Chapter 13

Mr. Cavor Makes Some Suggestions

For a time neither of us spoke. To focus together all the things we had brought upon ourselves seemed beyond my mental powers.

"They've got us," I said at last.

"It was that fungus."

"Well--if I hadn't taken it we should have fainted and starved."

"We might have found the sphere."

I lost my temper at his persistence, and swore to myself. For a time we hated one another in silence. I drummed with my fingers on the floor between my knees, and gritted the links of my fetters together. Presently I was forced to talk again.

"What do you make of it, anyhow?" I asked humbly.

"They are reasonable creatures--they can make things and do things.

Those lights we saw..."

He stopped. It was clear he could make nothing of it.

When he spoke again it was to confess, "After all, they are more human than we had a right to expect. I suppose--"

He stopped irritatingly.

"Yes?"

"I suppose, anyhow--on any planet where there is an intelligent animal--it will carry its brain case upward, and have hands, and walk erect."

Presently he broke away in another direction.

"We are some way in," he said. "I mean--perhaps a couple of thousand feet or more."

"Why?"

"It's cooler. And our voices are so much louder. That faded quality--it has altogether gone. And the feeling in one's ears and throat."

I had not noted that, but I did now.

"The air is denser. We must be some depths--a mile even, we may be--inside the moon."

"We never thought of a world inside the moon."

"No."

"How could we?"

"We might have done. Only one gets into habits of mind."

He thought for a time.

"Now," he said, "it seems such an obvious thing."

"Of course! The moon must be enormously cavernous, with an atmosphere within, and at the centre of its caverns a sea.

"One knew that the moon had a lower specific gravity than the earth, one knew that it had little air or water outside, one knew, too, that it was sister planet to the earth, and that it was unaccountable that it should be different in composition. The inference that it was hollowed out was as clear as day. And yet one never saw it as a fact. Kepler, of course--"

His voice had the interest now of a man who has discerned a pretty sequence of reasoning.

"Yes," he said, "Kepler with his sub-volvani was right after all."

"I wish you had taken the trouble to find that out before we came," I said.

He answered nothing, buzzing to himself softly, as he pursued his thoughts. My temper was going.

"What do you think has become of the sphere, anyhow?" I asked.

"Lost," he said, like a man who answers an uninteresting question.

"Among those plants?"

"Unless they find it."

"And then?"

"How can I tell?"

"Cavor," I said, with a sort of hysterical bitterness, "things look bright for my Company..."

He made no answer.

"Good Lord!" I exclaimed. "Just think of all the trouble we took to get into this pickle! What did we come for? What are we after? What was the moon to us or we to the moon? We wanted too much, we tried too much. We ought to have started the little things first. It was you proposed the moon! Those Cavorite spring blinds! I am certain we could have worked them for terrestrial purposes. Certain! Did you really understand what I proposed? A steel cylinder--"

"Rubbish!" said Cavor.

We ceased to converse.

For a time Cavor kept up a broken monologue without much help from me.

"If they find it," he began, "if they find it ... what will they do with it? Well, that's a question. It may be that's the question. They won't understand it, anyhow. If they understood that sort of thing they would have come long since to the earth. Would they? Why shouldn't they? But they would have sent something--they couldn't keep their hands off such a possibility. No! But they will examine it. Clearly they are intelligent and inquisitive. They will examine it--get inside it--trifle with the studs. Off! ... That would mean the moon for us for all the rest of our lives. Strange creatures, strange knowledge...."

"As for strange knowledge--" said I, and language failed me.

"Look here, Bedford," said Cavor, "you came on this expedition of your own free will."

"You said to me, 'Call it prospecting'."

"There's always risks in prospecting."

"Especially when you do it unarmed and without thinking out every possibility."

"I was so taken up with the sphere. The thing rushed on us, and carried us away."

"Rushed on me, you mean."

"Rushed on me just as much. How was I to know when I set to work on molecular physics that the business would bring me here--of all places?"

"It's this accursed science," I cried. "It's the very Devil. The medieval priests and persecutors were right and the Moderns are all wrong. You tamper with it--and it offers you gifts. And directly you take them it knocks you to pieces in some unexpected way. Old passions and new weapons--now it upsets your religion, now it upsets your social ideas, now it whirls you off to desolation and misery!"

"Anyhow, it's no use your quarrelling with me now. These creatures--these

Selenites, or whatever we choose to call them--have got us tied hand and foot. Whatever temper you choose to go through with it in, you will have to go through with it.... We have experiences before us that will need all our coolness."

He paused as if he required my assent. But I sat sulking. "Confound your science!" I said.

"The problem is communication. Gestures, I fear, will be different. Pointing, for example. No creatures but men and monkeys point."

That was too obviously wrong for me. "Pretty nearly every animal," I cried, "points with its eyes or nose."

Cavor meditated over that. "Yes," he said at last, "and we don't. There's such differences--such differences!"

"One might.... But how can I tell? There is speech. The sounds they make, a sort of fluting and piping. I don't see how we are to imitate that. Is it their speech, that sort of thing? They may have different senses, different means of communication. Of course they are minds and we are minds; there must be something in common. Who knows how far we may not get to an understanding?"

"The things are outside us," I said. "They're more different from us than the strangest animals on earth. They are a different clay. What is the

good of talking like this?"

Cavor thought. "I don't see that. Where there are minds they will have something similar--even though they have been evolved on different planets. Of course if it was a question of instincts, if we or they are no more than animals--"

"Well, are they? They're much more like ants on their hind legs than human beings, and who ever got to any sort of understanding with ants?"

"But these machines and clothing! No, I don't hold with you, Bedford. The difference is wide--"

"It's insurmountable."

"The resemblance must bridge it. I remember reading once a paper by the late Professor Galton on the possibility of communication between the planets. Unhappily, at that time it did not seem probable that that would be of any material benefit to me, and I fear I did not give it the attention I should have done--in view of this state of affairs. Yet.... Now, let me see!

"His idea was to begin with those broad truths that must underlie all conceivable mental existences and establish a basis on those. The great principles of geometry, to begin with. He proposed to take some leading proposition of Euclid's, and show by construction that its truth was known

to us, to demonstrate, for example, that the angles at the base of an isosceles triangle are equal, and that if the equal sides be produced the angles on the other side of the base are equal also, or that the square on the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle is equal to the sum of the squares on the two other sides. By demonstrating our knowledge of these things we should demonstrate our possession of a reasonable intelligence.... Now, suppose I ... I might draw the geometrical figure with a wet finger, or even trace it in the air...."

He fell silent. I sat meditating his words. For a time his wild hope of communication, of interpretation, with these weird beings held me. Then that angry despair that was a part of my exhaustion and physical misery resumed its sway. I perceived with a sudden novel vividness the extraordinary folly of everything I had ever done. "Ass!" I said; "oh, ass, unutterable ass.... I seem to exist only to go about doing preposterous things. Why did we ever leave the thing? ... Hopping about looking for patents and concessions in the craters of the moon!... If only we had had the sense to fasten a handkerchief to a stick to show where we had left the sphere!"

I subsided, fuming.

"It is clear," meditated Cavor, "they are intelligent. One can hypothecate certain things. As they have not killed us at once, they must have ideas of mercy. Mercy! at any rate of restraint. Possibly of intercourse. They may meet us. And this apartment and the glimpses we had

of its guardian. These fetters! A high degree of intelligence..."

"I wish to heaven," cried I, "I'd thought even twice! Plunge after plunge. First one fluky start and then another. It was my confidence in you! Why didn't I stick to my play? That was what I was equal to. That was my world and the life I was made for. I could have finished that play. I'm certain ... it was a good play. I had the scenario as good as done. Then.... Conceive it! leaping to the moon! Practically--I've thrown my life away! That old woman in the inn near Canterbury had better sense."

I looked up, and stopped in mid-sentence. The darkness had given place to that bluish light again. The door was opening, and several noiseless Selenites were coming into the chamber. I became quite still, staring at their grotesque faces.

Then suddenly my sense of disagreeable strangeness changed to interest. I perceived that the foremost and second carried bowls. One elemental need at least our minds could understand in common. They were bowls of some metal that, like our fetters, looked dark in that bluish light; and each contained a number of whitish fragments. All the cloudy pain and misery that oppressed me rushed together and took the shape of hunger. I eyed these bowls wolfishly, and, though it returned to me in dreams, at that time it seemed a small matter that at the end of the arms that lowered one towards me were not hands, but a sort of flap and thumb, like the end of an elephant's trunk. The stuff in the bowl was loose in texture, and whitish brown in colour--rather like lumps of some cold souffle, and it

smelt faintly like mushrooms. From a partially divided carcass of a mooncalf that we presently saw, I am inclined to believe it must have been mooncalf flesh.

My hands were so tightly chained that I could barely contrive to reach the bowl; but when they saw the effort I made, two of them dexterously released one of the turns about my wrist. Their tentacle hands were soft and cold to my skin. I immediately seized a mouthful of the food. It had the same laxness in texture that all organic structures seem to have upon the moon; it tasted rather like a gauffre or a damp meringue, but in no way was it disagreeable. I took two other mouthfuls. "I wanted--foo'!" said I, tearing off a still larger piece....

For a time we ate with an utter absence of self-consciousness. We ate and presently drank like tramps in a soup kitchen. Never before nor since have I been hungry to the ravenous pitch, and save that I have had this very experience I could never have believed that, a quarter of a million of miles out of our proper world, in utter perplexity of soul, surrounded, watched, touched by beings more grotesque and inhuman than the worst creations of a nightmare, it would be possible for me to eat in utter forgetfulness of all these things. They stood about us watching us, and ever and again making a slight elusive twittering that stood, I suppose, in the stead of speech. I did not even shiver at their touch. And when the first zeal of my feeding was over, I could note that Cavor, too, had been eating with the same shameless abandon.