nose up after that fashion blaze away at it."

An order to this effect was transmitted throughout the squadron. At the same time several of the most powerful disintegrators were directed upon the ship which had executed the stratagem and, reduced to a wreck, it dropped, whirling like a broken kite until it fell into the flood beneath.

Still the Martian ships came flocking in ever greater numbers from all directions. They made desperate attempts to attain the level at which we hung above them. This was impossible, but many, getting an impetus by a swift run in the denser portion of the atmosphere beneath, succeeded in rising so high that they could discharge their electric artillery with considerable effect. Others, with more or less success, repeated the maneuver of the ship which had first attacked us, and thus the battle gradually became more general and more fierce, until, in the course of an hour or two, our squadron found itself engaged with probably a

thousand airships, which blazed with incessant lightning strokes, and were able, all too frequently, to do us serious damage.

But on our part the battle was waged with a cool determination and a consciousness of insuperable advantage which boded ill for the enemy. Only three or four of our sixty electrical ships were seriously damaged, while the work of the disintegrators upon the crowded fleet that floated beneath us was terrible to look upon.

Our strokes fell thick and fast on all sides. It was like firing into a flock of birds that could not get away. Notwithstanding all their efforts they were practically at our mercy. Shattered into unrecognizable fragments, hundreds of the airships continually dropped from their great height to be swallowed up in the boiling waters.

Yet they were game to the last. They made every effort to get at us, and in their frenzy they seemed to discharge their bolts without much regard to whether friends or foes were injured. Our eyes were nearly blinded by the ceaseless glare beneath us, and the uproar was indescribable.

At length, after this fearful contest had lasted for at least three hours, it became evident that the strength of the enemy was rapidly weakening. Nearly the whole of their immense fleet of airships had been destroyed, or so far damaged that they were barely able to float. Just so long, however, as they showed signs of resistance we continued to pour our merciless fire upon them, and the signal to cease was not given

until the airships, which had escaped serious damage began to flee in every direction.

"Thank God, the thing is over," said Mr. Edison. "We have got the victory at last, but how we shall make use of it is something that at present I do not see."

"But will they not renew the attack?" asked someone.

"I do not think they can," was the reply. "We have destroyed the very flower of their fleet."

"And better than that," said Colonel Smith, "we have destroyed their clan; we have made them afraid. Their discipline is gone."

But this was only the beginning of our victory. The floods below were achieving a still greater triumph, and now that we had conquered the airships we dropped within a few hundred feet of the surface of the water and then turned our faces westward in order to follow the advance of the deluge and see whether, as we hoped, it would overwhelm our enemies in the very center of their power.

In a little while we had overtaken the first wave, which was still devouring everything. We saw it bursting the banks of the canal, sweeping away forests of gigantic trees, and swallowing cities and villages, leaving nothing but a broad expanse of swirling and eddying

waters, which, in consequence of the prevailing red hue of the vegetation and the soil, looked, as shuddering we gazed down upon it, like an ocean of blood flecked with foam and steaming with the escaping life of the planet from whose veins it gushed.

As we skirted the southern borders of the continent the same dreadful scenes which we had beheld on the coast of Aeria presented themselves. Crowds of refugees thronged the high borders of the land and struggled with one another for a foothold against the continually rising flood.

We saw, too, flitting in every direction, but rapidly fleeing before our approach, many airships, evidently crowded with Martians, but not armed either for offense or defense. These, of course, we did not disturb, for merciless as our proceedings seemed even to ourselves, we had no intention of making war upon the innocent, or upon those who had no means to resist. What we had done it had seemed to us necessary to do, but henceforth we were resolved to take no more lives if it could be avoided.

Thus, during the remainder of that day, all of the following night and all of the next day, we continued upon the heels of the advancing flood.