

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### THE WOMAN FROM CERES

The second night we could perceive ahead of us the electric lights covering the land of Thaumasia, in the midst of which lay the Lake of the Sun. The flood would be upon it by daybreak, and, assuming that the demoralization produced by the news of the coming of the waters, which we were aware had hours before been flashed to the capitol of Mars, would prevent the Martians from effectively manning their forts, we thought it safe to hasten on with the flagship, and one or two others, in advance of the waters, and to hover over the Lake of the Sun, in the darkness, in order that we might watch the deluge perform its awful work in the morning.

Thaumasia, as we have before remarked, was a broad, oval-shaped land, about 1,800 miles across, having the Lake of the Sun exactly in its center. From this lake, which was four or five hundred miles in diameter, and circular in outline, many canals radiated, as straight as the spokes of a wheel, in every direction, and connected it with the surrounding seas.

Like all the other Martian continents, Thaumasia lay below the level of the sea, except toward the south, where it fronted the ocean.

Completely surrounding the lake was a great ring of cities constituting the capitol of Mars. Here the genius of the Martians had displayed itself to the full. The surrounding country was irrigated until it fairly bloomed with gigantic vegetation and flowers; the canals were carefully regulated with locks so that the supply of water was under complete control; the display of magnificent metallic buildings of all kinds and sizes produced a most dazzling effect, and the protection against enemies afforded by the innumerable fortifications surrounding the ringed city, and guarding the neighboring lands, seemed complete.

Suspended at a height of perhaps two miles from the surface, near the southern edge of the lake, we waited for the oncoming flood. With the dawn of day we began to perceive more clearly the effects which the news of the drowning of the planet had produced. It was evident that many of the inhabitants of the cities had already fled. Airships on which the fugitives hung as thick as swarms of bees were seen, elevated but a short distance above the ground, and making their way rapidly toward the south.

The Martians knew that their only hope of escape lay in reaching the high southern border of the land before the floods were upon them. But they must have known also that that narrow beach would not suffice to contain one in ten of those who sought refuge there. The density of the population around the Lake of the Sun seemed to us incredible. Again our hearts sank within us at the sight of the fearful destruction of life for which we were responsible. Yet we comforted ourselves with the

reflection that it was unavoidable. As Colonel Smith put it:

"You couldn't trust these coyotes. The only thing to do was to drown them out. I am sorry for them, but I guess there will be as many left as will be good for us, anyhow."

We had not long to wait for the flood. As the dawn began to streak the east, we saw its awful crest moving out of the darkness, bursting across the canals and plowing its way into the direction of the crowded shores of the Lake of the Sun. The supply of water behind that great wave seemed inexhaustible. Five thousand miles it had traveled, and yet its power was as great as when it started from the Syrtis Major.

We caught sight of the oncoming water before it was visible to the Martians beneath us. But while it was yet many miles away, the roar of it reached them, and then arose a chorus of terrified cries, the effect of which, coming to our ears out of the half gloom of the morning, was most uncanny and horrible. Thousands upon thousands of the Martians still remained here to become victims of the deluge. Some, perhaps, had doubted the truth of the reports that the banks were down and the floods were out; others, for one reason or another had been unable to get away; others, like the inhabitants of Pompeii, had lingered too long, or had returned after beginning their flight to secure abandoned treasures, and now it was too late to get away.

With a roar that shook the planet the white wall rushed upon the great

city beneath our feet, and in an instant it had been engulfed. On went the flood, swallowing up the Lake of the Sun itself, and in a little while, as far as our eyes could range, the land of Thaumasia had been turned into a raging sea.

We now turned our ships toward the southern border of the land, following the direction of the airships carrying the fugitives, a few of which were still navigating the atmosphere a mile beneath us. In their excitement and terror the Martians paid little attention to us, although, as the morning brightened, they must have been aware of our presence over their heads. But, apparently, they no longer thought of resistance; their only object was escape from the immediate and appalling danger.

When we had progressed to a point about half way from the Lake of the Sun to the border of the sea, having dropped down within a few hundred feet of the surface, there suddenly appeared, in the midst of the raging waters, a sight so remarkable that at first I rubbed my eyes in astonishment, not crediting their report of what they beheld.

Standing on the apex of a sandy elevation, which still rose a few feet above the gathering flood, was a figure of a woman, as perfect in form and in classic beauty of feature as the Venus of Milo--a magnified human being not less than forty feet in height!

But for her swaying and the wild motions of her arms, we should have

mistaken her for a marble statue.

Aina, who happened to be looking, instantly exclaimed:

"It is the woman from Ceres. She was taken prisoner by the Martians during their last invasion of that world, and since then has been a slave in the palace of the emperor."

Apparently her great stature had enabled her to escape, while her masters had been drowned. She had fled like the others, toward the south, but being finally surrounded by the rising waters, had taken refuge on the hillock of sand, where we saw her. This was fast giving way under the assault of the waves, and even while we watched the water rose to her knees.

"Drop lower," was the order of the electrical steersman of the flagship, and as quickly as possible we approached the place where the towering figure stood.

She had realized the hopelessness of her situation, and quickly ceased those appalling and despairing gestures, which had at first served to convince us that it was indeed a living being on whom we were looking.

There she stood, with a light, white garment thrown about her, erect, half-defiant, half yielding to her fear, more graceful than any Greek statue, her arms outstretched, yet motionless, and her eyes upcast, as

if praying to her God to protect her. Her hair, which shone like gold in the increasing light of day, streamed over her shoulders, and her great eyes were astare between terror and supplication. So wildly beautiful a sight not one of us had ever beheld.

For a moment sympathy was absorbed in admiration. Then:

"Save her! Save her!" was the cry that arose throughout the ship.

Ropes were instantly thrown out, and one or two men prepared to let themselves down in order better to aid her.

But when we were almost within reach, and so close that we could see the very expression of her eyes, which appeared to take no note of us, but to be fixed, with a far away look upon something beyond human ken, suddenly the undermined bank on which she stood gave way, the blood red flood swirled in from right to left, and then:

"The waters closed above her face  
With many a ring."

"If but for that woman's sake, I am sorry we drowned the planet," exclaimed Sydney Phillips. But a moment afterward I saw that he regretted what he had said, for Aina's eyes were fixed upon him. Perhaps, however, she did not understand his remark, and perhaps if she did it gave her no offence.

After this episode we pursued our way rapidly until we arrived at the shore of the Southern Ocean. There, as we had expected, was to be seen a narrow strip of land with the ocean on one side and the raging flood seeking to destroy it on the other. In some places it had already broken through, so that the ocean was flowing in to assist in the drowning of Thaumasia.

But some parts of the coast were evidently so elevated that no matter how high the flood might rise it would not completely cover them. Here the fugitives had gathered in dense throngs and above them hovered most of the airships, loaded down with others who were unable to find room upon the dry land.

On one of the loftiest and broadest of these elevations we noticed indications of military order in the alignment of the crowds and the shore all around was guarded by gigantic pickets, who mercilessly shoved back into the flood all the later comers, and thus prevented too great crowding upon the land. In the center of this elevation rose a palatial structure of red metal which Aina informed us was one of the residences of the Emperor, and we concluded that the monarch himself was now present there.

The absence of any signs of resistance on the part of the airships, and the complete drowning of all of the formidable fortifications on the surface of the planet, convinced us that all we had to do in order to

complete our conquest was to get possession of the person of the chief ruler.

The fleet was, accordingly, concentrated, and we rapidly approached the great Martian palace. As we came down within a hundred feet of them and boldly made our way among their airships, which retreated at our approach, the Martians gazed at us with mingled fear and astonishment.

We were their conquerors and they knew it. We were coming to demand their surrender, and they evidently understood that also. As we approached the palace signals were made from it with brilliant colored banners which Aina informed us were intended as a token of truce.

"We shall have to go down and have a confab with them, I suppose," said Mr. Edison. "We can't kill them off now that they are helpless, but we must manage somehow to make them understand that unconditional surrender is their only chance."

"Let us take Aina with us," I suggested, "and since she can speak the language of the Martians we shall probably have no difficulty in arriving at an understanding."

Accordingly the flagship was carefully brought further down in front of the entrance to the palace, which had been kept clear by the Martian guards, and while the remainder of the squadron assembled within a few feet directly over our heads with the disintegrators turned upon the



palace and the crowd below, Mr. Edison and myself, accompanied by Aina, stepped out upon the ground.

There was a forward movement in the immense crowd, but the guards sternly kept everybody back. A party of a dozen giants, preceded by one who seemed to be their commander, gorgeously attired in jewelled garments, advanced from the entrance of the palace to meet us. Aina addressed a few words to the leader, who replied sternly, and then, beckoning us to follow, retraced his steps into the palace.

Notwithstanding our confidence that all resistance had ceased, we did not deem it wise actually to venture into the lion's den without having taken every precaution against a surprise. Accordingly, before following the Martian into the palace, we had twenty of the electrical ships moored around it in such a position that they commanded not only the entrance but all of the principal windows, and then a party of forty picked men, each doubly armed with powerful disintegrators, were selected to attend us into the building. This party was placed under the command of Colonel Smith, and Sydney Phillips insisted on being a member of it.

In the meantime the Martian with his attendants who had first invited us to enter, finding that we did not follow him, had returned to the front of the palace. He saw the disposition that we had made of our forces, and instantly comprehended its significance, for his manner changed somewhat, and he seemed more desirous than before to conciliate us.

When he again beckoned us to enter, we unhesitatingly followed him, and passing through the magnificent entrance, found ourselves in a vast ante-chamber, adorned after the manner of the Martians in the most expensive manner. Thence we passed into a great circular apartment, with a dome painted in imitation of the sky, and so lofty that to our eyes it seemed like the firmament itself. Here we found ourselves approaching an elevated throne situated in the center of the apartment, while long rows of brilliantly armored guards flanked us on either side, and grouped around the throne, some standing and others reclining upon the flights of steps which appeared to be of solid gold, was an array of Martian women, beautifully and becomingly attired, all of whom greatly astonished us by the singular charm of their faces and bearing, so different from the aspect of most of the Martians whom we had encountered.

Despite their stature--for these women averaged twelve or thirteen feet in height--the beauty of their complexions--of a dark olive tint--was no less brilliant than that of the women of Italy or Spain.

At the top of the steps on a magnificent golden throne, sat the Emperor himself. There are some busts of Caracalla which I have seen that are almost as ugly as the face of the Martian ruler. He was of gigantic stature, larger than the majority of his subjects, and as near as I could judge must have been between fifteen and sixteen feet in height.

As I looked at him I understood a remark which had been made by Aina to the effect that the Martians were not all alike, and that the peculiarities of their minds were imprinted on their faces and expressed in their forms in a very wonderful, and sometimes terrible manner.

I had also learned from her that Mars was under a military government, and that the military class had absolute control of the planet. I was somewhat startled, then, in looking at the head and center of the great military system of Mars, to find in his appearance a striking conformation of the speculations of our terrestrial phrenologists. His broad, mis-shapen head bulged in those parts where they had placed the so-called organs of combativeness, destructiveness, etc.

Plainly, this was an effect of his training and education. His very brain had become a military engine; and the aspect of his face, the pitiless lines of his mouth and chin, the evil glare of his eyes, the attitude and carriage of his muscular body, all tended to complete the warlike ensemble.

He was magnificently dressed in some vesture that had the luster of a polished plate of gold, and the suppleness of velvet. As we approached he fixed his immense, deep-set eyes sternly upon our faces.

The contrast between his truly terrible countenance and the Eve-like features of the women which surrounded his throne was as great as if Satan after his fall had here re-enthroned himself in the midst of

angels.

Mr. Edison, Colonel Smith, Sydney Phillips, Aina and myself advanced at the head of the procession, our guard following in close order behind us. It had been evident from the moment that we entered the palace that Aina was regarded with aversion by all of the Martians. Even the women about the throne gazed scowlingly at her as we drew near. Apparently, the bitterness of feeling which had led to the massacre of all of her race had not yet vanished. And, indeed, since the fact that she remained alive could have been known only to the Martian who had abducted her and to his immediate companions, her reappearance with us must have been a great surprise to all those who now looked upon her.

It was clear to me that the feeling aroused by her appearance was every moment becoming more intense. Still, the thought of a violent outbreak did not occur to me, because our recent triumph had seemed so complete that I believed the Martians would be awed by our presence, and would not undertake actually to injure the girl.

I think we all had the same impression, but as the event proved, we were mistaken.

Suddenly one of the gigantic guards, as if actuated by a fit of ungovernable hatred, lifted his foot and kicked Aina. With a loud shriek she fell to the floor.

The blow was so unexpected that for a second we all stood riveted to the spot. Then I saw Colonel Smith's face turn livid, and at the same instant heard the whirr of his disintegrator, while Sydney Phillips, forgetting the deadly instrument he carried in his hand, sprung madly toward the brute who had kicked Aina, as if he intended to throttle him, colossus that he was.

But Colonel Smith's aim, though instantaneously taken, as he had been accustomed to shoot on the plains, was true, and Phillips, plunging madly forward, seemed wreathed in a faint blue mist--all that the disintegrator had left of the gigantic Martian.

Who could adequately describe the scene that followed?

I remember that the Martian emperor sprang to his feet, looking tenfold more terrible than before. I remember that there instantly burst from the line of guards on either side crinkling beams of death-fire that seemed to sear the eyeballs. I saw a half a dozen of our men fall in heaps of ashes, and even at that terrible moment I had time to wonder that a single one of us remained alive.

Rather by instinct than in consequence of any order given, we formed ourselves in a hollow square, with Aina lying apparently lifeless in the center, and then with gritted teeth we did our work.

The lines of guards melted before the disintegrators like rows of snow

men before a licking flame.

The discharge of the lightning engines in the hands of the Martians in that confined space made an uproar so tremendous that it seemed to pass the bounds of human sense.

More of our men fell before their awful fire, and for the second time since our arrival on this deadful planet of war our annihilation seemed inevitable.

But in a moment the whole scene changed. Suddenly there was a discharge into the room which I knew came from one of the disintegrators of the electrical ships. It swept through the crowded throng like a destroying blast. Instantly from another side, swished a second discharge, no less destructive, and this was quickly followed by a third.

Our ships were firing through the windows.

Almost at the same moment I saw the flagship, which had been moored in the air close to the entrance and floating only three or four feet above the ground, pushing its way through the gigantic doorway from the ante-room, with its great disintegrators pointed upon the crowd like the muzzles of a cruiser's guns.

And now the Martians saw that the contest was hopeless for them, and their mad struggle to get out of the range of the disintegrators and to

escape from the death chamber was more appalling to look upon than anything that had yet occurred.

It was a panic of giants. They trod one another under foot; they yelled and screamed in their terror; they tore each other with their claw-like fingers. They no longer thought of resistance. The battle spirit had been blown out of them by a breath of terror that shivered their marrow.

Still the pitiless disintegrators played upon them until Mr. Edison, making himself heard, now that the thunder of their engines had ceased to reverberate through the chamber, commanded that our fire should cease.

In the meantime the armed Martians outside the palace, hearing the uproar within, seeing our men pouring their fire through the windows, and supposing that we were guilty at once of treachery and assassination, had attempted an attack upon the electrical ships stationed round the building. But fortunately they had none of their larger engines at hand, and with their hand arms alone they had not been able to stand up against the disintegrators. They were blown away before the withering fire of the ships by the hundreds until, fleeing from destruction, they rushed madly, driving their unarmed companions before them into the seething waters of the flood close at hand.