

A TRIP TO MARS

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A TRIP TO MARS ***

Produced by Al Haines.

[image]

They returned his greeting as heartily as it was given.—Front.
PAGE 91.

A TRIP TO MARS

By
FENTON ASH
Author of "The Radium Seekers"

WITH SIX COLOURED ILLUSTRATIONS

by
W. H. C. Groome

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PREFACE.

In the case of my former book—my first written for young readers—I inserted a preface stating at some length my reasons for taking up the writing of stories of the kind. In it I pointed out that I had endeavoured to combine amusement with a little wholesome instruction; and that what might at first sight appear to be mere irresponsible flights of fanciful imagination had, in reality, in all cases some quasi-scientific foundation.

Doubtless such a preface is unusual in a work of fiction, and even more so in one intended chiefly for boys; but the result proved that its intention was understood and appreciated. I should show myself ungrateful indeed if I omitted,

at the first opportunity, to record my deep sense of the kindly sympathy and approval with which that preface and the whole book were received by those reviewers—and they were many—who favoured my work with a notice.

In this, my second attempt in the same direction, I am conscious that I have set myself a difficult task, for it is not an easy matter to give verisimilitude to a story of a visit to another planet about which we necessarily know so little. Yet astronomy as a study is so fascinating, its mysteries and possibilities are so wonderful, so boundless, its influences so elevating and ennobling, that little apology is needed for any effort to attract the attention of youthful readers to it by making it the subject of a romance.

Amongst other difficulties the story-writer here meets with, by no means the least confronts him when he is called upon to decide which of various theories put forward by different scientists he shall adopt as a starting-point. Mars, for instance, may have an atmosphere which is like ours, or one that is either thinner or denser, or it may have no atmosphere at all. As to this nothing is known with certainty, and the most learned authorities differ one from another. In these circumstances, I have adopted the supposition which seems best suited to my story—namely, that the air there may be denser than it is on the surface of our globe; but I do not wish to be understood as asserting it as a fact. The same remark applies to the assumption that diamonds or other precious stones do not exist naturally in Mars. In regard to these two points, I have felt it may be allowable, as children say, to 'make believe' a little in forming a groundwork upon which to build up a story. As to the rest, I have refrained, in deference to the known prejudices of young people, from interjecting constant scientific explanations in the course of the narrative. Only sufficient has been introduced here and there to justify the hope that none will sit down to its perusal without getting up a little the wiser.

We are all of us, as Sir Isaac Newton so aptly yet reverently expressed it, 'only as children picking up pebbles on the seashore while the great ocean of knowledge lies stretched out before us.'

I shall be well satisfied if, in addition to affording pleasure to youthful readers, I enable them to pick up incidentally even so much as a few grains of the sand which lies beside the pebbles upon that wondrous, glorious shore.

THE AUTHOR.

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[Transcriber's note: In the source book (a reprint), the illustrations were printed in black and white, not in colour as indicated on the title page.]

They returned his greeting as heartily as it was given . . . *Frontispiece.*

He fell backwards upon the floor

There was a flash of light, and a sharp, crackling sound

The wing drooped, and the flier fell heavily to the ground (missing from source book)

They were then blindfolded, and the march resumed

The assailant was lifted high in the air and flung down with terrible force

A TRIP TO MARS.

CHAPTER I.

THE FALL OF THE GREAT METEORITE.

'What a magnificent night! What a scene! Jack, old man, I think you will have to go in to supper without me and leave me to myself. It seems a sort of sacrilege to go indoors—to exchange the moon's beautiful light for the miserable glimmer of a little oil-lamp, and this invigorating air off the sea for the smell of paraffin oil. Ugh!'

'You're a queer chap, Gerald; as dreamy, at times, as any girl, I declare! You amuse me vastly when you take on these sudden sentimental fits. When you are in this mood no stranger would ever imagine you were the same go-ahead, muscular young Christian you can prove yourself to be at other times.'

'Yes, I suppose I'm a bit of a dreamer, Jack. I've been told it so many times that I fancy there must be something in it. Yet "While you sleep, then am I awake"—you know the quotation.'

'Faith! I believe you there, Gerald. I believe you were cut out for a night-bird!'

'No, no; now you 've got hold of the wrong end of the stick. It isn't that I prefer the night to the day; it is simply that by day one cannot see the stars, and one loses touch with the marvellous thoughts they inspire. Look at the sky overhead now! Look at those little shining points of light, and think how that they are all worlds such as ours is, or was, or will be! Imagine what it would be like if we could sail up amongst them from this old earth of ours—if we could roam at will through space, stopping here and calling there upon those which are inhabited—as I feel assured some must be. What sights we should see! What wonders we should encounter! Ah, think of it!'

'I'd rather think just now of having a bit of supper,' remarked the practical-minded Jack, with a yawn. 'And I'm going in to get it too; so, are you coming with me, or are you not?'

This talk took place upon a headland of a lonely island in the Southern Seas. A tropical moon cast its wondrous radiance over everything around, shimmering upon the water, and causing the whole island to appear as though floating in an ocean of molten silver. There was just wind enough now and then to start the graceful palms waving—cool, refreshing zephyrs that set millions of sparkling ripples in motion on the sea, and sent them dancing merrily shorewards to plash at last upon the golden sands at the foot of the cliff.

Gerald Wilton and Jack Lawford were two youths, orphans both, who, after having been brought up and educated in England, found themselves, through a curious series of chances, passing their time upon this island under the guardianship of a former friend of Gerald's father, named Armeath. The latter was a scientist who had chosen to make this out-of-the-way spot—absolutely uninhabited save for himself and his establishment—his home for a year or two, in order the better to pursue certain abstruse studies to which he was ardently devoted.

They were stalwart, well-grown, clean-limbed British youths, these two, with good-looking faces and well-knit frames, fond of hunting, shooting, fishing, and all outdoor sports. At first, therefore, it is needless to say, they had enjoyed the change to this far-off island home, and entered with zest into its free, open life. If limited as to space, there were larger islands near, amongst which they could take an occasional cruise, and where they could go ashore for hunting expeditions.

But after nearly a year, even this pleasant life had begun to grow a little monotonous. The two high-spirited youngsters were getting somewhat tired of it, and beginning to long—almost unconsciously—for other and more exciting adventures.

Of the two, however, Gerald perhaps was more troubled by these vague, restless feelings than his chum. As his friend had said, Gerald was given at times to fits of dreaming. In appearance he was fairer and a little taller than his com-

panion, with gray eyes which often had in them an abstracted, far-away look. Jack, on the other hand, was almost swarthy of skin, with dark hair, firm lips, and keen, alert eyes, which indicated an active, determined character, and a practical, matter-of-fact temperament.

That, in effect, constituted the essential difference between these two firm friends. Gerald was fond of indulging in speculations concerning all kinds of scientific research. The mysteries of the unknown, and the as yet 'undiscovered;' the limitless possibilities lying in the worlds surrounding our globe—speculations concerning such themes as these had for him an irresistible fascination. Jack, on the other hand, kept his thoughts and interest fixed upon the practical side of everything about him. He was a skilful mechanic and a trained mathematician, and had developed clever engineering abilities; he might possibly some day become an inventor. But speculative, dreamy fancies had little attraction for him.

'Jack,' said Gerald impressively, 'I can't come in just now—I really cannot! I can't exactly say why, but to-night I seem to be unusually restless. I could not sit down indoors, nor could I rest if I went to bed. I don't know what it is; but I have a feeling'—

'It's the electricity in the air. I suppose there must be more lying about loose to-night than suits your constitution,' remarked Jack prosaically. 'I said a minute or two since that you were as dreamy at times as any girl. I begin now to think you are developing "nerves" as well. However, do as you please! Stop here and enjoy yourself with your "nervy," dreamy fancies if you choose. For my part, I'm going in to supper, and'—

'What are you lads talking about?'

This question, which came from some one behind them, caused the two friends to start suddenly, and then glance at one another with wondering looks.

It was not that they had not recognised the voice. They knew it at once to be that of Mr Armeath, their guardian; the wonder was that he should have come out to them. Usually he spent the whole night shut up in his own rooms, immersed in his studies, or gazing through his telescope at the heavens above; for, amongst other things, he was an enthusiastic astronomer.

'Faith!' exclaimed Jack, in an aside to Gerald, 'I begin to think you're right after all. There must be something unusual in the air to account for this new move!'

The new-comer was a tall, fine-looking old man, with an ascetic face and a kindly voice and manner. His hair and beard were white, but his deep-set eyes glowed with the liveliness and fire of a vigorous young man.

With the self-absorbed, thoughtful air that so often marks the devoted scientist or profound student, Armeath, without waiting for any reply to the question he had asked, stepped past the two youngsters and walked almost to the edge

of the bluff. There he gazed first at the sandy shore fifty feet or more below, then out over the glistening sea to the distant horizon, and finally at the deep-blue, star-spangled sky overhead.

Behind the three, at a distance of a few hundred yards, was the building—or rather group of buildings—which formed their home. These were built bungalow-fashion, save as to one part—the observatory—which rose above the rest, with detached dwelling-places for their attendants close by.

Inland, the ground fell away, and there was on one side a winding road down to the shore. On the other side, the ground rose again towards higher ridges in the centre of the island.

The old man remained for some minutes gazing fixedly upwards; the two young fellows, very much surprised, and—if the truth be told—a little awed by his demeanour, remained also motionless, gazing alternately at him and at each other.

Suddenly the sage uttered a sort of cry—an exclamation so strange, so thrilling, that his companions were startled, and stared anxiously about, seeking for an explanation.

Then they saw him raise an arm and point to the sky, and, following the direction thus indicated, they both started and stood and gazed fixedly as though spell-bound.

'Look!' exclaimed Jack. 'It is a meteor!'

And that was all that was said—all, indeed, there was time for. There was no time for questions, for comments, for anything, in fact, save a great gasp of astonishment, and scarcely even for that.

Careering towards them through the upper air, at what seemed lightning speed, was something which left a long, luminous trail behind it. Rays and flashes of light of different colours burst from it in its course, darting out in all directions. A low, rushing sound became audible, which quickly increased in volume until it became a terrific, deafening, overwhelming roar.

There was a sudden disturbance in the air, as of the approach of a whirlwind, and a crackling noise as of the discharge of fireworks.

Then something seemed to shoot past them into the sea, the 'wind' from it almost brushing them aside like that caused by a shell fired from some colossal cannon.

From the sea came a mighty crash as of a loud explosion, while columns of water and clouds of vapour rose into the air. The water came right over the top of the cliff, drenching the amazed spectators, and almost sweeping one—it was Jack—off his feet.

Hardly had the spray cleared away when there was another commotion in the water. The sea, boiling and chafing, seemed to rise up into a pyramid, and

from it a huge dark mass shot up into the air, dropping back into the sea again with a plunge only a little less violent than that which had accompanied its first fall.

For a brief space it was lost to view, and then it reappeared, shooting again high into the air, as might a gigantic whale throwing itself out of the sea in sport or an endeavour to escape some terrible marine foe.

These mad leaps and plunges were repeated again and again, becoming each time less in height and violence, until at last they ceased.

It was some time, however, before the agitation in the water came to an end. Great waves rushed booming along the shore, dashing wildly up the face of the cliffs, sending clouds of spray flying over their summits far inland.

But after a while the commotion subsided, the sea became smooth on the surface, and there remained only a gentle heaving, as from a ground swell.

And there, at a little distance from the shore, the cause of all this disturbance was plainly to be seen—an immense, egg-shaped mass many hundreds of feet in length, floating as lightly and buoyantly upon the still-heaving water as if it had been an immense football.

CHAPTER II.

WHAT GERALD SAW.

Seldom, perhaps, have there been seen three people more puzzled and amazed than the little group who had witnessed the tremendous advent of the wondrous 'meteorite'—for such it appeared to be—and now stood gazing at it in helpless astonishment as it floated quietly in the sea only a short distance from the shore.

It was some time before either Jack or Gerald spoke, and when they at last found speech, they had little to say beyond vague, incoherent exclamations.

Presently an impulse came upon them to run down the path which led to the shore, thinking that they might get a better view from there of this extraordinary new arrival from the realms above. Perhaps a closer look might yield some clue as to the nature of the strange visitor.

But a nearer view did not help them much. All that they could see, when they arrived on the sandy margin, was what they had already seen from above—and that was a huge mass composed of some material not heavy enough to sink, and—as a natural consequence—light enough to float.

What could it be? It was, presumably, a meteorite—so Armeath pronounced—but of what kind? Who had ever heard of a meteorite of such a size, and above all, of a material light enough to float in water?

'Don't you wish you had gone in to your supper, Jack?' Gerald asked mischievously. 'Had you done so you would not have witnessed this wonder.'

'It's all very well to pretend to joke about it,' returned Jack, affecting to grumble; 'but it's rather serious, you know. The giddy thing might have hit one of us a nasty crack on the head, or something worse. This all comes of your busying yourself about what doesn't concern you, Gerald. You've bothered about the stars above us so long that, as you can't get up to them, one of 'em's come down to pay a visit to you.'

'Well, it's likely to prove a grand find, anyhow. It must be made of some substance unknown to science, and its discovery may bring us all name and fame; so its arrival is bound to be a gain to us.'

'It's been nearer bringing us pain than gain, I guess,' was Jack's retort. 'But what on earth are we going to do with the thing? How can we hope to get a great, round affair like that ashore?'

'Well, Tom, you seem to be pondering something very weighty in your mind. Have you thought of a likely plan for getting this pretty plaything ashore in the morning?'

Gerald addressed these words to one of their attendants, Tom Clinch by name, a grizzled, rough, but worthy old sailor, who had known Gerald all his days. He had been indoors when the meteorite fell, and had not therefore witnessed its arrival. As the sound of its fall reached his ears he had rushed out, with others of the attendants—chiefly natives—most of whom had gone off shrieking and panic-stricken towards the interior of the island. Only Tom and another sailor had stood their ground.

'Humph! It's a rum sort o' visitin' star, this 'ere, Mr Gerald,' said the old mariner, with a wise shake of the head. 'Got out of its coorse, I reckon, the channel not being buoyed; onless,' he added, a sudden thought striking him as he noted how lightly the mass floated, 'onless this be one of the buoys which 'as got loose from its moorin's above, an' toppled over down 'ere, d'ye see?'

With comments and talk such as this, the islanders passed the time while waiting for the morning. They felt too restless and excited to 'turn in,' with the exception of Mr Armeath. He, after a while, deeming that there was nothing to be gained by waiting outside, went back to his own rooms, leaving instructions that he was to be called at once if anything fresh occurred.

His wards remained on the watch, however, and with them their two sailor hands, Tom Clinch and Bob Reid; and in due course the moon went down and it became quite dark. Then, behold! there was another wonder to be added to the

rest—the whole great mass became luminous! Not only that, but queer shadows came and went upon it, as though something were in motion upon the surface or just beneath it.

The news of this being conveyed to Armeath brought him out again; but he could not account to his own satisfaction for this new phase.

'It may be that it is composed of some highly phosphorescent mineral,' was the only explanation he could suggest.

At last the morning dawned, and, immediately it was light, Armeath and his two young companions, without waiting for breakfast, put off in a boat, with the two sailors, to examine the meteorite more closely.

It was still there, but the slight wind had drifted it up to a sandy ledge close inshore, and it appeared to be now resting on the sand.

They rowed up to it and were not a little surprised to find that the whole mass was perfectly smooth like glass. Still more mystifying was it to see that there were bands at regular intervals extending 'from stem to stern,' as Tom expressed it, 'jest for all the world like the hull of a great boat.'

They rowed all round it, their wonderment and astonishment growing all the time. They computed that it must be considerably over a thousand feet in length, by, perhaps, a hundred feet in diameter.

Suddenly Gerald uttered a loud exclamation. Jack, glancing at him, saw that he was pointing to a place in the side of the mass and staring at it as though his eyes were about to start out of his head.

'What on earth's up, old man?' he asked in alarm. 'Have you got an attack of nerves again, or'—

'Jack!' cried Gerald, seizing his chum's arm, 'd-didn't you see—didn't you see them?'

'Them—what—who?' asked Jack, bewildered.

'People—men—moving about! I declare that I saw some men moving about inside the—the—thing!'

'You 're barmy, my good Gerald! This little astronomical raree-show has been too much for those imaginative nerves of yours. I see nothing. Perhaps you saw shadows thrown by some birds flying overhead.'

'No, oh no! A thousand times no! I tell you I saw people—two or three—moving about inside that smooth, slippery surface. They were very dim and shadowy, it is true, but they were there. I saw them just as one might see anything through very thick, semi-opaque glass. What does it mean? I tell you it's uncanny! There's some strange mystery about it all. This thing is not what it seems to be. What, in the name of all that is wonderful, does it mean?'

Jack looked at the smooth, shining sides which rose from the water and towered up high in the air. But he could see nothing to account for Gerald's wild

words; and he then glanced inquiringly, with real alarm and trouble in his eyes, at Armeath.

'I am afraid,' said the scientist, with a grave smile, 'that Gerald is letting his exuberant imagination run away with him this morning. I confess I see nothing of the kind he described. It must have been some strange effect of the rays of the sun, which is not very high yet, striking at an angle upon these remarkable, shining sides.'

Gerald shook his head impatiently, but made no verbal reply; and they rowed round and round the phenomenon, without finding anything to satisfy their curiosity. Armeath examined the smooth sides closely, sometimes through a magnifying glass. He even tried to chip off a piece with a hammer and a chisel; but it was so hard that he could make no impression upon it, and so slippery that his chisel glanced off and flew from his hand into the sea.

After a good deal of rowing to and fro, and a considerable amount of critical examination, which threw not the slightest light upon the puzzling lump of mystery, it was decided to return to shore for their breakfast.

Even over their meal, however, their talk continued to run upon the all-engrossing subject. Jack rallied his chum unmercifully upon the extraordinary statement he had made; but Gerald refused to admit that he might have been mistaken.

'I saw what I told you!' he persisted doggedly. 'I may be a bit of a dreamer at times, but I don't "see visions" to that extent. No, there is some awful, inscrutable, incredible mystery about it all! Well, we 'll wait and see. We shall find out, I suppose, in good time.'

With such discussions and speculations the day passed, without bringing anything fresh in the way of enlightenment.

When evening came, Jack declared his fixed resolution not to allow the puzzle to deprive him of another night's sleep. After supper, therefore, he went off incontinently to bed; and as Armeath shut himself up as usual, Gerald was left to himself.

Still restless and perplexed, dissatisfied with the explanations and theories which had been propounded, Gerald felt no inclination to 'turn in.' Something within him—some vague impulse he could not analyse, above all, the recollection of the mysterious, shadowy figures he believed he had seen through the semi-transparent 'shell,' as Jack now called it—urged him to remain on the watch.

'As Mr Armeath says,' he thought to himself, 'if a wind were to spring up it might be gone by to-morrow. We may as well, therefore, keep an eye on it while it is here, and watch its departure when it goes.'

In order to carry out his idea, he required a reliable assistant, and this he found in Tom Clinch. Not only had Tom known Gerald all his life, as already

stated, but he had served his father before him, and he had now transferred his devotion to the son. When, therefore, the young fellow sought him out and told him what he required, Tom was ready enough to lend his aid.

'We 'll keep a watch, Mr Gerald,' he responded, 'turn and turn about, all night, an' have the boat ready in case we wants it. Fur my part, I think ye're only actin' cautious-like. Nobody can tell what's goin' to happen next when things like this once begin fallin' from the skies. I've 'eerd it said as 'ow theer's supposed to be a great bear, an' scorpions, an' crabs in the sky. An' after this, who can say but they might come a-rainin' down on us an' eat us all up in our sleep?'

Honest Tom had heard vaguely of the constellations of stars called by those names, and had very loose notions as to what they meant.

'Well, I hope it won't be as bad as that,' Gerald answered with a smile. 'But I shall be very glad of your company on my night-watch, all the same.'

So it was arranged; and the two betook themselves to a part of the shore where there was a cave which had been utilised as a boathouse, and here they began their watch.

The night turned out as fine as the previous one, except that there were a few drifting clouds which now and again obscured the light of the moon. There was scarcely any breeze, however, and the sea was, as Tom put it, 'as calm and still as a pint of stale beer.'

For a long time nothing occurred, though they kept up their watch till the moon had set, and it had become quite dark. Then they saw again the luminous appearance which they had noticed before.

'Now this is what I want to investigate, Tom,' said Gerald. 'Get out the boat quickly, and let us pull close up as silently as we can.'

The boat, which had been placed ready for launching, was slipped into the water, Gerald putting in the stern a dark lantern, which he had lighted.

Like a gliding shadow, the boat and her two occupants—the sailor rowing and Gerald steering—approached the huge 'meteorite,' now all aglow with a strange, dim light. The oars, well greased, made no sound, and they passed silently along the side nearest the shore, rounded the end, and were making their way back upon the outer side, when Gerald put a hand upon his companion as a signal to stop rowing.

They were then about the centre of the great mass, on the side which was away from the shore and faced the sea. There the boat remained stationary, Gerald staring intently at the curious shimmering wall which towered up at a distance of twenty or thirty feet.

'See, Tom! Look!' he suddenly whispered excitedly. 'See! There are the shadows—the forms of people! There! Now, who was right?'

'Heaven defend us!' breathed Tom fervently. 'Whatever do it mean? Be

the thing bewitched?’

‘Hush! Whatever you see, do not utter a word—not a sound—on your life! I believe they’re coming out!’

Decidedly it was no trick of the imagination this time, at any rate. There were actually figures, as of men, moving about inside. They could be dimly seen through the semi-opaque outer wall or shell. What they were, how they were dressed, or what they were doing, was not clear; but actual, moving, living beings they certainly were.

Something now seemed to be shifted inside, as though a screen had been removed, and at once the figures could be distinguished more plainly. But ere Gerald could fix his attention upon one or another among them, a sort of door had opened in the smooth, shining side, a platform had been run out, and now remained extended in a horizontal position.

Then a tall, noble-looking man appeared in the doorway, stepped on to the platform, and remained there, gazing out over the darkling waters.

CHAPTER III. STRANGE VISITORS.

Gerald, resting almost spell-bound upon his seat in the boat, with difficulty repressed a gasp of astonished admiration as his gaze fell upon the stranger, whom he could see very clearly, even down to the smallest detail of his dress, in the soft but intense light which issued from the opening behind him.

Gerald saw before him a man, tall and commanding in stature, yet so exactly proportioned as scarcely to look his real height—muscular without being stout, light and graceful in carriage without being thin. His refined, clear-cut features, which were free from any trace of beard or moustache, were those of a man in the very prime of life. The skin was smooth and clear, and as light in hue as in the average English type. The mouth was delicately chiselled, and very expressive; and the high, massive brow had a character all its own, conveying an idea of lofty serenity. Beneath, as it were, were traces of an irresistible will and a certain sense of latent power, which were somehow felt by the spectator rather than openly declared. The eyes were large, dark, and luminous, and their gaze searching and penetrating, appearing to be capable either of winning gentleness or the most terrible sternness.

Altogether, Gerald decided, a man to be loved and trusted, or hated and dreaded, according to whether he were a friend or an enemy; a born leader of men, a being of indescribable majesty and dignity in general appearance, yet possessed of a singular simplicity and charm of manner.

As to the dress of this attractive stranger, it is more difficult to describe, for the reason that Gerald perceived at once that the material was unlike anything he had ever seen before. There was a long tunic, with a belt of gold, and a very picturesque head-dress not unlike that in vogue in England in the days of Henry the Eighth; while the arms and legs were encased in garments which fitted closely, showing the figure clearly. That much was plainly to be seen. But what the dress consisted of was a puzzle, for it seemed to have a sheen of its own, a sort of shimmer which did not appear to be altogether reflected light. There were several little ornaments here and there, such as buckles on the shoes and another on the shoulder; but the chief embellishment was a large star upon the breast, which flashed and sparkled and seemed to be worked in diamonds.

Behind this regal figure were three or four others, who stood respectfully in the background, evidently in attendance upon him. Suddenly, while Gerald still gazed in ever-increasing wonder upon the unexpected scene, the stranger reeled as though suffering from an attack of faintness. He put his hand to his breast, and appeared to be panting for breath. Blood showed upon his face and ran off on to his dress, and the next moment he staggered and fell off the platform into the sea.

Gerald did not hesitate. He guessed that the man must have fainted; he knew that the spot where he had fallen in was outside the ledge on which the supposed 'meteorite' was resting; that it was of unfathomable depth, and that, therefore, his danger was imminent and deadly. Throwing off his jacket, therefore, Gerald dived into the water, and that with such promptitude that the second splash followed closely upon the first.

But the stranger had fallen from a height, and the impetus carried him down faster than that gained by Gerald's dive from the boat, so that he failed to grasp the fainting stranger, and was compelled to swim downwards in the hope of finding him.

Down, down, ever down, he went, clawing at the water with fierce energy, and battling his way with feverish determination, knowing that, with those awful depths beneath him, the stranger's one and only chance of life lay in his—Gerald's—overtaking and gripping him.

It was a long and terrible struggle—long, that is, comparatively—and the pressure of the water became oppressive, when, at last, just as the plucky diver felt he must give up and return to the surface, his hand touched something. His fingers closed at once upon it, and he felt that he had secured his prize.

A few seconds later he had regained the surface, and found himself, panting, and all but exhausted, close to the boat, from which Clinch was watching for him. The sailor was aiding his search upon the waters around by throwing on them the rays from the dark lantern, which had been lighted and placed ready to hand in the stern.

A stroke or two brought the boat close enough for Gerald to get a hold upon it with one arm, while with the other he supported in the water the stranger's insensible form.

'Wait, sir; wait an' get yer breath!' counselled the old sailor. 'Take it easy, Mr Gerald! I 'll hold on to t' other chap, never fear! You let go on 'im, an' get yer breath!'

So Gerald loosed his hold upon the one he had rescued, and a little later had recovered sufficiently to be able to scramble into the boat. Then he gave his aid to Clinch, and between them they lifted the stranger in also.

'Where to now, Mr Gerald?' asked Tom, a little dazedly. All these sudden happenings, as he afterwards phrased it, had been 'a little trying to the works of the upper story, an' had set 'em spinnin'' In other words, his brain was in a whirl.

Gerald looked round, and saw that a ladder had been lowered from the platform; and seizing the oars, he rowed the boat to the place. Two strangers were waiting on the lower part of the ladder. To Gerald's surprise they wore masks upon their faces, and he noted that all the other strangers were now masked also.

As the boat came alongside, and Tom raised the inanimate form in his arms, the two on the ladder seized it, and carried it up the ladder, across the platform, and out of sight. A moment or two later the ladder was drawn up in very sudden fashion, the platform was run in, and then the doorway closed up completely, leaving nothing to mark the place where it had been.

The great mass lost its luminous appearance, and the two in the boat found themselves in complete darkness.

'Well, I 'm sugared!' exclaimed Tom, or words to that effect. 'If that don't take the cake! Never so much as a "good-bye," or "thank yer kindly," or— Well! He gave a great gasp, words altogether failing to explain his feelings.

'You forget, Tom, that they probably don't know our language, and we shouldn't understand theirs,' said Gerald. 'You must remember that they are foreigners—er—that is—h'm!—strangers, you know, from another'—

He hesitated, and broke off. For what could he say? Strangers these people certainly were; but foreigners? Well, that depended upon the point of view—travellers from where? Another world? The suggestion seemed monstrous—preposterous! Yet where else could they have come from? If it seemed impossible—incredible—to think of them as travellers from another sphere, it was

certainly no less impossible to regard them as inhabitants of the Earth. No mortal upon our globe had yet succeeded in manufacturing an affair like this 'meteorite,' and travelling about in it; that much was certain. To conceive it possible was to imagine a miracle quite as wonderful as to suppose that this extraordinary flying-machine—for something of that sort Gerald now felt certain it must be—had come from another planet.

However, Gerald realised that he was not in a state of mind to be able to think clearly or logically about the matter at all. His brain, like honest Tom's, was in a whirl; and he tried in vain to collect and marshal his thoughts. The whole affair was too puzzling, too extraordinary for sober thought.

'Tom, row me ashore,' he said abruptly. 'This is too much for me. I'm going to bed.'

'Ay, ay, sir; I can unnerstan',' said Clinch, wagging his head helplessly. 'I feels jest the same, Mr Gerald. Lawks! To think as I should ever 'a lived to see this day!'

Gerald went ashore, but was far too excited in mind to really go to bed. He passed the remaining two or three hours of darkness in restless pacing up and down between the dwelling-house and the bluff, whence he could keep observation upon the cause of his wonderment, as it lay placidly in the water below.

Great was the astonishment of his friends when, in the morning, he related to them the adventures of the night. It is scarcely to be wondered at that they were—Jack certainly was—disposed at first to regard it all as an extraordinary hallucination which had seized upon the relater. But there was Clinch's confirmation; and in the end they saw that there was no room left for doubt.

'Then it comes to this,' said Jack, 'we have to face the fact that we have here, close by us, some people who are paying us a visit from another planet! Phew! What a wake-up for our scientists! What a snub for those wiseacres who have declared that the planets could not possibly be inhabited! But why have our visitors shut themselves up again? It's rather churlish after your saving that johnny from drowning! What do they mean by it? And what was the matter with him?'

'I read it this way,' said Armeath thoughtfully. And it may as well be here stated that after-events fully proved the correctness of his deductions. 'These people from another world either came involuntarily—that is to say, by accident—or they made some mistake which resulted in their being landed upon the Earth in a fashion different from that which they had intended. They narrowly escaped destruction, which would certainly have come to them had they struck the ground—this island for instance, instead of the sea—or if they had fallen in the sea at a place where it was shallow.

'Even as it was, I imagine, their method of arrival came very near to being

a disaster. In all probability something has gone wrong with their engines or machinery—whatever they may be—and also, probably, some of the voyagers were injured by the shock, and required time to recover from it. This would explain how it is that they have not shown themselves outside sooner.’

‘It’s a far-reaching sort of guess, sir,’ said Jack reflectively; ‘but it seems to fit the situation. It scarcely explains, however, why the beggars should have gone off without signifying their thanks in some way. It appears pretty certain that Gerald saved that chap’s life.’

‘Yes,’ said Armeath slowly; ‘Gerald certainly saved his life. Let us hope that the circumstance is of good augury; that it may lead to their being friendly when the sufferer has thoroughly recovered, and they venture out again.’

CHAPTER IV. GERALD CARRIED OFF.

Several days went by after the adventure recorded in the last chapter without anything further being seen of the strangers. The friends kept a watch upon their curious-looking abode from the shore, and sometimes from the water; but the voyagers gave no sign. At times a muffled hammering and clanging could be heard from inside, ‘which,’ as Tom Clinch expressed it, ‘confirmed Mr Armeath’s ’pinion as there’s summat wrong with the works.’

To the impatient youngsters the time seemed to drag by slowly, and even Mr Armeath himself did not conceal the curiosity he felt.

‘I confess,’ said he, ‘that I am waiting with the most intense interest to see what developments are in store for us. Before these people could have constructed such a machine, they must have made many wonderful discoveries in the sciences. What marvels they will be able to show us!’

But Gerald’s feelings in the matter went beyond mere scientific curiosity. He had been most strangely attracted by the face and general appearance of the man whose life he had saved. The recollection of his countenance, the expression of lofty nobility, and wondrous, indefinable graciousness which he had read there, had fascinated him, and now seemed to haunt him. He looked forward with eager expectation to meeting this wonderful being again, and longed for an opportunity of becoming friendly with him.

Under the influence of these feelings, Gerald became more restless from

day to day. He could not sleep at night, and took to staying out upon the beach instead. There he passed the time marching to and fro opposite to the great dark mass which, sphinx-like, remained silent and inscrutable, and refused to divulge any more of its mysterious secrets.

One night, as he thus paced up and down in the darkness, he suddenly saw one part of the structure light up as though screens inside had been removed. He heard voices, and dimly saw a gangway open, after which something which looked like a boat was pushed out quietly and smoothly on to the water. Then shadowy figures stepped into her, and began to row or paddle towards the shore.

'At last! At last!' thought Gerald, highly pleased. 'They are coming ashore at last! I will go forward to greet them!'

Had he not been so taken up with the expectation of meeting again the one who had so attracted his interest, he would probably have felt some distrust at the fact that these strangers should be coming ashore thus stealthily in the darkness instead of in the daylight. No suspicion, however, entered his mind, and he ran forward to welcome them just as the boat grounded on the sand. From her stepped out three figures, who came towards him.

What happened next he was never able to say with certainty. He was conscious of a quick movement on the part of one of the three, and he felt a slight pricking sensation in one of his hands, somewhat as though he had been touched by a very sharp needle.

Then a giddiness seized him, his legs seemed to give way under him, and he sank, rather than fell, to the ground, and rolled over. When he tried to rise he found that he had no sort of control over his muscles; they refused to act, and he was unable to move so much as a finger. Even his voice refused to obey his will, for he vainly tried to cry out; no sound issued from his lips.

Two of the dark figures who had just landed came forward, picked him up, and carried him to the waiting boat. There he was thrown down very much as if he had been a deer which had been captured. He next felt the craft moving through the water, he heard the *lap, lap* of the ripple against the sides, followed by a bump when it reached the end of its short voyage.

Then he was hauled up through the air and carried some distance through seemingly interminable passages, which he knew were well-lighted; for, though he could not move, he was quite conscious, and could not only hear but could see whatever came within the range of his eyes.

Presently he was cast down upon the floor of a small chamber, where he was left to himself, his captors closing the door with noisy accompaniments which sounded like the turning of keys and the shooting of bolts into their sockets.

And there he lay, utterly unable to move, in an agony of mind which can

be better conceived than described. He was like one in a trance; and wild, weird tales came into his mind of persons who had fallen into a similar state, and had been believed to be dead when they were really still alive. Did the people who had brought him there think he was dead, he wondered, or were they aware of the true state of the case? The question suggested terrible possibilities. These strangers must be formidable beings indeed! Seemingly, they possessed dread powers and strange secrets. It looked as though they could throw an enemy at will into this terrible condition. But why they should regard him as an enemy to be treated thus, more especially after what he had been able to do for the one who had fallen into the sea, poor Gerald was at a loss to guess.

In his helplessness and dread of what the end might be, he prayed earnestly for help and deliverance. It seemed as though no earthly friends could aid him, but he did not lose faith in the power of the one Great Friend above, and to Him his prayers were many and fervent. And after a while it seemed as though those supplications were heard. Slowly, but surely, feeling crept back into his useless muscles, and the power to use them returned. Little by little the control over his limbs returned, until at last, with a long breath of relief and a grateful prayer of thankfulness, he was able to stand up and move about his prison-chamber.

First he examined himself to see if there was any wound which would account for what had happened to him; but he could find nothing save a slight mark on the right hand. He remembered that he had felt a pricking sensation there just before he had collapsed upon the beach; after which there had been a tingling which had spread quickly all over his body. And that was all he knew.

Ere, however, he could carry his memory and his speculations further, the door of the chamber was opened, and several persons entered abruptly and stood for a while regarding him in silence.

Gerald, on his side, looked back at them curiously, and he was not by any means favourably impressed by his first survey of them. He decided at once that they were soldiers, though their dress and accoutrements were very different from anything he had ever seen before. They all wore beards, and were dark, both as to their hair and their complexions.

Their costumes, which were a curious dull-gray in tint, had that peculiar, shimmering sheen which he had noted in the dress of the stranger who had fallen into the sea. The fashion, too, was much the same, the principal garment being the tunic, with a belt, and the picturesque head-dress.

These people all bore shields, which, strange to say, seemed to be of glass, for they were perfectly transparent; and by way of arms each had an odd-looking twisted pole or spear, which looked like two rods of polished steel entwined together. At the top was a flat, spear-shaped piece of light-coloured silvery metal, with three points or prongs instead of one. Stuck into the belt of each, as people

might stick pistols, were two or three smaller articles. One of them looked like a hunting-knife or dagger; but regarding the others, Gerald could form no sort of idea as to their use or meaning, and could only vaguely guess that they were probably weapons of a kind unknown to dwellers upon the Earth.

One of these men, who appeared to be their officer, motioned to Gerald to follow him, and turned and led the way. Outside there were half a dozen more men in waiting, all similarly dressed. The officer signed to Gerald to follow a couple of these, while he himself, with the others, fell in behind; and thus they all marched onwards in double file, like a squad of soldiers.

They traversed many passages and galleries, where Gerald saw plenty to attract attention and excite wonder. They passed also people standing about in small groups, and these looked as curiously at the prisoner—for such he felt himself to be—as did he at them. There was, however, no time or opportunity for more than a fleeting glance; he was hurried onwards, till suddenly there came a great surprise.

Passing through an entrance, which in massiveness and design seemed to the wondering captive more like the gateway to a medieval castle than a doorway one might expect to find in such a place, they emerged into a large open space.

Gerald looked round, and as he did so, a gasp of astonishment escaped him. He found himself in what had all the appearance of a spacious, lofty hall, with a domed roof, around which glittered numerous lights.

But his attention was at once drawn to the other end of the room. Here was a dais, and upon it were several persons. They were seated, for the most part, on handsomely carved and upholstered armchairs; but two of the latter were higher and larger than the rest, so that they partook rather of the character of thrones, and of these one again was larger and more important-looking than the other. Very strange affairs were these two high seats, ornamented as they were with carvings representing heads of the queerest-looking creatures that can well be imagined. The high backs curled over above, fashioned again in the shapes of heads of most horrible, fantastic monsters; smaller heads, vying with them in frightful ugliness, formed the ends of the arms.

Behind this array of chairs hung a curtain on which was worked weird pictures of the chase. They depicted men hunting, and the creatures they were in pursuit of were again strange beasts, such as, Gerald thought, seemed rather the outcome of a bad nightmare than the representation of anything which had ever lived. Over all was a canopy with more carved heads as corner-pieces.

Noting these details in two or three quick glances, Gerald turned his attention to the occupants of the chairs; and as he did so his spirits fell considerably.

He had hoped—expected indeed.—that he was about to be ushered into the presence of the man whom he had rescued from the sea. Gerald had already made

up his mind to like this man of the noble countenance, and therefore, notwithstanding that the treatment he had received had not been over friendly, he had felt no great anxiety or misgiving as to what was in store for him.

But now, as he looked round, he very quickly perceived that the one he had hoped to meet was not there. Instead, upon the large chairs or thrones, he saw two dark, bearded men, who returned his looks with anything but friendly gaze, and whose general appearance filled him with feelings of dislike and alarm. Looking round the semicircle, he found it was much the same with the others. There were no friendly glances at all; they gazed at him in solemn, gloomy silence; and the expression upon their faces was at the best merely a sort of contemptuous curiosity.

As to one of them in the centre—the one who sat upon the second highest seat—Gerald thought he had never looked upon a more unprepossessing being. His frame was large and muscular, his head massive; but his dark, bearded face seemed full of brooding evil. His eyes were crafty, and lighted now and then with cruel, cunning gleams. He reminded Gerald somehow of ancient tales of horrible old ogres, whose principal amusement might consist in planning new tortures for the unfortunate victims who fell into their power.

Nor was his master—as Gerald judged him to be, the one seated upon the principal seat—much more attractive. His, too, was a huge figure, and his countenance was dark and forbidding; but it was relieved by a certain air of haughty authority and natural ease, imparting to his bearing a dignity which was lacking in the case of the other.

The more Gerald looked at the men before him the more he wondered at the innocent, open-hearted expectation with which he and his friends on the island had welcomed the coming of this wonderful 'chariot of the skies.' Had they known—he now bitterly reflected—had they but known the sort of beings it was peopled with, they would certainly have regarded its advent with very different feelings!

What evil fate, he vaguely and sadly wondered, had they in store for him?

CHAPTER V. KING IVANTA.

Gerald stood in the midst of his captors, regarding them with steady eyes and

undaunted mien. Critical though his situation might be, he was determined that these strangers from another world should have no reason for deeming him wanting in courage. He gazed round, and took note of everything about him with an outward appearance of calmness; though the more he saw of the people in whose hands he was the more he instinctively distrusted their intentions. He noted that the man who was seated upon the higher of the two chairs was treated with great deference by all the rest, and was evidently a sort of chief amongst them. The next in rank—the one Gerald had privately dubbed the 'Ogre'—appeared to be his principal councillor, while the others seated on the dais were officers of lesser degree. The rest of the people present were attired much as the soldiers had been who had brought Gerald to the place, save that their costumes were handsomer, and bore many ornaments and special marks denoting superior rank.

As regards their ornaments, it was noticeable that only the chief and the 'Ogre' wore jewels. The former had upon the breast of his robe a large, curious figure worked in diamonds, and the latter a similar ornamentation of a smaller kind. But Gerald, who knew something about precious stones, was surprised that these people, if they wore diamonds at all, did not display something larger and finer. In his own mind he appraised the value of those he saw at a very moderate figure, and considered that they were altogether paltry as compared with what he would have expected such men to wear.

'Diamonds must be scarce where these people come from!' was the idea which flashed through his mind; and therein he had made, as it afterwards turned out, a very shrewd guess.

And now the chief addressed some words to the prisoner, which, being spoken in a strange language, Gerald could not understand. Then the other one—the Ogre—rose up, and stepping off the dais, came close to him. Taking him by the shoulders, he turned and twisted him round, now this way, now that, as one might a fat bullock that was offered for sale.

Under this treatment Gerald became indignant. There was something in the man's manner so contemptuous, so insulting, that the young fellow's blood grew hot in his veins. He clenched his hands and bit his lips, striving his best to keep down his fast-rising anger.

But the man's behaviour only became more intolerable; and another now came up to join in the amusement—for such it seemed to be considered. Then Gerald, exasperated beyond all control, struggled fiercely to get free, throwing one of his persecutors off with so much force that he fell backwards upon the floor. His head must have struck against something, for there was a heavy thump, which was followed at once by an angry outcry from the man's friends.

The latter rushed upon the hapless captive, and began to pommel him in cruel and brutal fashion.

[image]

He fell backwards upon the floor.

How the scene might have ended if no interruption had occurred it is impossible to say. As it happened, however, it was brought to an end in an unexpected manner.

A man came rushing in, calling out in tones of warning. Evidently he was the bearer of news, for every one turned to listen to what he said; and it was curious to see the effect it produced upon the assembly when they had gathered its purport. They appeared not unlike a lot of unruly schoolboys who had ventured to amuse themselves in some forbidden manner in the absence of their master.

They looked at one another inquiringly, and somewhat guiltily. Those who had been mixed up in the fray busied themselves in hastily trying to remove all traces of the struggle; while others who felt themselves less compromised tried their best to appear innocent and at their ease.

Then were heard the blare of trumpets, hoarse calls, as of men in authority giving words of command or ordering people to clear the way, and the rattle and clatter of accoutrements. Great, massive doors at the end opposite to the dais swung apart, throwing open to the view another and larger hall, and a brilliant and unexpected scene.

Gerald turned and stared in mute wonder. There, before him, was a vista presenting one of the most magnificent spectacles it is possible to imagine. He had thought the hall he was in large and imposing when he had been ushered into it; but it was small and almost commonplace compared with the great space into which he now gazed.

Ranged on either side were ranks of magnificently dressed persons, who looked like courtiers attending a levee. Above, from the ceiling, hung gorgeous banners, and the walls were decorated with beautifully coloured frescoes. Spiral columns of sparkling lights rose here and there, ever turning and ever ascending, and dazzling the eyes with their splendour. Music clashed from some unseen band of musicians; and, as the strains floated through the air, they came mingled with the scent of subtle and delicious perfumes. At the farthest end of all was an empty throne, evidently awaiting its occupant.

Gazing in wonder at all these things, Gerald shortly became aware that he was himself becoming an object of curiosity to the whole of this brilliant company. He had turned his back to the dais upon which his persecutors had been seated, and he was standing out alone in the open space in front, his homely dress

contrasting curiously with the splendid costumes around.

The music ceased, there was another blare of trumpets, and then a man entered near the throne. He stood upon the steps for a few moments, his keen eyes travelling round the whole assembled throng as they all bowed their heads in respectful salutation. He was about to seat himself, when his eagle glance fell upon the wondering captive. At the same moment Gerald recognised him—he was the man whose life he had saved!

Evidently he was the real chief. He was the king of these people; not the evil-looking, cruel man whose prisoner he had been. Gerald's heart gave a great bound of relief and thankfulness; for he no longer felt fear or doubt. One look at that stately figure, one glance in return from those flashing eyes, told him all he wished to know. He felt that he was saved! Such a being as this was incapable of either cruelty or injustice!

The king—for such he was—ordered Gerald to be brought up to him; and two of the principal officers, whom he knew afterwards as Arelda and Abralda, came down the long hall and conducted him to the steps of the throne.

There Gerald stood, whilst he whom he afterwards knew as King Ivanta made inquiries concerning him. For as yet, though Gerald had recognised him, he, on his side, had no idea that Gerald was the one who had saved his life; having been, it will be remembered, insensible when he had fallen into the sea.

There followed much talking in a strange language. The king was evidently making inquiries; and the more questions he asked the darker grew the lowering cloud upon his brow. A tense silence fell upon the assembled company, the hush that tells of coming trouble.

Then one of the officers suddenly recognised Gerald. He was the officer who had been with the king when he had fainted, and he was the only one who had seen his rescuer's face. He now informed his master, who turned and regarded the young stranger with new interest, in which there was a kindly and friendly welcome. Then his brow grew darker than ever, his eyes seemed literally to flash fire, and he looked truly terrible, as, with outstretched arm, he thundered out some stern orders.

What these were, or what was their effect, Gerald could not learn. There was some stir near the place where his captors had been seated, and he guessed that they were being brought forward to be dealt with. But he himself was led out through a small side doorway into an antechamber, where there were only a few officers in waiting; and these in turn conducted him into another and still smaller room, where they bade him be seated. Then they went out and left him

alone.

CHAPTER VI. THE KING'S OFFER.

Gerald felt like one in a dream. His adventure had been such a strange one, events had followed one another so quickly, the change from fear and almost despair to hope and safety had come so unexpectedly, that he had scarcely had time to realise all that was going forward. And then the stately magnificence of the scene at which he had been present, the sudden revelation of the personality of the being he had rescued—all these things, crowding into the short space of a single night, made his brain reel.

For some time he remained alone, turning these things over and over in his mind. He almost doubted the evidence of his own senses, and began vaguely to wonder whether it could all be real, or whether he had fallen asleep and was dreaming some extraordinary, fantastic dream.

After what seemed a long time, the door opened, and some one entered behind him; some one who, even before Gerald caught sight of him, was adding to the confusion of his ideas by speaking to him in English! Turning round sharply, he found himself face to face with a tall, good-looking man with a shrewd, intellectual face, who was regarding him with a smile which seemed to be half-kindly, half-amused. He was dressed like some of the principal officers he had seen; but there was that in his manner and general appearance which, apart from his speech, seemed to tell Gerald that he was one of his own race.

'Well, young sir, will you tell me your name?' was the query which came to Gerald's consciousness after a moment or two of bewilderment.

'My name is Gerald Wilton,' he said simply.

'And how did you come into these parts? Parents live round here?'

Gerald shook his head. 'I have none,' he answered sadly. 'I have a guardian, who is at present living on the island, however. His name is Armeath—Mr Marcus Armeath.'

The stranger uttered a long whistle, then he exclaimed, 'So, so! Marcus Armeath living on this island! I knew him some years ago. He was then in England engaged in some experiments, trying to discover— But never mind that now.'

He broke off abruptly, and regarded Gerald again with his enigmatic smile, which, however, now seemed to have in it more of friendly interest. Then he took to pacing up and down the room, his hands behind him, as though lost in thought.

'Young sir,' said he presently, 'I don't know what star you were born under, but it seems perfectly clear that you are marked out for some experiences such as scarcely any one else on this Earth can boast of. You are in possession of a great secret, which we wished to keep to ourselves; and, further, it has been ordained that you should save the life of—of—well, of one who is never ungrateful to those who do him even the smallest service. He is my most gracious master, and he will talk with you himself later on; but, meanwhile, he has deputed me to see you, and prepare your mind for some tremendous facts which you might otherwise find it difficult to grasp all at once. I am instructed to tell you certain things which must appear to you so incredible, so impossible, that I doubt if you will believe them without further proof.'

'I think I can give a good guess at one or two of them, sir; or, rather, my guardian has done so. This monster airship, or whatever you call it, has found its way here from some other planet—probably Mars'—

'My word, young gentleman, you've hit it!' cried the other, in very evident surprise.

'And,' continued Gerald, 'you made some mistake in arriving here, and very nearly came to awful grief.'

'Yes, yes! There, too, you guessed well,' returned the other. 'It was but a slight miscalculation, but it nearly smashed us up! It was a fearfully narrow escape!' He drew out a handkerchief and passed it over his forehead, as though the mere recollection made him hot. 'I expect that was Mr Armeath's guess too, wasn't it?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Ah well! there are certain other things, however, which you do not know—cannot know—which I will now explain. In the first place, you do not know that my master is a great king in Mars—a mighty ruler over nearly half the population of that globe. His name is Ivanta; he reigns over the empire of Ivenia—which, by-the-by, is the name of this airship, as you called it. He named her the *Ivenia*, after his own country.'

Gerald listened with growing wonder, and eyes that lighted up more and more as the stranger continued:

'Very well! The next thing is that this is not the first visit my master has paid to this Earth. He came here some years ago.'

At this Gerald stared harder than ever. 'Is it possible?' he exclaimed. 'I never heard of it!'

'Nobody—on the Earth—ever heard of it, save myself and one or two others who were all sworn to secrecy. My royal master came here for purposes of his own, and did not wish—and does not wish now—that his visits should be made known. If they were, he would have a lot of people pestering him with questions, and possibly some one might imitate his inventions and build airships like this one, and he might have explorers from here coming over to Mars—which he does not wish. Do you understand?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Very well! At his first visit he came to this very island, and made it his headquarters. It was uninhabited then'—

'Yes; so it was when we came to it. We have only been here a year or so.'

'I see. Well, my master hoped to find the place still uninhabited, and that he would be able to hide the *Ivenia* away here this time, as he did before, when no one upon the Earth was ever the wiser, save the one or two I have referred to. He had brought with him a yacht of his own. She made a bit of a stir, being unlike anything previously seen, but no one suspected the truth. In her he made a tour of the world, travelling about for three years, during which time he and his chosen companions picked up English, a little French, and so on. They also picked me up, and I also saved the king's life, even as you have done, though in a different manner. He was so grateful for what I did that he told me his secret, and offered to enrol me in his service and take me back to Mars with him. I had nothing particular to tie me here, and I am fond of adventure, so I took him at his royal word. Now you can begin to understand how it is that I, an Englishman by birth, Kendal Monck by name, engineer by profession, happen to be here, in these days, in the suite of this great king from another planet, and talking to you in your own tongue!'

'Yes, sir, I understand,' answered Gerald, his face aglow with interest and excitement. 'It's very, very wonderful! What strange, marvellous scenes and adventures you must have passed through!'

'I have that, my lad! I have passed through many grave dangers too; have had many hair-breadth escapes in the service of my royal master, who is of a very adventurous disposition. His search after knowledge has led us into queer places, I can assure you. But he is a wonderful being! This marvellous airship was constructed from his own inventions and designs. And then, as a man—Ah!' Here the stranger drew a long breath. 'His is a character which makes you feel you would go through fire and water for him!'

'I'm sure of it!' cried Gerald with enthusiasm. 'I felt it the first moment I set eyes upon him! How I should like to do as you have done—go with him to Mars and back! What an experience!'

'Ah!' exclaimed the engineer again, 'it would do you good, my lad. It would

do anybody—everybody—good, physically, morally, in every way. It gives you a different, a more glorious, outlook on life when you realise that the mighty works of the Creator are not confined to this globe on which we live, but extend through endless "universes" in space. Even comparatively near us there are great planets compared with which this Earth is scarcely more than a big football. There is Saturn, for instance. When we were there'—

'You have visited other planets, then, as well?' Gerald gasped.

Monck nodded. 'Yes, even great Jupiter, but we could not get very near to him. Saturn, however, we landed on, and spent some weeks there—awful, terrible weeks they were. My young friend, even to think of the things to be seen there is almost too much for the ordinary human brain. But, as I have said, it does one good. It instils into the mind some faint conception of the vastness, the greatness, the endless variety to be everywhere found in what we call the creation!'

'Would that your king would make me the offer he made to you!' cried Gerald, with glistening eyes.

'Perhaps he will. What if he has?' was the unexpected reply.

Gerald started up from the chair he had been sitting on. 'You cannot mean it!' he exclaimed.

'What would be your reply if he made you the offer?'

'I would accept only too gladly!'

'You see,' Monck explained, 'the service you rendered is one that a man like my master would never forget. I dare say you wonder how it happened that he fell into the sea. It was because the air here is so different from that which he is used to upon Mars, and which we all had been living in inside this airship. At his first visit to the Earth, years ago, he was extremely careful, and made the change gradually and cautiously. This time he seems to have been rash, or to have forgotten. Hence the air here—which is thinner and lighter than that on Mars—served him as the air on the top of a very high mountain would serve you if you were suddenly transported there. He was attacked with what you have doubtless heard of as mountain-sickness. There is vertigo, bleeding at the nose and ears, and fainting. However, his danger was your opportunity; and I must say you acted very promptly and pluckily.'

'I only did what I would have done for any one,' said Gerald modestly.

'I am sure of that, my boy. But I won't keep you in suspense any longer. To come to the point, my master said I could make you the offer I have hinted at if I found you were likely to regard it with favour. I do not want your answer now, of course. You can take time to consider—there are lots of things we can talk over first. Briefly, however, when we go back to Mars we shall only be away a few months. At the end of that time we shall return here again; and if you are then tired of the adventure you will be free to leave his service and remain here.'

'I do not need any time to make up my mind,' Gerald burst out impetuously. 'All I should hesitate about would be as to whether my guardian'—

'Well, we can talk to him.'

'And Jack!'

'Who is Jack?'

'My chum! He must come too!'

'Oh—h'm! I don't know what to say about that! You had better ask King Ivanta yourself when you see him!'

'I will!' cried Gerald. And he did, with what result will presently appear.

CHAPTER VII

OFF ON A TRIP TO MARS.

'Our last morning upon the Earth, Jack, for many a day to come! Think of it! It scarcely seems possible, does it?'

'It's true enough, though, old chap! In a few hours we shall "sail away," as the song says, and shall be winging our way through space!'

'Fancy gazing down and taking our last look at our own globe! The daring of the thing gives me a bit of a shock, now that the event itself is so near at hand! How is it with you?'

'Well, I confess, Gerald, that I have to brace my mind up to it, as it were. But it's always the same when you start upon a journey or a new adventure. One never exactly likes saying good-bye to the old familiar places.'

Many months had passed since the events recorded in the last chapter. King Ivanta had been to Europe and finished the business he had in hand—for it was generally understood, amongst those who knew of his presence on the Earth, that he had come here on his second visit for some definite purpose. What the purpose was remained for the present a secret confined to the Martian monarch himself and the few he chose to take into his confidence.

Amongst those who shared the secret Mr Armeath was probably one; for he had grown high in favour with the illustrious traveller, and had been invited to accompany him in the forthcoming trip to Mars and back. He had also been accorded the privilege of taking with him his two wards Gerald and Jack, and his two servitors Tom Clinch and Bob Reid; and the latter, loyal and faithful followers that they were, had not shrunk from the risks of the adventure.

There were some other passengers also—namely, Amos Zuanstroom the multi-millionaire (the well-known 'Diamond King'), his son Silas (who was about the same age as Jack), and a much younger lad, named Freddy Whitcomb, his nephew.

Why King Ivanta should choose these particular persons from all the millions of inhabitants of the Earth was another matter which was wrapped in mystery, and which, for the time being, he kept strictly to himself.

As the engineer Mr Monck had predicted, Gerald had good reason to congratulate himself upon the fortunate chance which had enabled him to render so great a service to the Martian king. The latter had shown himself extremely grateful, and had conferred upon the young fellow many marks of his favour. In particular, he had confirmed the offer Mr Monck had made, and had graciously extended it, as stated, to his guardian and his chum.

And now, behold them all, then, on board the *Ivenia*, the colossal 'chariot of the skies,' awaiting the moment when she should rise in the air and commence her tremendous journey.

She lay in a sort of natural harbour in the island, a spacious salt-water lake almost landlocked.

From this she presently rose easily and smoothly, like a huge bird wending its way upwards in a series of graceful circles. Like a bird, too, she had at first enormous wings spread out to the air. But after a time, as she gained the upper air, these were folded away, the upper covering was replaced, and she became once more the great, egg-shaped mass she had appeared when she had arrived beside the island. How, afterwards, she continued to force her way upwards against the attraction of the Earth, was King Ivanta's own secret. It was believed that he had discovered a means of using the sun's more powerful attractive force, and so controlling it as to make it do whatever he required; but that was probably only a guess. What is certain is that the whole structure continued to rise steadily and smoothly upwards, till presently Gerald and Jack were called by Mr Armeath and the engineer, Mr Monck, to come to a sort of periscope, from which they could take their last look at the Earth.

They stepped forward and stared through the opening in startled wonder. There, they saw our globe, looking like an enormous ball. The great airship itself was perfectly steady, and appeared to be absolutely motionless. Not a tremor was to be felt, and it seemed as though it was the Earth which was receding from them at a rapid rate, not they from the Earth. No longer, however, could they make out details upon its surface; the distance was already too great. All they could distinguish were the respective masses of land and water, broadly mapped and marked out as they are upon a school globe representing the Earth. The side they were looking at showed the New World—the great continents of North and

South America and the oceans surrounding them—and that was all.

Who shall attempt to describe their feelings, or guess their thoughts, as they stood there gazing at this strange appearance of the planet upon which they had lived all their lives? Probably they then for the first time fully realised the actual nature of the risks they were running; and it is more than likely that they were wondering whether they were looking their last upon the Earth, as they watched it sinking silently away into the immeasurable distance!

CHAPTER VIII. A NARROW ESCAPE.

The first part of the time which followed upon the departure from the Earth of the *Ivenia* on her long journey through space was one of great enjoyment to the two chums. The marvels and mysteries of the great airship—or aerostat, as Mr Armeath preferred to call her—seemed to be inexhaustible. 'Every day' the young people found something new and strange, to puzzle over. Every time they moved about they came upon some unexpected revelation of the wondrous inventions and contrivances which it had been necessary to bring to perfection before the great machine could start upon the adventurous journeys she had undertaken.

The above words, 'every day,' require an explanation. Of course, once they were really out in 'the realms of starry space,' there were really no alternations of day and night, for the sun shone upon them continuously. But within the aerostat artificial nights, so to speak, were produced by drawing huge screens across the semi-transparent outer casing.

Mr Monck explained this to the young voyagers, giving them, incidentally, a little lecture, as it were, in astronomy and general science; and on this occasion he had as his auditors all four of the young passengers—including, that is to say, the two cousins, Silas and Freddy.

'I expect you all know,' he said, 'that out in what is called space, where there is no atmosphere—no air—the sun's rays seem to have no heat. The cold there is most intense—far greater than anything ever experienced upon Earth. You feel the sun's rays warm on your globe because they pass through the Earth's atmosphere, which acts like a lens or magnifying-glass. Here the same effect is obtained by passing them through the wonderful semi-transparent metal of which the outer shell of the airship is composed. It is harder than the hardest

steel, yet almost transparent like glass, without being brittle, while it is far lighter than aluminium. It was discovered by King Ivanta, and is called "ivantium" after him. He found that when the sun's rays were passed through it the result was exactly the same as when they pass through the atmosphere of the Earth or of Mars. That is how it is we are so warm and comfortable on board here. But for the discovery of that metal such a journey as we are taking would be impossible. We should be frozen to death.'

'Then there is no need to have day and night unless you like,' Freddy observed, his blue eyes opening in surprise. He was a fair, good-looking youngster, and a great favourite with Monck and the chums.

'No, my lad. But King Ivanta considers it best to keep up the same habits as those you and his people are all accustomed to "at home;" for Mars turns on its axis in about the same time as the Earth—namely, twenty-four hours or thereabouts. That is to say, the average day on Mars is just about the same length as the average day on the Earth.'

On many other occasions, when he had the time and opportunity, the good-natured engineer 'trotted them round' and explained to the young people, in similar fashion, the why and the wherefore of many of the things that puzzled them—so far, that is, as he himself understood them. But as to a great many, and those some of the most surprising, he was obliged to confess his own entire ignorance.

'There are most essential secrets connected with the structure and working of this remarkable "chariot of the skies" which no one but my master understands, and he takes good care to keep them to himself,' he declared. 'When you reach Mars, for instance, you will see there numerous airships and flying-machines of many kinds. It has, indeed, been much easier for the Martians to learn to build such contrivances than for the dwellers upon the Earth, because, as I have before mentioned, the air upon Mars is so much denser. But though you will see many such things flying about, you will not see one that can compare with this; not one that can venture out into space, or, indeed, very far above the surface of the planet.'

Often Mr Armeath accompanied the young people, and listened with interest to the engineer's explanations; for, scientist though he was, he found he had almost as much to learn in their new surroundings as they had.

Truly, the great airship was a wonder from every point of view. It may assist readers to understand the stupendous scale upon which she had been designed if it is explained that she was more than twice the size of Britain's great warship the *Dreadnought*. But nothing less in bulk would have been of any use if we consider the tremendous strength required, and the accommodation necessary for the number of people she carried—of whom there were between two and

three thousand. In addition, room had to be provided for enormous quantities of stores and other equipment.

Another feature which illustrates the gigantic scale upon which everything was carried out was to be found in the fact that a large space was given up to ornamental gardens and conservatories. In these were graceful, waving, palm-like trees, wondrous flowers and shrubs, and trees growing delicious fruits, interspersed amongst fountains and pleasant walks, with what appeared to be a sunny sky overhead. There was even a sort of 'Zoo' or menagerie on board, in which were many very curious animals which the new passengers had never seen or heard of before. To these had now been added quite a collection of more familiar creatures which King Ivanta had acquired during his stay upon Earth, and was taking back for the edification of his subjects at home.

The chums were fond of wandering about in this miniature zoological garden, looking at those creatures which were new to them, and studying their ways and habits. Some were natives of Mars; these were mostly small, for—as they soon learned from Monck—just as Mars was a smaller globe than the Earth, so the animals generally were smaller in proportion. But in this Zoo were specimens brought, as it appeared, from the great planet Saturn, some of which were large and terrible creatures.

It was with one of these that Gerald met with an unpleasant adventure one day when they had been but a short time 'out.' He had strolled in alone, in the early morning, as was now his almost constant habit, and went towards the cage of a creature called by the Martians an *amalpi*. Gerald was especially interested in it on account of its resemblance to an immense unicorn. It was, indeed, something between that fabled creature and a rhinoceros. It had a very long, straight, sharp horn upon the frontal bone, and a body very much like a heavily-built cart-horse, covered with skin almost as thick as that of an elephant. It was a most savage, dangerous creature, and all attempts to tame it, even in the smallest degree, had failed.

When Gerald walked up to its cage on this particular occasion he met with a surprise, for the cage was empty and the barred gate was standing ajar. Ere he had time to consider what this might mean he received a second surprise. There was a loud, bellowing roar, and the next he knew was that the creature itself was charging down upon him with lowered head like a bull, the terrible, long, sharp horn pointed straight at him.

For an instant the young fellow stood as if spell-bound; then, by a happy flash of thought, he dashed into the empty cage and pulled the gate to after him. It fastened, as he knew, automatically, with a huge spring-catch. A moment later there was a frightful crash as the ferocious animal ran full tilt at the bars, its long horn pushing between them, and just failing to reach Gerald by some few inches.

For some time he had the novel experience of being a prisoner in the great cage, while his enemy, furious with disappointment, charged again and again at the bars. Such was the strength and determination of its rushes that it seemed almost as if the bars must give way.

At last the noise of its bellowing brought some of the keepers upon the scene. Then Gerald had an opportunity of learning more of the weapons the Martians were armed with, and how they used them. Each keeper carried in his hand one of the large wands or staves, with triple points at the top, similar to those the soldiers had carried who had marched Gerald as a prisoner before the 'Ogre' and his chief. Gerald had seen similar wands many times since, but had never seen how they were used. Nor was he, indeed, much the wiser now. All he saw was a slight flash of very brilliant light which seemed to leap from the tridents towards the great roaring animal, as it stood for a moment tossing its head and stamping its feet ere charging down upon the rescue-party. But it never started upon its rush, for, lo! it suddenly sank upon its knees and rolled helplessly over upon the ground, where it lay quiet and still—a big, inert mass.

The keepers opened the gate, and Gerald walked out, wondering greatly at what he had seen, but unable to ask any questions, because he could not speak their language.

Just then, however, Monck arrived upon the scene. He looked very grave when informed what had occurred, and examined the lock with a perplexed air and many dubious shakes of the head.

'What will they do with the dead *amalpī*?' Gerald asked, as he walked away with the engineer.

'Put it back again. It is not dead; it will recover in a few hours, and to-morrow will be as lively as ever,' was the answer. Then the speaker went on to explain. 'Those tridents,' he said, alluding to the three-pronged wands, 'are really a kind of electric gun, if I may use the term. This weapon also—like so many of the Martians' greatest discoveries—is the invention of our royal master, King Ivanta. He tried for years to discover a weapon which would stun or paralyse and not kill. He has a horror of bloodshed, and he set himself to devise a weapon which should do away with the horrors of war by rendering killing and maiming unnecessary. He found it at last in this weapon, which simply paralyses the muscles for a certain time, without killing or inflicting any permanent injury. People or animals—even the largest and most ferocious creatures, as you have here seen—struck in this way are merely rendered quite helpless for a time, so that you can bind them, or do what you please with them.'

'Ah! like I was! I understand now!' cried Gerald. 'All I felt was a slight prick, as if some one had hurt me with a needle, and immediately I collapsed and rolled over, utterly unable to move, yet not unconscious.'

Monck nodded thoughtfully. 'Ay, I remember,' said he.

'So do I,' said Gerald, in a tone which indicated that the remembrance was a sore one. 'And that reminds me that you have never given me any explanation as to why I was treated in that fashion! I frequently see the chap I have to thank for it—who, I have been given to understand, is a sort of king in his own country—and his confederate, the one I called the Ogre. I know their names too—Agrado and Kazzaro. Whenever they catch sight of me they glare at me as though they would like to eat me!'

'Well, they got a precious good wiggling from King Ivanta over that affair before the whole Court,' Monck declared with a smile. 'So it is not surprising that they do not exactly fall upon your neck and embrace you.'

'But what was their object?' Gerald persisted.

Monck seemed to be ruminating. 'I cannot say with certainty; I can only guess,' he answered thoughtfully. 'Agrado, you must know, is the ruler of one of the last countries which Ivanta conquered and brought under his sway. He reigned over a numerous and powerful nation, and there was a long and bitter struggle ere Ivanta was completely successful. Agrando did not like giving in, and I don't think he has become quite reconciled to it even yet.'

'Was that why King Ivanta brought him with him—so that he might be able to keep an eye on him?' asked Gerald shrewdly.

Monck laughed. 'Perhaps,' he said.

'Well, my impression is—and always has been—that the old ruffian intended to keep me there as prisoner in secret, and carry me secretly to his own country, and there exhibit me as a raree-show, or keep me as a slave to wait on him, or some infamy of that sort.'

Monck looked puzzled. 'I hardly know what to say as to that,' he said musingly. 'But I feel sure that you have no friend in him or his chief councillor. I should keep clear of them if I were you. Have you any other enemies, think you, on board?'

Gerald started. 'Why do you ask?' he queried.

'Because this little business of the *amalpi* is a rather strange affair. It looks to me as if it had been done on purpose. That lock did not open itself, nor did the animal burst it open. It is not injured in any way. Now, you are in the habit of going there regularly in the early morning, are you not?'

'Yes, Mr Monck,' returned Gerald gravely. 'But I don't like to think there is any one on board who hates me enough to plan such a wicked thing! I know, of course, that the Zuanstrooms are anything but pleased at the fact that King Ivanta invited us to come with you on this trip; and Silas has behaved very strangely once or twice, just as if he were jealous, or envious, or something. But still—I could not imagine they would carry their dislike as far as that!'

'Well, to me it looks very much as though it had not been altogether an accident,' Monck declared bluntly. 'So, take my advice, my lad, and keep your eyes open; and if you get into any trouble, or suspect any danger, do not hesitate to let me know at once.'

CHAPTER IX. ARMEATH'S SECRET.

The weeks passed on, and still the *Ivenia* continued on her tremendous journey through space to meet the advancing planet Mars. She travelled at a rate which would make the heads of young readers swim if it were set down in figures. Yet she glided on so smoothly that those on board might well have thought she was all the time standing motionless in one place. How this was accomplished was one of those secrets which Monck confessed himself unable to explain. And the same may here be said of some other mysteries which puzzled Mr Armeath not a little. One was, that there was a feeling of weight or gravity on board much the same as upon the Earth. Another puzzle was, how was the supply of air kept always pure and wholesome? These were among the things that Ivanta kept to himself. The Earth sank away into the distance, gradually diminishing in size till it became no larger to the view than the moon when it is full. Then came a time when it looked like a rather large star of a pale-bluish tint.

On board, the time passed, for the most part, pleasantly enough. There was plenty to do—plenty of work and plenty of amusement. King Ivanta was a ruler who believed in the policy of keeping his people busy in one way or another. Every person on board was compelled to give a certain amount of time each day to work or study of some kind; while a certain interval was also set aside for recreations. The latter were of many kinds. There were concerts—for the Martians seemed to be all fond of music—games, somewhat after the style of football, tennis, and other athletic sports; and, not least, military exercises, in which the soldiers took part and contended for prizes. These—which the chums always watched with the utmost interest—often took the form of actual combats. Sometimes they were between two champions, sometimes between parties of fifty or a hundred; and amongst the latter there were often many 'slain' on both sides; but they always came to life a little later, none the worse for the experience.

Then it was that the chums saw the use made of the shields borne by the

soldiers, which Gerald had first noticed when he had been a prisoner. They were, as stated, transparent, and it now appeared that they were used as a protection against the mysterious power of the 'tridents,' or 'electric guns.' Just as electricity will not pass through glass, so the curious 'flash' from the tridents could not pass through these shields. The heads, feet, and legs of the combatants, and some other parts of their bodies, were also protected in similar fashion, so that they appeared to be partly dressed in shining armour. They wore helmets, breastplates, and leg and thigh pieces, which looked like glass, yet were not brittle, and which, like the shields, were proof against the power of the tridents.

Thus, a duel between two antagonists equipped in this manner resolved itself, to a great extent, into a trial of skill in the use of the shield. Through it each could see the other; and many were the feints and stratagems resorted to by a practised fighter to get at his foe behind his shield.

Every night King Ivanta held a levee or other Court function, which all who were off duty were free to attend, and at which very curious entertainments were sometimes provided.

Altogether there was no lack either of occupation or amusement during the three months which the voyage lasted.

Gerald and Jack applied themselves assiduously to learn the Martian language, and in this they were joined by Mr Armeath. Then, by way of relaxation, they gained the king's permission to learn the mysteries and use of the trident and shield. Monck fitted them out in suits of the shining armour, and they practised under the instruction of one named Aveena, a young noble of the Court. Thanks to his tuition, they became so expert that they entered for contests before the king, and came off victorious in more than one bout with others of their own age. Silas Zuanstroom was one of those they each vanquished in turn; only with the result, however, of increasing the coldness which had grown up between the two parties of travellers from the Earth.

One day, Gerald met with yet another disagreeable adventure in the Zoo, and again narrowly escaped a terrible death. This time it was a large venomous serpent of vicious and aggressive disposition, which (again by some 'accident') had got loose just about the time when Gerald, unarmed and unsuspecting of danger, was taking his stroll round the cages. Monck came upon him, a little later, clinging to the upper branches of a tall palm-like tree, which the serpent was slowly climbing, bent on reaching him.

This time the engineer reported the matter to the king, who sternly ordered a strict inquiry with the object of finding out who was to blame. But no evidence was forthcoming to show that the occurrence had been other than an accident; and the affair ended in the punishment of one of the keepers in charge for negligence.

But more exciting events were steadily preparing, and began to develop as the voyage went on.

One morning the two chums were called into Armeath's private apartment, where he was awaiting them with Monck. He explained that he had received the king's permission to impart to them an important piece of information. 'I am going to entrust you with a bit of a secret,' said he, 'and I must ask you to regard it as confidential, and say nothing about it to any one—particularly to the Zuanstrooms; which, of course, includes the two lads. Doubtless you have wondered what it was which induced King Ivanta to pay a second visit to our Earth. It is this, that what we call precious stones do not exist naturally in Mars. None were ever seen there until the king brought back a quantity after his first visit.'

Gerald burst into an exclamation. 'Just what I guessed, sir,' he cried. 'I have had that idea in my mind for some time!'

'It was a shrewd guess, lad,' Monck observed. 'The fact is, that once the Martians had set eyes on them they went almost mad over them, and became clamorous for a larger supply to be brought, in order that those who could afford it might be able to purchase some.'

'Our gracious master, who is continually thinking what new thing he can do to please his people, determined to pay a second visit to the Earth specially to secure a large supply. Hence his taking up with Zuanstroom, the "Diamond King." But Zuanstroom was not easy to arrange with. When he learned the actual state of the case, he insisted, as a part of the bargain, that my master should promise to bring him over to Mars for a trip, and take him safely back. Nothing less would satisfy him.'

'I see,' said Jack. 'And I suppose his diamonds are on board too—a whole shipload of them, so to speak?'

'Exactly. The greatest load of treasure, I suppose, that has ever been carried on any ship of the air or the sea.'

'But,' said Gerald, 'the Zuanstrooms know all this. Why mustn't we speak to them about it?'

'Because, at this point, I come to my story,' Armeath said, with a half-smile. 'For years I have been experimenting, trying to manufacture precious stones artificially. At last I succeeded in getting diamonds from a certain mineral; only to find, however, that the discovery was almost valueless, because I could not get enough of the particular mineral. I found out that there was some in the island we have been living on, and that was the reason I went there to stay for a time. When, however, I understood what King Ivanta wanted, I told him of my experiments, showed him the results, and he was highly delighted. He said it would be easier and cheaper to manufacture diamonds than to buy them from

the Diamond King on his own terms.'

'But how can that be done, sir, if the necessary material is so scarce?' asked practical Jack.

'You shall hear. King Ivanta recognised the mineral, and declares that there is plenty of it to be obtained from the planet Saturn. He saw quantities of it when he was there!'

'Then we are to go to Saturn to obtain a supply; I suppose?' cried Gerald, full of enthusiasm at the prospect of this new and unexpected addition to their programme of adventure.

'That I cannot yet say,' replied Armeath. 'We must hear what the king says.'

'But, sir,' exclaimed Jack, 'you would not think of leaving us alone—stranded—upon a strange planet! Suppose you never came back!'

'It is not a pleasant place to visit; I can tell you that much,' Monck put in. 'Saturn, at the present time, is in the stage which the scientists tell us the Earth was in, ages ago, when the great antediluvian monsters existed. Those monsters—or similar ones—are alive now on Saturn; and terrible creatures they are, I can assure you! The *amalpi*—the unicorn-like animal which hunted you, Master Gerald—is one which we managed to capture and bring back from Saturn. But it is small and almost harmless compared with some of the animals and reptiles we saw there! I do not think I would go there again, Mr Armeath, of my own choice, even for the sake of bushels of diamonds!'

'If I go, it will not be exactly for the reason you suppose, my friend,' returned Armeath. He spoke very gravely, and with a note of sadness in his tone. 'Your king, in most things, has shown himself a very wise monarch; but I think he has made a mistake in introducing jewels at all amongst his subjects. Upon our globe they have always been the cause of heartburning, envy, jealousy, and all kinds of evil passions. In too many cases they have proved, as all of us know, a veritable curse, and have led to crimes innumerable. But, for good or for evil, your master has made certain promises, and arranged certain things with the Diamond King. King Ivanta's people are all agog, waiting in clamorous impatience for the cargo of jewels which we are taking to them. It is too late now to alter that; but, look you! what if I prove to them that jewels just as good can be made as cheaply as bits of glass? What will be the consequence?'

'Nobody will want them,' Monck answered, laughing.

'Just so! And that, in my opinion, would be for the future benefit of all the inhabitants of Mars! It is for that—and with that idea alone—that I am ready to risk the danger of a trip to Saturn.'

'If that be so, then I am with you,' exclaimed the engineer. 'It is a worthy object, and I will help you all I can! But to obtain the mineral you want will be almost like undertaking over again the fabled labours of Hercules, for the place

where it exists is guarded by creatures more formidable than the fabled Hydra, and more terrible than the worst of the ancient dragons!’

CHAPTER X.

CAPTURED BY A COMET.

The *Ivenia*, the great Martian airship, sped onwards upon its wonderful voyage for a period of nearly two months without anything occurring to interrupt its continuous progress. Then, one night, there came a startling interruption of its smooth, gliding flight through space—one that nearly terminated it for good and all.

It so happened that the two chums were sitting up that night with Mr Armeath in the conning-tower, a privilege but seldom accorded to any one not actually engaged in the navigation of the ship. The officer in charge, however, was one named Malanda, the one who had been in attendance on the king when Gerald had saved his life. He it was who had recognised the lad at the critical moment when he had been a prisoner, and since that time he had treated him with marked kindness.

The conning-tower was a roomy apartment, very curiously constructed. It could be raised or depressed by mechanical means, so that at some times it projected above the outer surface of the ship, while at others it was just level with it. In the former case there was a clear view in all directions except immediately beneath; in the latter there was no direct view save upwards; but the images of outside objects were then thrown on to a screen, as in a camera-obscura.

Upon this eventful night the conning-tower had been raised, and the two chums had been amusing themselves by peering through powerful telescopes at the heavenly bodies around them.

It was truly a wonderful, a fascinating sight, and one which Gerald, especially, was never tired of contemplating. The various constellations blazed out with a vividness and beauty far exceeding their appearance as seen through our atmosphere from the surface of the Earth. Thanks to Malanda, the two lads had learned to distinguish the planets from the far-more distant fixed stars. They knew that the latter were at such tremendous distances that they ‘didn’t count,’ as Jack put it; the only ones they were likely to have anything to do with being the planets, which, like our Earth, are always revolving round our sun.

Of course, as they were going to visit Mars, they watched that orb particularly; and they felt a special interest in noting how its pinkish-red light increased in size and intensity as they drew nearer. Next in interest came our Earth, which they had so recently left, whose bluish light waned exactly in proportion as that of Mars waxed stronger. Then there was beautiful Saturn, with its wondrous rings of light; perhaps they were also to visit that mysterious orb, and learn what those lustrous bands were composed of!

Besides these, there were plenty of curious things to watch and admire. The planets had their moons in attendance upon them—some having two, some as many as eight—all behaving as our own moon does—each, that is to say, showing in turn as a thin crescent, a half-moon, a full-moon, and so on; and the voyagers had watched these changes with interest which never flagged. It seemed such a strange thing to think of: several moons round one planet; one, perhaps, a new moon; and two or three others near the full, all shining at the same time!

Now, it was while they were gazing at these beautiful sights that Jack noticed a tiny speck of light which struck him as unfamiliar. He mentioned it in an undertone to Gerald, who, just then, was half-watching what was to be seen of Saturn, half-dreaming of what lay beyond. Gerald pointed his telescope in the direction indicated, and looked at the speck of light, but seeing nothing particular in its appearance, turned his attention again to other objects.

Jack, however, was more observant. His acute, practical sense had told him that here was something different from anything he had seen before. He promptly recognised two or three very important points in connection with it. One was that its light was different in colour from that of anything else he could see. Another was that it was very unsteady, yet it did not 'twinkle' as do the far-distant stars; and yet another was that it was growing in intensity very quickly.

'Therefore,' said Jack to himself, 'I believe it must be comparatively near, and coming towards us at a most tremendous rate.' Finally, he drew Mr Armeath's attention to the phenomenon.

Armeath in turn pointed it out to Malanda, who had no sooner glanced at it than he rushed across the floor of the chamber to some levers, which he began to manipulate, at the same time setting a number of bells ringing in various parts of the great aerostat. One of these, as it afterwards appeared, rang out its urgent message in the sleeping-apartment of the king, who roused at once from his slumber and hurried to the conning-tower.

Before his arrival, however, the alarm bells had summoned others to the place, and from their excited talk the chums quickly learnt the cause of the excitement. For they had worked at the study of the Martian language to such good purpose that by this time they could understand most of what was said.

There were many confused exclamations, and much incoherent talk; but

amidst it all they heard again and again the cry, 'A comet! A comet!'

Just then Jack found the engineer Monck beside him, and he asked for further information.

'I cannot tell you much about it now, my lad,' was the reply; 'but I know that this is one of the gravest dangers of our voyage. Comets have well been called "the spectres of space." The planets and their moons move in certain well-defined orbits or tracks, and you know exactly where you are likely to meet them and what to do if you wish to avoid them. But comets seem to be controlled by no known law, and you never can tell where you may encounter them. Compared with any of the planets, they are, of course, small; but they are enormous compared with our aerostat, and quite big enough to accomplish our destruction if one of them ran against us. So you can understand that great care is necessary when one is sighted.'

'These people seem very excited; do you think there is serious danger, sir?' Gerald asked.

'No, no—a—at least, I hope not. But when a comet is anywhere near it is always a relief when we are safely past it. You will see, however, that all will quiet down when our royal master is here. He is the only one, I believe, who really knows how to meet the danger.'

The words were scarcely spoken when they were verified by the king's arrival. As his stately form strode into the chamber, a great hush fell upon those assembled there, and, like magic, quiet and orderly procedure took the place of what had looked very much like unreasoning panic.

He stood for a few moments gazing around to take in the situation, then he looked at the advancing comet, which could now be plainly seen without any telescope furiously rushing, at tremendous speed, seemingly straight at the ship.

Flashes and bursts of light accompanied it like explosions of mighty bombshells, lighting up the interior of the conning-tower as might flashes of terrible lightning. Already it had grown from a tiny speck of light to a ball of fire as large as our moon looks at the full; and it was rapidly growing bigger and bigger.

Then Ivanta gave a series of orders in sharp, commanding tones, and some of the crowd of officers went off to execute them. The doors of the chamber were closed, and a moment later the conning-tower sank down, and all became dark save for a fiery image which was now to be seen upon a large screen. This gave a view of the comet as it would have appeared if they had still been looking direct at it. From the apparent size of a moon it had now grown to twice as large as our sun looks to us. Its shape was no longer round, but was changing each second, the continual explosions sending out irregular masses of fire upon all sides in turn.

Even as seen upon the screen it was an awful sight to look upon. It seemed

like some gigantic, fiery monster bent upon devouring them.

Armeath put a hand affectionately upon each of his wards. He could see that the position of the aerostat was critical, and that they were all in terrible danger. It was not a moment for talk or comment, but he bent down and whispered a few words in the ears of the two lads. 'We are in the hands of God, my boys,' he said devoutly. 'Such things as these are but some of the smallest and most puny of His great works! If He so wills it we shall pass the danger safely, and live to remember it with admiration and wonder in place of fear!'

The fiery shape grew in size till it covered the whole screen, and in intensity till, even as thus reflected, the light from it was almost blinding. Then there came a close, stifling feeling, and the chamber grew so hot as to become almost intolerable. They were conscious of something which whizzed past them with a frightful roar. In a second it was gone, and the heat and light grew perceptibly less.

'It has passed!' murmured Armeath; and he breathed a prayer of thankfulness.

Monck, who had remained alongside them, gave a gasp of relief.

'That's the nearest brush we've ever had since I've been on board!' he muttered.

'Has it really gone? Are we safe now, do you think, sir?' Gerald asked in a whisper. Both lads had held their breath at the critical moment. Though they had shown no signs of panic, the strain had been pretty severe, and they breathed more freely now.

'Yes, it has gone—shot past us like a flash. And now'—

Suddenly the aerostat gave a lurch, and then swerved from its course so abruptly as almost to throw the voyagers off their feet. To them it felt as if it had swung round in a great half-circle, and was now flying along in the opposite direction to that in which they had been going.

It was the first time since leaving the Earth that the travellers had experienced anything that could be called a jar or swerve; and they now stared at one another in startled surprise.

What could it mean?

Ivanta's voice was heard issuing hurried orders, and his officers hastened to execute them. Malanda crossed the floor to handle a lever near to where Monck was standing.

'What is it, friend Malanda?' asked the engineer, in an anxious undertone.

'We are caught in the attractive power of the comet,' was the answer, 'and it is pulling us along after it. Unless we can manage to fight free, this ship will follow the comet through space as long as it may continue to rush about on its

erratic journey, which would probably mean at least a thousand years!

CHAPTER XI. 'WELCOME TO MARS!'

The minutes which followed Malanda's startling announcement were anxious ones indeed for those of the voyagers who had heard it. The great majority on board, however, were happily ignorant of what had happened, and knew nothing about it till subsequently.

Even Armeath and his companions could not afterwards tell much more about it than has been here set down, for the reason that Ivanta ordered the conning-tower to be cleared of every one save two or three of his officers. So they had to march out with the others; and of what went on inside, or whether the aerostat was likely ever to struggle out of its fearful position, they in the meanwhile knew nothing. For what seemed a long, weary time they could only wait on in suspense while the issue was being decided.

It was a good half-hour before the welcome news was brought to them that the king had succeeded in getting his ship free from the comet's sinister influence; and then no further particulars were vouchsafed. How it had been done was again one of those secrets which Ivanta kept strictly to himself. All that was made known was that the aerostat had now resumed her voyage, and that, as it happened, no harm had been done.

A few days later, Gerald was seated in one of the large conservatories, reading a book which he had borrowed. Both he and Jack could now read the Martian language fairly well, and they found in the library on board a new storehouse of wonders of the most fascinating description. Hearing footsteps, he glanced up, and saw that Tom Clinch had come to seek him.

'Could I 'ave a wurd wi' you, Mr Gerald?' Clinch asked.

'Certainly, Tom. What's the trouble?'

'Well, Mr Gerald, it be like this. I've 'eerd—it's odd 'ow things do get about—as we was nearly run down t'other night by a comet or some such blamed foolishness.'

Gerald looked with surprise upon the weather-beaten features of the faithful henchman, and with difficulty repressed a smile as he noted their woe-begone expression.

'I don't know how you managed to learn so much, Tom,' he answered quietly; 'but something of the kind did occur, I believe. Still, there is no occasion for you to take it so seriously. The danger is past; and they tell me it's not likely to happen again during the rest of our journey.'

But Tom Clinch was not so easily comforted. He shook his head with a dissatisfied grunt.

'Ow does they know?' he asked dubiously. 'They doan't keep a proper lookout, Mr Gerald, that's what's the matter, else they 'd 'a sighted this reckless galoot afore she got so near. They'd 'a seen as she wurn't under proper control, an' they should 'a sounded the siren. Why doan't they 'ave somebody perched on the top, outside, in a little sort o' crow's-nest? They could 'ave a speakin'-tube to shout through if ye like.'

'I 'm afraid it wouldn't answer; it would be rather uncomfortable—and, um—well, a little cold for the man outside,' replied Gerald gravely, though his eyes were twinkling. 'But is that all you wish to say?'

'Why, no, sir. Me an' Bob Reid, we've talked it over, an' we's agreed t' offer t' run the look-out for 'em, turn an' turn about, if ye likes. We's old sailors, an' we knows the ropes, an' we 'd keep a proper watch. Seems t' me as the people aboard 'ere be mostly landlubbers, what ain't got no nautical knollidge like.'

Gerald listened with a sympathetic air, for though he was naturally vastly amused, Tom looked so very much in earnest that he had not the heart to seem to ridicule his well-meant suggestion.

Promising, therefore, that he would make the generous offer known in the proper quarter, he dismissed the old sailor, just as his chum Jack came upon the scene.

Gerald did not notice at the moment that Jack looked serious too, and proceeded to tell him, with a laugh, what Clinch had been saying.

'Fancy the two honest old worthies talking this over, and coming sedately to me with such an offer!' said he. 'What an idea—that they should have a lookout placed outside, where the temperature runs far below that of liquid air! Jupiter!'

Then he noticed, for the first time, that his chum was also looking troubled.

'Why, what's amiss?' he asked. 'You and Tom Clinch seem alike to-day—you both remind me of the Knight of the Troubled Countenance. You look as if you wanted cheering up. You should read this book I 've got hold of; it would make you laugh.'

'What is it about?'

'It's written by some old Martian crank of an astronomer, and contains his speculations upon the subject of the Earth. They call us, you know, the evening star; for so our planet appears to them, just as Venus does to us. Well, he is writing and speculating about their evening star—that is, about our world—and

he declares his conviction that it cannot be inhabited by human beings like those living on Mars. He argues that because the light from our Earth shines with a bluish tint, therefore, if there are people on it, they must have blue skins. He brings forward a lot of most convincing arguments to support this theory, and winds up by declaring that if our world is really inhabited, it can only be by a race of ape-like creatures, with blue skins and bodies partly covered with green hair!

'H'm! So much for some people's scientific theories. However, I've got something else to talk to you about just now. While you've been reading and dreaming, and going about with your head in the clouds'—

'Above the clouds, Jack—far, far above the clouds! Be practical, now. Consider! Are we not far above the clouds?'

'Will you listen, you incorrigible dreamer?' exclaimed Jack impatiently. 'I want to tell you that I am afraid there is some fresh trouble brewing in which those Zuanstrooms are mixed up. Two or three times lately I have come upon their youngster, Freddy, wandering about in melancholy fashion, and when I asked him why he was alone, he said, each time, that they had sent him out because the "ugly old man" had come there to talk, and he was in the way. Now, by "ugly old man" Freddy means the one you called the Ogre—Kazzaro. The question naturally suggests itself, why should there be secret conferences between that worthy and the Diamond King?'

'Seems funny, doesn't it? Have you mentioned anything about it to our guardian or Mr Monck?'

'Not yet. You see, I haven't anything definite to go upon. But I'm going to keep my eyes open, and I mean, if I can, to find out what it really is that is going on between the Zuanstrooms and the crowd they've become so thick with.'

'Well, I'll help you to keep an eye on them too. Neither Kazzaro nor Mr Zuanstroom is any friend of ours; that we know. I do believe that if they could have their way they would throw us off the ship, and leave us to go whizzing about in space like a couple of little comets.'

However, time passed on without anything further occurring to strengthen Jack's suspicions; and soon they were almost forgotten in the interest and excitement which sprang up and grew from day to day as they neared the end of the voyage.

The apparent size of Mars was visibly increasing each time they looked at it, till at last it seemed to take up the whole of the firmament in front of them. It was a wonderful, and in many ways an awe-inspiring, sight. For, just as when they had been leaving the Earth it seemed to be our globe which was travelling away from them—not they from the Earth—so now Mars appeared to be coming towards them, and at a frightful pace. Majestic, magnificent, inconceivably grand,

it certainly was; but there was something oppressive in its very grandeur, something awful in its swift, silent approach, something terrible in its overwhelming greatness.

Seas and continents began to show upon its surface, till the wondering spectators could see the whole of one side laid out as on a gigantic map. And there, plain to the eye, were the so-called 'canals,' those curious constructions or formations which our earthly astronomers have viewed through their telescopes and puzzled over for so many years, and which are supposed to be artificial canals upon a gigantic scale.

At last, the *Ivenia* entered the planet's atmosphere, through which they had been viewing everything as through a faint-pinkish haze. Then a great change took place in the outward appearance of the aerostat. The upper covering was removed, the immense wings were spread, a beautifully carved and decorated 'figurehead,' like the head of a colossal bird, was run out at one end and a tail-like addition at the other.

Monck led Mr Armeath and his companions out on to the upper deck.

'You may now safely venture into the open air,' he observed; 'for, unknown to you, the air within the aerostat has been gradually changing, and becoming denser. We are all, therefore, now acclimatised, and you will feel no ill effects.'

As they looked through their glasses, the two lads uttered exclamations of astonishment and admiration.

Below them could be seen an extensive city, built beside an arm of the sea, which, instead of being blue, was of an ethereal, rosy tint. There were towering palaces and noble buildings, vast embankments and terraces, surrounded by beautiful gardens, amidst which could be distinguished stately colonnades, winding streams, and glistening fountains and cascades.

The *Ivenia* swept downwards with a swift, gliding motion, in a series of wide circles, like some giant bird poised on outstretched wings. There was no vibration, no jar, no motion even of the wide-spreading wings as she sank lightly and gracefully through the air.

And as she descended, the air below became filled with what at first had the appearance of a great flight of birds.

Gerald asked what they were, and Monck bade him look again through his glasses. Then he saw that what he had mistaken for distant birds were in reality numbers of flying-machines mounting upwards to meet the *Ivenia*.

A little later these smaller air-craft were swarming round the great aerostat, the occupants uttering shouts and cries of joyous welcome to their returning king. These flying-machines were of all shapes and kinds, and they thronged round Ivanta's superb 'chariot of the skies' as might a swarm of steamers, yachts, and other craft round a mighty warship bearing our own king back to England's

shores after a foreign trip.

Finally, the wondrous structure landed easily and quietly upon the ground in the midst of a vast crowd of people; and, as she came to rest, King Ivanta stepped out from the conning-tower and showed himself to the shouting throng.

Then, turning to Armeath and the others whom he had brought with him as guests, he said, with a charming mixture of royal dignity and kindly condescension, 'Welcome, my friends! Welcome to our world! Welcome to Mars!'

CHAPTER XII.

PRINCE ALONDRA.

As King Ivanta spoke to his visitors the words 'Welcome to Mars!' there came a rustling sound, and a strange figure, shining and glistening in the sunlight, suddenly appeared on the deck beside him.

So rapidly had it arrived that the startled spectators scarcely saw more than the sheen from its resplendent body before it was amongst them, alighting with the grace and ease of a swallow close to the king, whom it addressed in joyous, laughing accents, 'Welcome, father! welcome home!'

Even King Ivanta was evidently taken by surprise, for at first he scarcely seemed to understand this arrival any more than the strangers from Earth did. The next moment, however, he had clasped the radiant vision in his arms in a close embrace. Then he drew back and regarded the youth—for such the figure was—critically. 'Why, Alondra, my son,' said he, 'what is this surprise?'

Alondra, as the visitors were soon to learn, was Ivanta's son, his only child. He was about the same age as Gerald, with an exceedingly handsome, open, merry-looking countenance, lithe and graceful in figure and in every movement. On this occasion he was clad in a most bizarre costume, which included two large wings, just now folded back behind the shoulders, and trailing on the floor of the deck.

It was impossible to guess what these wings could be made of. The surface was composed of thin, feathery flakes in constant motion, which glistened in the sunshine with iridescent brilliance, something between the sheen of silver and the sparkle of crystal. A tunic of the same marvellous material covered the body to the knees, below which were attachments like smaller wings, which now fitted closely round the ankles.

Evidently this wondrous outfit was as new and surprising to the king as it was to the strangers.

The youth seemed delighted at the impression he had created. He walked to and fro, opening and folding his wings, and turning this way and that to show them off to advantage.

'Almost all my own invention, father,' he laughed, as he moved about—'mine and Amaldo's! We were afraid we should not get it finished and in working order before your return. Indeed, I only took my trial-flight in it yesterday! Is it not a splendid creation?'

He opened the wings and fluttered them in the sunlight. Ripples of light and dancing colours ran incessantly over the surface, producing effects so exquisitely varied and beautiful as to be absolutely indescribable.

'It is perfect, Alondra! Truly, as you say, a splendid creation!' said Ivanta admiringly.

'These things, however, are a little too long when folded, as you can see,' Alondra continued, looking down at them with a critical air. 'I must have them shortened. You can see that if you are not careful you may catch your feet in them and get a tumble.'

In order the better to explain his meaning, he stepped backwards towards Gerald, who was standing near, watching everything with intense interest.

Scarcely had the young experimenter uttered the words than he involuntarily illustrated them, in the most practical fashion, by tripping on one of the wings, and rolling over at Gerald's feet.

Gerald stepped quickly forward to help him up, and in doing so was astonished at the youth's seeming lightness. So light was he that Gerald, in trying to raise him, lifted him clean off his feet, almost as though he had been made of cork. As a consequence, Alondra came near to losing his balance and rolling over again. Then the two stood staring and smiling at one another.

'Why, how strong you must be!' exclaimed the young prince.

'H—how light you must be!' was Gerald's answer. And he looked so very puzzled and perplexed that the other burst into a merry peal of laughter. Then he turned to the king. 'Father,' he began, but stopped and hesitated.

Ivanta interpreted the inquiring look. 'Your surprising creation has made me forgetful of other matters, my son,' said he. 'I owe an apology to our friends here. These gentlemen, Alondra, are visitors from Lokris, the planet I have been to visit. They are our guests. I need not say more than that to commend them to your attention and care.—My guests, this is my son, Prince Alondra, who, I am sure, is ready to add his welcome to my own!'

'That I am!' cried the young prince, his handsome face alight with interest and surprise. 'A warm welcome to you all! Welcome to Zotis!'

'Ah, they do not know our world by our name!' Ivanta reminded him. 'They call it Mars.'

'Welcome, then, to Mars!' said Alondra.

He held out both hands at once; and, as it happened, he caught hold of one each of Gerald and Jack, and they returned his greeting as heartily as it was given. Then he caught sight of Monck, who was standing a little in the background. At once he made a dart for him.

'Why, there is Monck Affelda!' he cried. 'You have returned, then! Welcome, dear friend! I was afraid that, perhaps, when you got back to your own world you would stay there, and we should never see you more!'

'Alondra, here are others waiting to know you!' the king reminded him.

And the lad at once turned obediently, with a look of quick apology at Monck for not saying more at the moment.

All the rest of the strangers having been duly presented, Ivanta gave his attention to his own subjects, who were now streaming up the ladders which had been let down the sides of the aerostat and crowding the deck to pay their respects to their sovereign.

Alondra, meantime, stepped back to where the two chums were standing with their guardian and the engineer, and commenced a lively chat, asking them a hundred questions concerning the world they came from, the incidents of the voyage, and so forth.

Both Gerald and Jack took to him at once. It was almost impossible, indeed, to do otherwise. His frank, gay, smiling manner, his attractive face, and easy, graceful air captivated them completely. Never, they afterwards declared, had they met so attractive a personality. 'A true son of the stars,' Jack dubbed him. Glad were they then that they had made such good use of their time and had learned the language of their hosts in advance. Even Silas, who presently joined the group, became quite amiable under the young prince's genial influence; and little Freddy fell in love with him then and there.

Naturally, amongst these young people, there was a lot to ask about on both sides. Question followed question, inquiries and explanations were interrupted with exclamations of surprise, wonder, admiration, and delight.

Then Alondra caught sight of others who were known to him, among them Aveena the young noble, and went off to greet them on their return.

'He is a splendid youngster, the prince,' observed Monck admiringly. 'Everybody loves him. Clever, too—quite a young inventor, I can assure you.'

'What is this flying-dress affair?' asked Jack. 'Do people fly here, then? Or is this the first time it has been done?'

'To the last question the reply would be both yes and no,' Monck answered. 'If you had noticed, as we came down, you would have seen many aeronauts

flying about singly amongst the various airships and flying-machines.'

'I thought I saw something of the kind,' Jack returned. 'But we circled about so rapidly, and there were so many buzzing around, that I scarcely had a chance to make them out.'

'As you now know, the air here is very dense.'

'To me it seems very light and exhilarating,' Gerald put in. 'I expected, when you used to tell us it was so dense, to find, when we arrived here, that we should scarcely be able to breathe.'

'Ah, that is another matter which I will explain directly. As I have told you before, the air here is so dense that to make a flying-machine was never a matter of any great difficulty. For the same reason, with a properly constructed pair of wings, you can, after a little practice under expert tuition, very soon learn to soar into the air, and fly about after a fashion. It has, however, hitherto, it must be confessed, been a rather clumsy fashion. Now, this is the first time I have seen it really gracefully and easily done. I knew before we went away that Prince Alondra and his tutor—an old scientist named Amaldo, who was also the king's tutor when he was a boy—were at work upon some new device which was understood to be the prince's own idea originally. What it was I never knew exactly, for they kept it a sort of half-secret. Here, however, it seems, is the outcome of the idea; and a very successful outcome too, so far as I can judge.'

'What is the invention?' asked practical Jack. 'Does it consist, I mean, in the dress, in the material of which it is composed—wonderful stuff it certainly seems to be—or in a new shape for the wings, or what?'

'Ah, that is exactly what I do not yet know any more than you. Doubtless, the prince will enlighten us ere long—when he has enjoyed the general mystification a little longer.'

'Well, now, to turn to the other point. You say the air here feels to you light and exhilarating rather than dense and heavy. It is not exactly the air which gives you this feeling; it is due rather to the difference in what we call gravity. On Mars, things weigh only half what they would weigh on our Earth. It follows that our muscles feel stronger in proportion. It requires less strength, less exertion, to lift your leg or your arm. Every action or movement, great or small, is easier—even breathing. Therefore, you have a sense of lightness, of ease, of unusual strength.'

A light broke upon Gerald. 'I see! That was why the prince seemed so light to me when I went to help him up just now!' he cried.

'Exactly. We who have come from Earth, and who possess muscles used to the greater weight of everything there, are all "strong men" here. You will find this one of the first and one of the most curious of your experiences here.'

Just then they saw King Ivanta approaching, bringing Alondra with him. They had left the crowd of richly arrayed courtiers and officers to come across to

Gerald.

'Alondra,' said the king, indicating Gerald as they drew near, 'I wish to commend this brave young gentleman to your especial care; and I hope you two will become good friends. You must teach him to fly. If he learns to fly as well as he has learned to swim, then I can testify that he should make a clever performer; for he saved your father's life!'

CHAPTER XIII. THE PALACE IN THE CLOUDS.

Ivanta said a few more kindly words, and then returned to the brilliant circle he had left, this time beckoning the Diamond King to accompany him.

'My father says I may conduct you to our home,' said Alondra, as the king went away. 'So, if you are agreeable, we will start at once. My yacht is waiting close by.'

'We are ready, I think,' said Armeath. But in his manner there was some hesitation.

Monck interposed. 'You are thinking of your baggage,' he said, with a smile; 'but you need not trouble. It will be looked after, and whatever you want will be brought on afterwards.'

'Good! That being so, we are at your service, Prince. Shall our attendants come with us?'

'I dare say they will feel a bit lost if you leave them alone in a strange world,' laughed Alondra. 'So, by all means bring them with you, if it so pleases you.'

So Tom Clinch and Bob Reid, looking very confused and wonderstruck at their new surroundings, were sent for; and the whole party followed Alondra—who had been joined by Aveena—to the other end of the deck.

Here, to their surprise, they found a most beautiful structure awaiting them, moored, so to speak, to the *Ivenia*.

Compared with the great aerostat in which they had made their memorable voyage, she was like a tiny, graceful yacht beside one of our modern warships; yet she was large and roomy enough to accommodate a numerous party.

Alondra led his guests across a gangway on to the deck, and then, begging them to excuse him, he dived into a cabin. In a minute or two he returned, having divested himself of his 'flying dress,' and appearing now in a rich costume similar

to that usually worn by the king and his courtiers.

He gave the signal, ropes were cast off, unseen engines began to work with a quiet, smooth, scarcely perceptible vibration, setting in motion several curious spiral contrivances which revolved round three masts.

The 'yacht' rose quietly through the air, and when she was clear of the *Ivenia*, wings spread out on each side. Then she sailed swiftly away in a direction a little to the right of the city they had seen.

'What a curious arrangement!' exclaimed Jack, as he watched the revolving spirals.

'They take the place of fans,' Monck explained. 'They are far more handy and more powerful.'

'And far prettier too!' cried Gerald. 'What lovely coloured devices they make as they twirl round! They are like kaleidoscopes; and the wings, too, seem to be spangled with gold.'

'She is a beautifully designed structure in every way,' observed Monck. 'One of the latest and best, and also one of the fastest of our pleasure yachts.'

Meanwhile, a little apart, Tom Clinch and Bob Reid sat together, staring about, noticing everything, and making their comments in low, awe-struck tones.

'Well, well! that ever I should live t' see the likes o' this!' said Clinch. 'What d'ye think of it all, Bob?'

'I 'm thinkin' what 'd happen if she was t' shift 'er ballast, Tom. I do 'ope it be well stowed.'

'Ay, ay, Bob. Theer be a lot in the way a ship be ballasted. But 'ow do she manage t' keep up? That 's what beats me! Them wings scarcely moves at all.'

'Tom,' said Reid, leaning over to speak almost in a whisper, 'don't ye notice what queer sort o' air this be 'ere? 'Tain't a bit like ourn at 'ome.'

'No, it ain't. I notices that. What about it?'

'It must be some o' the liquid air I've read of, as scientific chaps thinks a lot of in our world. Depend on it, this is where it comes from!'

Tom slapped his thigh.

'Right ye are, mate! That explanations it. That 's 'ow 'tis she floats like this 'ere. They be all a-livin' 'ere in liquid air! An' them wings bain't wings at all! They be fins!'

Just then Monck drew Armeath's attention to a comparatively large, heavy-looking airship which was just rising into the air from near where the *Ivenia* lay.

'That,' said he, 'is one of King Agrando's war-vessels; or rather she was formerly a war-craft, but now she serves the purpose of a private yacht. She is just starting off to carry him and his people back to their own country.'

'Is that far away, Mr Monck?' Gerald asked.

'Yes. A pretty good distance as distances are reckoned on this globe.'

'The farther away the better, I should say,' muttered Jack. 'Good riddance go with him!'

A little while afterwards they neared a grand-looking mass of rock which rose abruptly from the plains below. It was a precipitous mountain, and upon its lofty summit, literally amongst the clouds, rose the noble towers and domes of the most stately building the strangers had ever seen.

They realised at once that none of our earthly buildings could compare with this magnificent pile. As the yacht rose in the air, and they obtained a better view, their amazement increased, every moment exhibiting more clearly its vast proportions and revealing some fresh surprise. What it might be built of was a puzzle; for it shone through the rosy haze with a golden lustre, and looked a veritable fairy palace of the upper air.

'Wh-what is that wonderful sight? Is it another town—a real town—or an effect of sunlight among the clouds?' gasped Gerald.

'That is King Ivanta's palace,' said Monck quietly. 'It is Alondra's home—the place we are going to stay at.'

'But how do you get to it?'

'The way we are getting to it now; there is no other way. No person could climb up that mountain. There is no road, no path to it. It can only be approached by airship.'

Just then a hoarse shout was heard, and there came a loud clanging of bells and gongs.

Amidst it all, Tom Clinch's voice was clearly heard. 'Avast theer, ye ga-loots!' he cried. 'Port yer helm, ye blunderin' lubbers! Can't ye see yer runnin' inter us?'

So absorbed had the strangers been in gazing at the palace on the mountain-top that they had not noticed a flying-craft which had been travelling behind them, and had almost overtaken them. Alondra and his attendants, seeing the effect produced upon his guests by the scene before them, had reduced the speed, and allowed the yacht to float upwards in leisurely fashion, omitting to look out for what might be behind them.

There was now a sudden bustle on board as the navigators rushed to the various levers, and a moment later the yacht dropped suddenly with a downward swoop, allowing the strange craft to pass harmlessly overhead.

'Jupiter!' cried Gerald, 'that was a near squeak! What careless people they must be! Is that sort of thing common here?'

Monck scowled and shook his head. 'No,' he said curtly. 'And there will be trouble about it to-morrow. Some one will be called to account for it, you may be sure!'

Alondra made no remark, but coolly resumed the journey as though noth-

ing out of the way had happened.

Gradually they drew nearer to the mountain-top, and all the while fresh beauties burst upon their view. Down the rocky sides tumbled mighty waterfalls, which gleamed like masses of molten gold till they were lost in clouds of golden spray below. Around the wondrous edifice itself were now seen groves and terraces upon a tableland broken by hills and dales extending far into the clouds beyond.

The travellers from the distant Earth, reassured by Alondra's coolness, gazed upon the scene of grandeur and sublimity in wondering silence, and seemed for a while scarcely to breathe. So entranced were they that they scarcely noticed when their yacht 'grounded' upon the summit of the mountain, at a short distance from an imposing gateway which formed the main entrance to the palace.

A minute or two later they passed down a gangway, and then followed their young host towards the gateway, which seemed to loom up larger and higher as they approached it.

Suddenly the massive gates were thrown open, and a stream of attendants sallied forth and ranged themselves in two rows, between which the guests were ushered into the building. Through wide galleries, open courtyards, where fountains played among strange plants and flowers, and up spacious staircases, they passed onwards to a central hall, where they found another assembly of nobles and officials, evidently waiting to receive them.

At one end, upon a dais, was a throne of ivory and gold, and on each side of it a number of richly upholstered seats.

Alondra signed to his chief guests to seat themselves upon the latter, while he himself occupied the throne.

'Good friends,' said he, addressing the assembly, 'I bring you glorious news—the news of the safe return of the king, my father! You have doubtless already seen that his "chariot of the skies" has arrived? To that I am rejoiced to be able to add the welcome tidings that my royal father, and all who accompanied him, have come back safely and in good health.'

At this there was much shouting and clapping of hands upon the part of the hitherto silent crowd. Evidently they had been awaiting news in some suspense, anxious as to whether, though they knew the *Ivenia* had returned, some untoward accident might have happened to any of those on board.

'I am also the bearer, good friends, of commands to you from the king,' continued Alondra, when the shouting had died down. 'By his wish I take my seat here in his absence, to welcome in his name to his royal home some strangers he has brought with him from a far-distant planet. Good friends, that is all I need say to you! These strangers are the king's friends and guests, and as such he bids

you receive and treat them until he comes himself to attend to their pleasure and comfort.'

Then such a clamour was heard as fairly took the visitors by surprise. It seemed even to surpass that which had greeted the announcement of the king's safe return. Hands, handkerchiefs, banners, were waved, trumpets blared, cymbals sounded. Finally, at a sign from the prince, there was a general rush towards the dais, the friendly crowd almost tumbling over one another, as each seemed determined to be the first to shake hands with these strangers from a distant world.

CHAPTER XIV. TOM CLINCH'S STATEMENT.

When the plaudits which greeted the strangers had subsided, and the strenuous handshaking had come to an end, Monck, at a signal from Alondra, conducted them from the great hall to a private suite of apartments.

'These are assigned to you for your own use during your stay here,' he explained. 'I may tell you, in confidence, that they have never been occupied by any save guests of consequence. Therefore, the fact that they have been allotted to you is one more proof that my royal master desires to pay you special honour in the eyes of his people.'

'It is very kind of him,' murmured Armeath, 'but a little embarrassing. It is likely to cause misapprehension. We are no royal visitors, you know.'

'My master knows it also,' Monck reminded him. 'But he is not like other monarchs. You know by this time, for instance, that he never allows any one to address him as "your Majesty." He looks upon it as unnecessary, and resents it as he does any kind of adulation or flattery. He expects that we shall treat him with due respect as the head of the State. If you go beyond that, so far from pleasing him, you only offend him.'

'And if you do less,' observed Gerald, 'why then'—

'I cannot tell you what would happen,' returned Monck drily. 'So far as my experience extends, I have never seen it attempted.'

'Truly, these are sumptuous quarters,' said Armeath, gazing round at the richly furnished rooms.

'You will find your sleeping apartments equally comfortable, with marble

baths attached, where you can have a swim before breakfast if it so please you. Also, you will see there is an ample wardrobe from which to select your Court dress'—

'Eh, what's that? Are we to put on Court dress, sir?' Jack stared, and looked first at the engineer and then at his guardian in serio-comic distress. 'Must we do that? We've never been used to that sort of thing, you know!'

'What does that matter?' said Gerald. 'When one goes to Rome one must do as Rome does.'

A little while later the two chums were looking over a collection of the most gorgeous raiment they had ever set eyes upon. Gerald viewed the dazzling costumes with enthusiastic admiration; but Jack was inclined to regard them almost with disfavour.

'Beautiful! Splendid!' exclaimed Gerald. 'Just what I have seen in my sleep when I was a child, and I used to gaze at the stars and dream that I went up into the heavens to visit them! In those dreams I went from one star to another, and saw the most charming countries and places, and all the good people in them were dressed in clothes something like these.'

'And how were the bad ones dressed?' asked Jack quizzically.

'There weren't any,' Gerald declared stoutly.

'What! No ogres, or giants, or bad fairies? However, it's odd, now, to think of those old dreams of yours! I remember how you used to recount them to us afterwards. It's curious to think how, after all, they seem to be coming true, isn't it?'

'Yes,' answered Gerald slowly, as the dreamy, far-away look came again into his eyes. 'But this is only the beginning. If they are all coming true, we have experiences before us more wonderful even than anything that has happened yet! Perhaps it will turn out so. Who can tell?'

'Well, I've got to that state of mind now that I sha'n't be so very much surprised if they do; and if they don't, I 'm quite content with what we have in hand,' said practical-minded Jack.

Their two attendants were lodged in adjacent rooms, so that they might be within call when wanted. Presently, Gerald looked in upon them to see how they were getting on, and was much amused to see Reid staring blankly at a heap of clothes, much as Jack had been doing but a little while before. These costumes, it is true, were much plainer and less pretentious; but they were, nevertheless, far finer clothes than either of the two worthies had ever yet worn, or ever expected to.

'Why, Bob, what's the matter?' Gerald asked. 'You look as dismal as if you were going to have a tooth out!'

'E 's a poor sort o' creechure sometimes, be Bob Reid,' said Clinch sen-

tentiously. Tom was busy picking out the most showy dress he could find, and attiring himself therein. "E often doan't seem to know when 'e's in luck. What's these yer fine things sent for if we ain't t' wear 'em? Take what Providence sends ye, an' be thankful! Them's my sentiments."

As he spoke he selected a coloured hat with a very high crown and poised it on his head, opposite a looking-glass.

'I never 'ad no 'igh 'at to wear afore, an' I ain't a-goin' t' throw this chance away,' said Tom.—'Look at that, Bob Reid,' he continued, as he surveyed himself in the glass and strutted to and fro. 'See 'ow it sets off yer figger, me lad!'

Gerald smiled, and was turning away, when Tom suddenly threw the hat on one side, and, looking very serious, said, 'Mr Gerald, I wants a wurd wi' ye. Ye knows as we was nearly run down a while since a-comin' up 'ere?'

'Yes, Tom. Well?'

'D' ye know who was in that blunderin' pirate as tried t' send us rattlin' down on the rocks below?'

'No, I saw no one. It was a strange-looking craft, and seemed to have no one on board; though, I suppose, the people were really boxed up and out of sight.'

Tom looked cautiously round, as if doubtful whether there were any hidden listeners. Then he came close to Gerald, and said in a whisper, 'But I see one on 'em! 'E were a-peepin' out o' a porthole! Nobody but me was lookin', an' as soon as 'e see me 'e bobbed back.'

'Well, who was it?' Gerald asked, impressed by Tom's manner. 'Any one we—you or I—know?'

Tom nodded portentously.

'Ay, ay, sir; one who ain't no frien' o' yourn—the one ye call the Ogre—an' a jolly good name for 'im too!'

'Are you sure—quite sure, Tom? This may be a serious matter! You should not say such a thing unless you are absolutely certain.'

'As sure as I am that me 'ead be on me shoulders, sir. The ugly swab! As if anybody could mistake 'is phizog!'

Gerald reflected a while, then said, 'Say nothing to any one else about this, Tom. Keep your own counsel. There may be nothing in it, and if you talk it may get you into trouble.'

'Ay, ay, sir! I shall be dumb about it onless ye tells me t' speak.'

Presently a loud flourish of trumpets and sounds of shouting and a general commotion announced that the king himself was approaching. Monck led the visitors to a post of vantage outside the palace, from which they could obtain a good view.

The sun was near to setting, and its beams cast a lurid glow over the scene—

redder than any sunset they had ever seen on Earth.

Below them was a vast plain with a few low hills, upon and round which was the great city of Ivenia, looking vast and glorious, with magnificent buildings extending in one direction pile upon pile almost as far as the eye could see. On the other side lay the sea, glistening like molten copper.

The king's air-yacht—larger and more beautiful even than the one they had come in—was seen rising majestically towards them, surrounded by hundreds of smaller air-craft, their decorations glittering and sparkling in the sun's red beams. There was no booming of cannon, as would be the case with us, but a loud, musical, humming sound, which was curiously agreeable to the ear.

When in due course Ivanta landed upon the height, a few of the craft accompanying him landed also, and from them poured out a stream of people splendidly arrayed, who trooped after him in procession to attend the reception in the palace.

This was a repetition upon a larger scale, so to speak, of the function at which Prince Alondra had presided, Ivanta this time occupying the throne himself, with the young prince beside him. As before, places of honour were given to the strangers, amongst whom the Zuanstrooms were now included; and the proceedings were even more enthusiastic and of longer duration, winding up with a grand banquet. It would take too long to describe all that followed. It must suffice to say that the two chums voted it the most wonderful entertainment that they had ever heard of or that imagination could picture; and when at last they lay down together for their night's rest they were both about tired out.

Now, however, that the dazzling excitement of this wonderful day was over, and they were once more alone and quiet, the memory of their narrow escape from death and of what Tom Clinch had said came back to Gerald's mind like the proverbial skeleton of the feast.

He had had a talk with Monck about it, and had been rather snubbed for his pains. The engineer said he had seen Kazzaro go with his master on board the large ex-warship which he had pointed out as serving now as Agrando's private yacht. Therefore, the Ogre could not possibly have been where Clinch said he was.

And Monck had ended the talk by rather curtly advising Gerald not to hunt for mares' nests, and warning him to be careful not to mention such suspicions to any one else.

'We shall make inquiries and find out who the people were who so nearly ran us down,' Monck assured him; 'and they will be called to account for their reckless navigation of the air. But I do not myself believe that there was anything more than carelessness, nor that Kazzaro could have been on board.'

Gerald felt a little sore at the engineer's blunt refusal to believe honest Tom

Clinch; and Jack sympathised with him, and tried to comfort him by declaring that he agreed with his view.

'Depend upon it, Tom would not be likely to make a mistake in such a matter,' Jack agreed. 'He is an old sailor, and is as sharp as a needle in a case of emergency like that. My own opinion—strictly, of course, between ourselves—is that that imp of evil we call the Ogre was there, and that he deliberately tried to run us down and to kill us all, including the king's son. You will remember my saying I believed that some understanding existed between the Ogre and Zuanstroom. I am still positive that I was right, and that there is some sinister mischief brewing. Mr Monck may disbelieve it and laugh at the idea if he chooses to, but don't you feel sore, old chap. I am afraid he will wish by-and-by that he had treated our hints more seriously.'

Gerald shivered. 'I would rather it should turn out that it is Monck who is right and we who are wrong,' he returned. 'It's horrible to think that we have come all this way, and incurred so many risks, only to meet with plots and murderous attempts. It used not to be so in my dreams,' he added moodily. 'I wonder why it should be so now? Mr Monck gave us to understand that we were coming to a place where there were no more wars, where King Ivanta reigned in peace and security, beloved by all his subjects. Why does it not seem to be as he led us to believe? Are we the cause? Is it due simply to the fact that the Zuanstrooms don't like us—that they are angry because we came, or jealous because the king shows more favour to you than he does to Silas?'

'No; I don't think it is our fault,' said Jack, with decision. 'Zuanstroom has brought with him the biggest cargo of diamonds ever seen; and, as Mr Armeath said, trouble was sure to follow. Now, dismiss it from your thoughts, old chap, and go to sleep.'

'I will; and perhaps some of the old dreams about the stars will come back to me,' Gerald finished, with a sigh. 'I hope, if they do, there will be no diamonds there!'

CHAPTER XV. HUNTING THE GREAT MARS EAGLE.

The time that followed upon their arrival on Mars was a period of great enjoyment for the two chums. The gloomy feeling which had been caused by their

narrow escape upon that first day quickly passed away and was now almost forgotten.

Agrando and the Ogre stayed at home in their own country, and the chums saw and heard nothing of them. Zuanstroom and his son went their own way, for the most part making friends with the nobles and the chief citizens, and seemingly bent only upon the acquisition of useful knowledge concerning the country they were in and its inhabitants.

Gerald and Jack, on the other hand, became the daily companions of the young prince; and the three grew more friendly and intimate as the weeks passed by.

Alondra showed himself a charming host in his behaviour towards his young guests, and did all he could to make their stay pleasant. He took them about, showing and explaining such things as were new to them and likely to excite their interest, and in particular initiating them into the mysteries of the Martian sports and pastimes. In some of these, as has been related, the two lads had already made themselves proficient during the voyage; but those had necessarily been only of such a kind as were possible in a comparatively confined space.

To attempt to tell of the many strange things the visitors met with, the novel and surprising sights they saw, and all their curious experiences, would, however, extend this narrative to too great a length. It is only possible to relate some of the more noteworthy.

The one great marvel of the place—naturally, the one which had first attracted their attention, and which was always in evidence—was the fact that everybody went about in the air. No one ever thought of travelling far in any other manner; no other kind of mechanical locomotion was to be seen, except as regards the transport of heavy goods. These were still carried to and fro on railways of various kinds, or on other motor vehicles—'slow, old-fashioned affairs,' as Alondra called them—or still slower 'electric ships.' None of these, Monck explained, could travel at a faster rate than a hundred miles or so an hour—reckoning miles as we do on Earth, and that was far too slow to suit the Martians of to-day.

'Fancy any one travelling at such an absurdly slow speed!' observed Alondra, laughing at the idea. 'Yet, ages ago, in what some here call the good, old-fashioned days, people, even upon the longest journeys, had to be content with crawling about our world no faster than that! We can travel far more quickly now, in our racing air-yachts, and I suppose that on your planet, which we know is bigger than ours, you travel more swiftly still?'

Gerald thought of some of our old-fashioned, slow-going railways, and blushed. 'I am sorry to have to confess that we do not,' he returned, a little shame-

facedly. He did not like having to admit at every turn how far his native Earth was 'behind the age,' as things were understood in Mars. But it was constantly the case, nevertheless.

They sailed about almost daily in the young prince's yacht—the one which had carried them up to the king's palace the first day—and they were astounded at the speed she attained in the air. No doubt, as Jack remarked, the marvellous *Ivenia* must have travelled immeasurably faster, or they would have been years upon their journey instead of months. But they had scarcely been aware of her real speed, because they had passed no object near enough to give any idea of the actual rate at which they were being whirled through space.

It happened that the prince's air-yacht had been named after our Earth. She was called *Lokris*, which, as has been already made known, was the name by which the Martians knew our planet.

'She was built shortly after my father's return from his first visit to your world,' Alondra explained; 'and I felt so interested in all he had to tell me about it that I called her by that name.'

At times there were 'air-regattas,' at which races were arranged for various classes of airships and flying-machines. The prizes at these were valuable and were eagerly competed for, and the *Lokris* was frequently one of the competitors. In these contests the young prince showed himself a skilful and daring navigator of the air; and sometimes, when the two chums accompanied him, they had some exciting experiences, as the competing yachts whirled along, often neck and neck, at almost incredible speed. At such times it was often the most venturesome—almost, one might say, the most reckless—who came in winners.

Alondra was delighted to discover that in his two visitors he had gained sailing companions after his own heart. He took special pains to teach them to assist him in the handling of the yacht, and they soon grew expert. Then the two sailors were instructed, and took the place of the former crew; and the five became celebrated for their skilful and fearless manoeuvring and for the number of races they won.

Tom Clinch and Bob Reid entered into the spirit of the thing with great gusto, and soon proved themselves as clever in the air as ever they had been in the handling of sailing-boats on the water at home. And when the prizes began to come in—half of which Alondra allotted to them, the other half being distributed in charity—their satisfaction and delight may well be imagined.

It should be explained that these Earth-born assistants gained a considerable advantage from the fact, which has already been noted, that their muscles were stronger comparatively than those of the natives. Thus the four on board the *Lokris* could do the work of nearly double the number of Martians—and as in this kind of racing the work was often heavy, and required considerable physi-

cal exertion, the saving in weight effected by carrying a smaller crew made an important difference.

But the great sport of the Martians, it presently appeared, was eagle-hunting. A species of eagle, very much larger than any on Earth, had their eyries amongst some mountain peaks in a wild district some distance away. In regard to size, the visitors found that birds were larger on the average, while some animals were often smaller, than those species on our earth which correspond to them. Certainly these eagles—known by the name of *krondos*—were gigantic birds, swift and very high flyers, and terribly savage, powerful creatures when attacked.

Doubtless they would have been exterminated long ago but for the fact that they had been expressly preserved for the purposes of sport, just as foxes are in England.

Packs of smaller tame eagles, of a different breed, were trained to hunt them. Assisted by these, a party of Martian nobles would sally forth in their air-yachts and chase the formidable giant eagles from peak to peak, following them in their circling flights into the upper air or their dizzy downward swoops, until some expert hunter-aeronaut contrived to throw a net over the quarry and capture it alive.

That was, briefly, the general procedure, Monck explained; but, as he further remarked, it did not always come off as per programme. Sometimes the *krondos* assumed the offensive against the hunters; and cases had been even known of their dragging men out of the airships and carrying them off, or dashing them down upon the rocks below.

'The king has arranged for a grand *krondo*-hunt to-morrow, in your honour!' Alondra one day informed the chums. 'We must be astir early in the morning. You are to come with me in my yacht. Now you will see some truly royal sport. Our air-yacht races are but as a children's game compared with this!'

It came to pass, accordingly, that at dawn a great procession of air-craft, headed by the king in his own yacht—known as the *Nelda*—started off in the beams of the rising sun for the district which was the haunt of the great birds.

An hour's run brought them to the hunting-ground, and the chums thought they had never seen a more desolate tract. Great, rocky cliffs and heights, and soaring mountain-peaks above, with dark, gloomy ravines and valleys below, were its chief features—truly a suitable region for the ferocious winged monsters they were in search of.

Alondra was the first to sight one of the creatures; and, following the rules of the hunt, turned his yacht quickly and dashed away in pursuit. He was wearing, as it happened, through a fancy of his own, his new flying-dress. Why, exactly, the chums who were with him did not know; though he had hinted mys-

teriously at some new experiment he was desirous of trying.

As the *Lokris* shot upwards, and then swerved to round a towering peak, something went wrong with one of the revolving spirals; and Gerald, as he had done before in a similar case, climbed up the mast to try to right it.

In the meantime, the speed was checked, and the craft passed closer to the rock than had been intended.

Other yachts, which had turned aside to follow, were catching them up; and Alondra, who did not like this, was shouting excited instructions to Gerald, when there came a loud rushing of wings as two immense dark forms rose unexpectedly from off the rock and sailed upwards within a few yards of him. One of the giant birds swung round in a narrow circle, poised, and then swooped down upon the busy worker on the top of the mast.

So sudden and unlooked for was the rush, so powerful the clutch which gripped him, that Gerald was forced from his hold; and a moment later the bird, with its prey, was seen either flying or falling headlong down towards the valley, thousands of feet below.

A great shout of horror and dismay went up from the spectators; but, even as the cries were heard, a glistening, shining figure flashed from the side of the yacht.

Alondra had dived through the air after his friend!

CHAPTER XVI. IN DIRE PERIL.

As Alondra disappeared over the side of the *Lokris*, Jack made a dart at the controlling-gear and began handling the levers. They were placed on a raised platform or bridge situated in the bow, in such a position as to give the best all-round view for directing and managing the craft. He had seen that Gerald had cleared the spiral just before he had been attacked by the giant eagle, and that everything, therefore, was now again in working order. Just before leaping off, Alondra had paused a second to give him a look which said as plainly as words could have done, 'I leave you in charge;' and Jack acted promptly upon the unspoken wish.

'Hold tight, everybody!' he shouted, and a moment later the airship plunged downward.

The *Nelda*, carrying King Ivanta and his party, had turned and dived too; and the two airships came close together, and raced for a while side by side in their swift descent.

King Ivanta was directing his own craft, and he made signs to Jack, indicating in dumb show his line of action.

Below them, and, as yet, far ahead, could be seen the feathered monster bearing off his prey, in what was now a more gradual downward sweep. Alondra could be seen, too, in close pursuit behind.

Jack understood Ivanta's meaning, and the two airships parted company—one going off to the right and the other to the left.

Then followed a most strange and terribly exciting chase.

The desolate valley at its farther end opened out, and there, away in the distance, could be seen a sheet of water forming an extensive lake. It was the object of the pursuers to drive the kronto in that direction.

This required very delicate and careful manoeuvring. If, on the one hand, the bird were pressed too closely, it might drop its prey upon the rocks beneath, which would mean for Gerald certain death. On the other hand, it was advisable to force it to fly its hardest, so that it would have no leisure to peck at its victim *en route*. Once it was over the water, Alondra, who had armed himself with his trident, would probably be able to deal with it.

All this King Ivanta had conveyed to Jack in pantomime, for no words could be heard amidst the rush through the air as the airships plunged madly downwards. Jack had been quick to divine what was intended, and now took his share in the hunt accordingly.

The kronto, however, also seemed to guess what its pursuers were trying to do, and it exhibited a desire to balk them by making for one or other of the rocky precipices which rose like colossal walls on either side of the valley. Every time it tried to do this, the king on the one side, or Jack on the other, immediately swept round to head it off.

Behind them came a number of other airships, which had formed now into more or less orderly ranks, some above and some below. Their occupants were watching all that took place with breathless interest, and held themselves ready to close up if the bird should elude the leading pursuers and break back.

The position was rendered yet more difficult by the appearance of four other krontos, which swooped down with blood-curdling screams, and followed the first one, quite ready and willing to fight it on their own account for the possession of its prize.

In one respect this, perhaps, was an advantage, as it had the effect of causing the robber to hold on to its prey more obstinately, and rendered it less likely to drop it. But there was also the danger of the other krontos closing round and

pecking Gerald to death amongst them.

Suddenly a new factor was added. From the king's yacht quite a flock of birds emerged and began flying about with shrill cries and hoarse calls. These were Ivanta's tame eagles—small birds, comparatively speaking, but still, in actual fact, strong creatures, which had been trained to hunt their giant cousins.

At first they circled round and darted this way and that in seeming confusion, no doubt dazzled by the light, for they had thus far been kept hooded. But they quickly became accustomed to their surroundings, and then a close observer might have seen that they were all watching their master the king, as he stood plainly in view upon the prow of his craft.

He waved his hands, and away they flew in a compact cloud, heading straight for the four krongos, just as they were beginning to 'mob' the one which was carrying Gerald.

Then ensued a battle-royal in mid-air, the sagacious, trained birds dashing at the bigger ones and darting away again, harrying and worrying them, as clever hounds will rush in at a wild boar, snap at it, and dart away before the bigger beast has time to turn and rend them.

This attack of the trained birds had the effect of turning the pursuing krongos from their intended purpose. They had now enough to do to defend themselves; and clouds of feathers could be seen falling through the air, testifying to the severity of the combat.

During the melee the first robber, glad of the opportunity of making its escape with its prize, winged its way steadily onwards until at last it was over the waters of the lake.

Here its speed grew perceptibly less, and it began to dip in its flight—unmistakable signs that it was tiring. For, large and powerful as the creature was, the weight it was carrying was bound to tell upon it sooner or later.

The pursuing airships now came up, and while some forged on ahead, the others closed round in such a manner as to hem the robber in.

Alondra, who had been following the heavily burdened thief without any great effort, made a sudden spurt, and, sweeping round, passed close to it. There was a flash of light, and a sharp, crackling sound.

[image]

There was a flash of light, and a sharp, crackling sound.

Then the spreading wings drooped, the gigantic bird seemed to stagger and shrink, and finally it collapsed. Robber and prey fell together into the lake, and

the waters closed over them.

There were a few moments of anxious suspense. Was Gerald injured? Would he be able to swim? These and similar questions were in the minds of the spectators as they scanned the surface of the lake.

Jack had turned his airship downwards as he saw Alondra make his rush, and a moment or two after the bird's fall the craft alighted on the water and lay gently rocking within a few yards of the spot.

Jack and Clinch both sprang to the side, and there were two splashes as they dived almost simultaneously.

Just, however, as they disappeared from sight beneath the water, two other forms emerged. One was the krondo, which floated motionless; the other was Gerald, who was swimming vigorously, seemingly none the worse for what he had undergone.

A great cheer went up from the assembled crowd, which was renewed again and again as first Jack and then Clinch reappeared, and, catching sight of their friend, hastened towards him to offer their help.

Just then the king's yacht descended close to the swimmers; a ladder was thrown from her side, and Ivanta himself stepped down and assisted them to climb on board.

He soon satisfied himself by actual examination that no great harm had been done. Gerald had some nasty scratches, and the muscles were bruised in places; but otherwise he was unhurt, and was inclined to make light of his adventure.

'It's an experience that no one on our own planet can boast of,' he observed with a smile. 'No one since the days of Sindbad the Sailor has ever been carried off by a bird.'

'I am thankful that it has been no worse, my lad,' said Ivanta, and in his tone there was a note of deep and kindly feeling. 'It is an unpleasant variation of our usual sport.'

'I confess I was on tenterhooks the whole time,' said Armeath, who was one of the king's party, 'and I am more relieved than I can tell you.'

'Oh, it's all right, sir!' answered Gerald cheerfully. 'I am none the worse, and I am quite ready to go on with the hunt. Don't let me spoil your day's sport. Besides, I want to get a bit of my own back. Those feathered brutes have hunted me; I want to hunt them before I've done with them!'

'So you shall!' returned the king. 'But you must first put on some dry clothes. Go down to my cabin, and Alondra will find you a change.'

'I haven't thanked him yet for following up the beast so promptly,' cried Gerald, turning to Alondra, who had just alighted on the deck and grasped his hand. 'I saw all that went on! I saw you, Alondra, leap down after me; and it was

that really which turned the bird in the right direction, for he was heading the other way!’

‘I noticed that,’ said Alondra modestly. ‘I remembered that there was this lake ahead of us, and it struck me in a flash that the best—almost the only—chance of saving you was to drive the krondo towards it. Of course, I could have overtaken him and mastered him; but I could not have supported you and battled with him too—to say nothing of the others which would have been after us.’

‘Twas wisely thought out, my son,’ Ivanta declared. ‘I caught your idea directly I noted that you had purposely turned the bird from the line it had first taken. Our young friend here was prompt, too, in following it up and aiding me to prevent it from breaking back,’ he added, indicating Jack. ‘Now, go and change your clothes; and we will give you your revenge upon the krontos.’

Half an hour later they were back again in the valley which had been the scene of Gerald’s startling adventure. A desultory fight was still going on between Ivanta’s trained eagles and a pair of their foes. Upon the rocky ground below lay one dead krondo and several of the smaller birds. Of the fourth krondo nothing was to be seen; it had probably taken refuge in flight.

Ivanta looked at his dead birds with grave concern and regret.

‘This is my fault! I forgot to call them off!’ said he. ‘I do not like to have my faithful feathered friends treated like this.’

He put a whistle to his lips, and at the sound of it his eagles obediently left the krontos they were ‘mobbing;’ and the latter at once flew off. Evidently they had had quite enough of the fray, and were glad of the chance of making good their retreat without further trouble.

‘We will find some more to chase presently,’ observed Ivanta. ‘First, let us see what can be done for those of my eagles which are hurt but not killed.’

Armeath and his wards looked on with wondering approval as they saw the attention Ivanta proceeded to bestow upon his wounded birds. It was curiously characteristic of the man to delay the proceedings and keep all his friends waiting for such a cause.

Later on, the hunt was resumed, and the visitors had some lively experiences among the mountain-peaks, though none quite so startling as the first one.

They found it, as Alondra had said they would, splendid sport. The krontos were hunted out and pursued by the small eagles in all their turns, and these were followed by the airships, just as the huntsmen follow the hounds. There was the same rivalry, too, amongst the latter to be ‘in at the death.’

Naturally, this necessitated some bold manoeuvring on the part of the airships. At one time they would be circling through the upper air to dizzy heights far above the highest mountains; then suddenly there would be a turn and a mad plunge downwards for thousands of feet, as their quarry swooped down almost

to the level of the ground below. There were many hairbreadth escapes from collisions; and altogether the sport was about as exciting as the most daring or the most reckless could desire.

'It beats the switchback railway business and all that sort of thing hollow!' exclaimed Gerald that evening, when relating their experiences to Freddy; for the Zuanstrooms had not joined the hunting-party.

'Looping the loop's nothing to it!' Jack declared.

Freddy looked wistful. 'How I wished I was with you!' he sighed.

'H'm! I 'm afraid you are not old enough yet for that sort of thing, youngster,' remarked Jack loftily. 'What has Silas been doing to amuse you to-day?'

'He hasn't been amusing me at all,' was the answer. 'It's been one of my "bad days" again. The nasty, ugly old man has come back, and has been with uncle and Silas all day; and whenever he comes I am always sent off and left to amuse myself as best I can!'

Gerald and Jack looked at each other. Jack gave a long, low whistle; Gerald exclaimed under his breath, 'The Ogre again!'

CHAPTER XVII.

LESSONS IN FLYING.

'It bain't no sort o' use; I shall never l'arn t' fly!' grumbled Bob Reid, as he stood rubbing his bruises. He had just come 'a nasty cropper,' and seemed, as he expressed it, to have 'hurt meself all over at wanst.' One hand was rubbing a leg, while the other was busy with a shoulder. 'If I 'ad 'alf a dozen more 'ands I could find plenty for 'em t' do!' he continued ruefully. 'I seem t' be bruised everywhere. Let's give it up, Tom, afore we suicides ourselves unintentional.'

'Not I!' cried Tom Clinch, who was balancing himself on a ladder. He flung his arms—to which two great wings were attached—about wildly, and leaped into the air, gasping as he came floundering down. 'You see, Bob, I 'll master it yet!'

The two sailors had had some 'flying-dresses' lent them, and had been practising and striving for all they were worth to learn the mystic art; but somehow they could not, as Tom put it, 'fall into the knack.'

'It be like swimmin',' Tom went on, between leaps and jumps which would have done credit to a Spring-heeled Jack. 'It takes a long time t' fall inter the knack'—

'Ye'll fall inter the ditch d'reckly,' Bob tittered, as Tom rolled over on the ground. 'It's no use, Tom! Let's be sensible, an' give it up. It ain't dignerfied like fur us two chaps at our time o' life!'

'I be goin' t' try another jump from that there ladder,' returned Tom obstinately. 'You needn't try no more if ye funks it! But when I starts out to do a thing I don't like t' be beat! Other people 'ere does it, so why shouldn't we?'

'Ay, but they l'arns it in their young days,' said Bob.

'Theer 's Mr Gerald—he's gettin' on fine! An' Mr Jack, too, ain't doin' bad at it! He be a-practisin' now just out yonder—t'other side that fence! There he goes now—a-soarin' up in grand style! I 'd give 'alf me month's wages t' be able t' go like that!'

'It's that puff o' wind's took 'old o' 'im,' Bob declared, as he watched Jack perform some rather curious aerial evolutions. 'Strikes me the wind's got 'old of 'im, an 'e can't 'elp 'isself! Yes! Look out fur 'im t' stop 'im, Tom!'

Tom had just succeeded, at the moment this urgent warning was uttered, in again climbing laboriously up the ladder on to a narrow platform which had been erected as a 'jumping-off place' for fliers.

There were several of these platforms, of various heights, placed at intervals in some spacious fields laid out specially near the city of Ivenia, for the use of those who were learning to fly, or experimenting with small flying-machines. They might be likened to the diving-platforms, with ladders leading up to them, which are to be seen at some bathing-places. They were open to all, and were freely used by old and young—especially the latter. It was no uncommon sight to see numbers of boys and girls—some almost babies—fluttering about like so many large butterflies.

This particular morning the two sailors were practising on their own account in one part, while Gerald and Jack were similarly engaged, not far away, under Alondra's tuition.

It was a windy day, with violent squalls at intervals, and lulls between. Just at the time Tom climbed to the platform there had arisen a very violent gust, which came sweeping across, bearing with it the figure of Jack, with large wings whirling about like the sails of a windmill. Whether he was purposely heading for the platform as a refuge to which he could cling, or whether the unexpected violence of the wind carried him there, it would be difficult to say. All that is certain about it is that he cannoned against Tom Clinch, and a moment later the two were gyrating and spinning in the air like a couple of gigantic bluebottles. Then, as though poor Bob Reid had not already enough bruises to attend to, the two descended like an avalanche plump on top of him. Finally, Gerald, who had followed Jack in his involuntary flight, sailed straight into the struggling group. Fortunately, at this point Alondra arrived. He had come after the two chums to

render them his assistance, and was now able to help to disentangle them.

'One o' my wings is broke!' cried Tom, as he sat up and surveyed the wreck.

'I'm afraid both mine are,' said Jack.

'You 've broke my back atween ye!' Bob spluttered, as he rolled over. 'This settles it! No more flyin' fur me!'

'I've had enough for to-day too!' Jack laughingly owned, as he proceeded to divest himself of his flying outfit. 'It's a mistake for beginners to practise on a windy day.'

'I doan't practise no more—wind or no wind,' Bob declared in a tone of conviction. 'All I wants now be some limbokation—an' plenty on it!'

'I think you only require a little more practice,' Alondra afterwards assured the two chums, as they were walking home towards his yacht, leaving their outfits to be brought after them by the two sailors.

'I don't know,' said Jack doubtfully. 'We've been trying it for a good while now, and we don't seem to make much progress. I begin to doubt if we ever shall. It's different with you, you see. Your people have learnt it more or less for generations, and it's in the blood, I fancy. I think we shall have to be content with motor-wings.'

Jack referred to the smallest form of flying-machine in use. It consisted merely of a pair of wings worked by a small motor, a balancing tail, and a saddle-seat on which the aeronaut perched himself. In many respects it might be described as the aerial counterpart of our motor-bicycle.

From the incidents just related it will be gathered that the visitors had not made much progress in learning the use of artificial wings. Whether there was something different in their physical constitution, or whether it was, as Jack was inclined to think, that the knack of flying was becoming hereditary amongst the Martians, it is certain that neither the youthful aspirants nor the two elderly sailors had so far been able to master the tantalising secret of soaring into the air at will with artificial wings alone. They could come down—from a height; but then, as Tom Clinch remarked, 'Most people can do that wi'out any l'arnin'.'

When, an hour or two later, Alondra's yacht landed them again at Karendia, as the king's palace was called (the name meant literally 'the palace in the clouds'), they found Monck awaiting them.

'I have some news for you young people,' said he. 'Our royal master has honoured me by entrusting me with a special mission to Sedenia (King Agrando's country); and he will let you accompany me, so that you may see something of another part of our world.'

'I 'm willing, if you others are going, of course,' Gerald answered readily, but without enthusiasm. He glanced at Alondra as he spoke.

'I shall like very much to go with you,' said Alondra. 'It is a country well

worth visiting. There are many curious natural wonders to be seen there. Moreover, we shall be able to visit other countries on our way.'

That night, as the two chums were retiring to rest, Gerald said, with a shiver, 'Do you know, Jack, I would give a good deal if we could get out of this trip. I've got a feeling—a sort of presentiment'—

'Nerves again!' murmured Jack sleepily. 'We shall be all right! We go as the king's guests or ambassadors, or whatever it is; and not even the Ogre will dare to harm us. Ivanta has a long arm, it strikes me.'

'Maybe he has, and maybe it will, as you say, be all right,' was Gerald's reply. 'All the same, something tells me we're in for trouble in some way or another.'

CHAPTER XVIII.

A ROYAL PROGRESS.

'There are the famous canals—the great waterways which the astronomers of the Earth have seen through their telescopes and puzzled over for so many years. The curious thing is that the scientists of Mars have puzzled over them almost as much, and can tell you practically just as little about them.'

Thus spoke Monck, as the *Lokris* sailed through the upper air on her way to the country of King Agrando.

Below them the voyagers saw seas and continents spread out as upon an enormous map. And there, quite plain to the eye, were the strange channels Monck had referred to. They looked like great arms of the sea; but there was that in their regular shape which proclaimed, even to the unscientific eye, that they must have been constructed artificially.

'Their origin is lost in the mists of past ages,' Monck explained. 'Some mighty race in the past must have made them at a time when to be able to travel by water was all-important.'

Jack, who was looking through a powerful telescope, exclaimed in surprise, 'I can see vessels going about on them! The curious thing is that in one channel they are all going one way, and in the other channel they are all moving along in the opposite direction.'

'Exactly!' Monck replied. 'And that, you perceive, seems to suggest a reason for their construction. There are strong currents running through them just

as you see the vessels going—that is to say, in opposite directions. It is supposed that the ancients, in the days before mechanical propulsion was invented, saw in that fact an easy way of getting about. At any rate, that is the general supposition nowadays. Of course, it is only a guess.’

The *Lokris* had been at this time two days and nights on her journey. She was accompanied by several airships, forming, in effect, a small squadron. ‘Escorted’ would be perhaps a more fitting term, for several of them were war-vessels, while others again were craft in attendance, carrying supplies.

The progress of the whole fleet was methodical, and was conducted with a good deal of ceremony. It was all ordered very much as would be the case with the fleet of one of the Great Powers on Earth escorting the yacht carrying the son of a powerful monarch on a visit or tour to a distant realm. One of the war-vessels carried the Diamond King and his party; while Armeath and his wards travelled with Prince Alondra in his yacht.

As they continued their journey they passed over various cities and countries. Sometimes strange war-vessels, seeing from a distance that a small fleet was approaching, came soaring up to inquire who and what they were. Continually, all day long, other craft, of every size and kind, passed them. Some were great liners, carrying passengers, going swiftly to and fro like our greyhounds of the Atlantic; some were private yachts; and others again war-craft, alone, or in twos and threes. All, as they went by, ran up signals; and when they learnt from the answering signals who the illustrious travellers were, saluted in token of respect.

Their progress was leisurely, and there were many halts. There were certain places where their coming was expected, and preparations had been made to give them a brilliant reception. Airships, splendidly decorated, came up to welcome them, and beg them to descend to receive addresses.

Then it was that the strangers saw how much diversity it was possible to introduce into the decoration of the various air-craft, and how their outward appearance could be varied and altered according to the taste and ingenuity of the owners. Every kind of bird was imitated upon a large scale. There were gigantic swans, eagles, swallows, and other birds such as are familiar to us upon Earth, and a number of strange bird-forms which exist only on Mars. There were grotesque creatures, too, representations of beasts and fish, and uncanny-looking monsters, some of the latter resembling what we know as dragons, griffins, wyverns, and so on.

At night there would be fêtes, when all these creatures were lighted up in curious and ingenious fashion, revealing to the astonished and delighted travellers most weird and marvellous effects, as they performed intricate evolutions and manoeuvres in the air in the dark. Then there were fireworks such as have

probably never been dreamed of by even our most skilful pyrotechnists. Illuminated airships soared up into the heavens and formed brilliant constellations of huge coloured stars, or rained down showers of fire, like colossal, inverted, fiery fountains. Chariots of fire sailed to and fro and engaged in races, contests, or in sham-fights upon a grand scale. Fiery monsters, which left long, shining trails of light behind them like the tails of comets, darted to and fro with a roar which startled those who heard it for the first time. Luminous clouds—red, yellow, blue, or green—formed mysteriously, and aeronauts played hide-and-seek amongst them with their lighted cars, vanishing suddenly into them and reappearing quite unexpectedly in a different place.

Such were some—only a few—of the spectacles with which the travellers from our Earth were entertained by the hospitable inhabitants of the countries over which they passed in the course of their journey to Sedenia. It would require too much space to describe all the marvellous sights they gazed upon, the novelties they met with, the quaint costumes, manners, and customs of the various nations they encountered, or the numerous zoological curiosities which were brought under their notice. Weeks were occupied in this manner, and it may safely be said that each day brought some fresh surprise, something which was new, unexpected, or curiously interesting to the visitors.

Altogether, the two chums and their guardian had a memorable journey—one to be remembered with delight and wonder for the rest of their lives, one which was in every sense a truly royal progress. Not the least interesting part of it consisted in the frank curiosity displayed by the inhabitants in themselves as natives of another world. Many showed great surprise at finding that they were just human beings, very much the same as the Martians were, neither more nor less.

'I suppose,' remarked Gerald, 'they expected that we should turn out to be monsters like those which that philosopher of theirs, whose book I was reading on the way here, declared us to be: "ape-like creatures, with blue skins covered with green hair."'

But whatever the expectations of the Martians had been, they soon demonstrated that they were well pleased with the reality, for they overwhelmed the visitors with the most lavish hospitality, and accorded them places of great honour at every public function.

One note there was, however, not exactly of discord, but a jarring note—an undercurrent—of disappointment and dissatisfaction, nevertheless. In every place at which they arrived, one of the first questions addressed to Monck was: 'Have you brought the diamonds?' or 'When are the diamonds to be offered for sale?' These, or some similar inquiries concerning the great shipload of gems which it was now known throughout the Martian world had been brought by

King Ivanta from the 'evening star,' met them at every halting-place.

It was evident that the answer which Monck, as the king's messenger, was compelled to make to these queries, caused considerable surprise and disappointment. In certain extreme cases they even threw a certain air of restraint into the exhibitions of public rejoicings.

'What has been done with the diamonds, Mr Monck?' asked Jack one day. 'What is going to be done with them? If they were brought here to be offered for sale to those who could afford to buy them, why are they kept back?'

'At present they are under lock and key—that is to say, they are deposited in the strong room of the treasury in the city of Ivenia.'

'When are they going to be brought out again?'

'That is more than I can say, young sir. It is at present a secret known only to my royal master.'

'It's no business of mine, sir,' Jack went on modestly, 'and perhaps you will think I have no right to say anything; but I can't help seeing that keeping them locked up is causing a great deal of ill-feeling. I know that Mr Armeath thinks—and I feel sure that he is right—that it is a pity they were ever brought here at all. But since they have been brought, it does seem a bit funny that so much time should be allowed to go by without any one being allowed even to see them.'

'It is the king's will, and that is all I can tell you. I may just hint to you privately, however, that I have an idea—it is only my own guess, mind you—that the king wishes to defer taking any decided step till after his return from his visit to Kondris—that is, to the planet you know as Saturn.'

Jack whistled. 'Oh, oh!' he cried, nodding his head shrewdly. 'I see! Then he is really bent on making that trip?'

'Undoubtedly. At least, I believe he is now completing the necessary preparations.'

'Mr Zuanstroom—he won't like that, will he?'

'He will have to wait the king's pleasure.'

'I suppose he will; but he won't like it. And you will find he will begin to kick if something isn't done soon. I have heard hints to that effect. Silas let it out in an indiscreet moment.'

'My royal master has a way of doing what he chooses without regard to the opinions of private individuals,' was Monck's answer; and it was given in a

tone which effectually closed the conversation.

CHAPTER XIX. A DARING PLOT.

In due course the travellers reached the country of Sedenia. They were met upon—or rather over—its borders by the ruler of the realm, King Agrando. He was accompanied by his chief councillor, Kazzaro—otherwise the Ogre—Gorondo his chief General, and his principal officers of State. He also had with him a number of war-airships of various sizes.

Under his conduct the travellers passed on to his capital, the city of Dyrania, a rambling town of considerable size, built upon the slopes of a high mountain and overlooking a large lake.

The visitors left their airships, and took up their abode for the time being in suites of apartments assigned to them for their use in the royal palace.

Here King Agrando dispensed his hospitality with a sort of semi-barbaric dignity. To Gerald, in particular, as may be imagined, it seemed a curious thing to find himself attending his Court as a guest. It cannot be said that it was a pleasant experience, and he entered into it with very mixed feelings.

So far as the outward conduct of his host went, however, he had nothing to complain of. He had come there with Prince Alondra and Monck, King Ivanta's special representative; and he, Mr Armeath, and Jack, were treated upon that footing with the strictest regard to everything that courtesy and etiquette required. At the same time, try as he would, he could not feel exactly comfortable. Every time he attended any function, and saw before him King Agrando and his chief officers, there came back to him the memory of that time when he had been brought before those same men as a helpless prisoner, and treated with contumely and insult. His cheeks would flush, and the hot blood rush through his veins even now, as he recalled how Kazzaro had prodded and pommelled him as a farmer might a bullock offered for sale, and remembered the sinister and forbidding aspect of the whole crowd as they gazed upon him.

Still, so far as they were concerned, all this might have been a mere dream. Nothing in their behaviour showed that they even recollected it. The king, indeed, in a certain fashion of his own, seemed to wish to convey to Gerald that he desired the whole 'regrettable incident' to be forgotten.

As King Agrando plays an important part in this history, some further particulars concerning him may be given here.

His had been one of the last countries to be brought under the sway of the all-powerful, all-conquering Ivanta. He now occupied a semi-independent position, one somewhat similar to that of some of the richest and most powerful of the native princes of India. In his time he had himself been a great fighter and conqueror, having invaded and conquered several adjoining countries. He had ruled over these—and over his own subjects also—with an iron hand; and at times, it was said, with tyrannical cruelty. There had been, indeed, dark rumours afloat of terrible deeds carried out by him with the aid of the band of councillors he kept about him, of whom Kazzaro was the chief. If these tales were anywhere near the truth, then the title of Ogre, which the chums had bestowed upon Kazzaro, might have been quite as suitably given to his master.

But those days were past—or supposed to be past. Agrando was now on his best behaviour. Ivanta had insisted that there should be no more fighting or quarrelling with his neighbours, and no more cruelty and oppression within his realm. Thus the tyrant's 'occupation was gone,' and he had little left to him to do save to occupy himself and his select circle with such more or less harmless amusements as the circumstances permitted.

For one thing, he had become a great collector of curios of all kinds, animate and inanimate. That is to say, he had got together the finest collection of curios and zoological and botanical specimens of any upon the planet. Some of these had been contributed by Ivanta—brought by him from distant planets, Earth and Saturn—who possibly thought it good policy to encourage his restless vassal in so blameless a hobby. Thus the gardens surrounding the palace formed a sort of glorified Zoo and Kew Gardens rolled into one. His palace, too, was filled to overflowing with the most remarkable works of art that money could buy and the countries of his globe could produce. The fame of his collections had spread throughout the world of Mars, and people travelled immense distances and made long pilgrimages to see them.

It is scarcely a matter for surprise that such a man should now be bitten with a craze for diamonds, with a burning, overmastering desire—which later on became a determination—to become the possessor of the finest collection of jewels upon his planet.

Now, it so happened that while Agrando's desires in this direction had been growing and growing until they had almost reached the length of becoming a sort of madness, Ivanta's thoughts had been working in an exactly opposite direction. By degrees he had come to wish he had never troubled himself about precious stones at all. Certainly, what he had done had been planned with the best intentions; but his sagacious instinct now began to lean to the idea that for once in

his life he had made a great mistake. Therefore, he was casting about for some plausible excuse for undoing what he had travelled all the way to Earth specially to accomplish.

Already, during the voyage home to Mars, he had noted many incidents which his keen insight into human nature had told him were the little seeds likely to grow into a big crop of future trouble. He had seen, with sorrow and alarm, that even his most trusted councillors and dearest friends were beginning to give their chief thought and attention to 'dividing up' the cargo of diamonds they were carrying back. Already envy, covetousness, and greed were raising their ugly heads where before all had been amiability and goodwill. And if this were so even before the distribution took place, what was likely to be the state of things afterwards?

This alteration in his views had been greatly strengthened by his conversations with Armeath. That honest sage, also deeply experienced in human nature, fearlessly expressed his own opinions on the subject. He gave Ivanta endless illustrations and 'modern instances' of the crimes and misery which a covetous greed for precious stones might be expected to introduce into his world.

Ivanta—convinced, yet, as an honourable man, hampered by his own promises and undertakings—gladly jumped at Armeath's suggestion of making artificial stones in such quantities as to render them as 'common as pieces of glass.' Then, as Armeath had argued in his talk with Monck, nobody would bother himself to be the possessor of any of the 'gems,' whether real or artificial. For none could tell the former from the latter when manufactured by Armeath's process.

The great difficulty now seemed to be to get a sufficient quantity of the necessary mineral; and to do this Ivanta would have to pay a visit to Saturn, that being the only place he knew of where it could be obtained.

Meantime, Ivanta had decided to keep the cargo he had brought locked up; and to postpone its distribution until his return from his projected journey.

Unfortunately, however, the mischief had already been done; the seeds of serious trouble had been sown, and were now growing to a far larger extent than King Ivanta knew of.

King Agrando, in particular, was hatching a double plot, which, if it succeeded, was not only to gratify his newly-born craze for a big collection of jewels, but to restore him to his former position of independent ruler. Even, perhaps—who could tell?—it might raise him to the position now occupied by Ivanta himself!

Into this conspiracy Zuanstroom had entered. That, at first sight, may appear a little strange; but the so-called Diamond King had newly awakened ambitions of his own. He saw that, as the owner of this great cargo of precious

stones, he was in a position which was absolutely unique in the world of Mars. Upon Earth he had only been the Diamond King in a relative sense; here he was actually entitled to that name. But why should he stop there? Why should he not use his unique position to make himself a king in actual fact? Upon Earth, even with the help of all his diamonds, he could never aspire to such a height; but here it was different. Ivanta, he knew, would never fall in with such an idea; but Agrando, if approached in the right way, might—and he did.

The result of the conferences between the two plotters may be summed up thus: Agrando had said, 'Let us use your diamonds to depose Ivanta and put me in his shoes, and give me the biggest share of the treasure; and I will then put you into a position similar to that I now myself occupy. You shall be king over a large tract of country, subject only to me as your overlord.'

And Zuanstroom's ambition and unscrupulous nature had determined him to seal the compact and risk the consequences.

The visitors to Agrando found plenty to amuse and interest them during their stay. The palace gardens alone were a never-ending source of wonder and delight to the two chums. Rumour had not exaggerated when it had spread reports of the marvels to be seen there. The friends spent a good deal of their time exploring and investigating—for the gardens were of very great extent—and every day they came upon something fresh.

At the beginning, Monck had given them this curious warning: 'Kazzaro has asked me to put you on your guard,' said he. 'King Agrando remembers the dangers which you, Gerald, so narrowly escaped during our journey in the *Ivenia*; and he does not wish that a similar unhappy occurrence should cast a reflection upon any of his people here. So he has instructed Kazzaro to remind me that there are many specimens and scientific curiosities in the gardens which may be dangerous to strangers unacquainted with their characteristics—not merely among the animals, and reptiles, and so on, he says, but even amongst the trees and plants. For King Agrando has devoted an immense amount of money and trouble to collecting and cultivating specimens of most out-of-the-way kinds, some of them with qualities never known or heard of before. Apart from this consideration, you have the king's permission to go about freely wherever you choose!'

Later on, Gerald asked Jack his private opinion of this warning. 'What does it mean?' he asked doubtfully. 'Is it genuine, do you think, or does it conceal some crafty trick?'

'Sounds straightforward enough!' Jack declared. 'Where can the trick come in?'

'I don't know,' Gerald mused. 'I have no right, perhaps, to suspect any trickery; yet, somehow, I don't trust the Ogre!'

'No more do I, for that matter! We'll keep our eyes open!' said Jack.

A few days later, Alondra, wandering alone in the gardens, one morning, came upon an immense round glass-house, the door of which, he noticed, was standing open for the first time. He had paused at the place two or three times before; but the door had always been shut and locked. Moreover, there was a label upon it, which read: 'Private. Contents Dangerous.'

Naturally, such a placard had aroused his curiosity, and he had made attempts to see what was inside; but everywhere the glass was screened off within, and he could discover nothing. Here, this morning, was an opportunity to see for himself what the mysterious 'contents' were. He had his trident with him—he had carried it every day in consequence of the warning that had been given—so what had he to fear?

He passed through the open door, and came to a second door at one side. Opening this, he made his way amongst a lot of thick shrubs, and came out in an open space paved with white marble. In the centre was a large marble pool, with steps leading down into it. In the pool a fountain was playing; the whole looking very cool and inviting. It had the appearance of a plunge-bath; and seemed to tempt the stranger to take a dive into its bubbling waters.

Alondra looked round. Nothing was to be seen on any side but flowering shrubs, the scent of which filled the air. But the most beautiful blooms of all, he noticed, were some large white lilies growing amongst clusters of immense leaves in the pool.

Surprised and fascinated at the extreme beauty of these blooms, the like of which he had never seen before, he walked down the steps as far as the edge of the water, and put his hand amongst the green leaves to pluck a flower. Immediately the leaf curled over upon his hand, and to his astonishment and dismay he found he could not withdraw it! Not only that, but the leaf was exercising a distinct pulling power; it was steadily dragging him towards the water! Then he put the other hand down to try to free the first one, when another leaf curled round it, and he found himself held as though his hands had been tied together with a strong rope. He struggled hard, but he could not cast off that deadly grip; and, little by little, the horrible leaves dragged him forward until he was forced into the pool. Other leaves then began to curl round his body, and forced him down, down, step by step, until the water encircled his neck!

CHAPTER XX.

THE DEATH POOL.

It was well for Alondra that Gerald and Jack happened to be walking in the gardens that particular morning. They had, in fact, strolled out to look for him, and Providence must have led them into the neighbourhood of the large glass-house just at the critical moment. They also noticed—as he had done—that the outer door was standing open; and they were reading the warning notice with great curiosity, and considering whether, in despite of it, they should venture on a peep inside, when a terrible cry rang out from within, a cry as of some one in urgent need of help.

'It's Alondra's voice!' exclaimed Gerald. 'He's inside there, and must be in some trouble! Come on, Jack!'

The two pushed open the inner door and rushed along the pathway amongst the shrubs.

A moment later they came in sight of the pool with the fountain playing in the middle; and there they saw Alondra—or, rather, his head, for that was all there was above the water—with a look of terrible, deadly horror upon his face.

'Help me quickly!' he gasped. 'Some awful thing is clinging round me and is dragging me down! Your knives! Get out your knives! But be careful, or you may get drawn in yourselves—both of you!'

The two friends acted upon the hints thus given; and, drawing their knives and joining hands, Gerald went boldly down the steps and seized hold of the young prince just as he was being drawn completely under the water.

The task of setting him free, however, proved a tougher one than they had expected. The clinging leaves, as though directed by some dreadful, sinister intelligence, closed upon Gerald's extended arm, and, exercising a strength and tenacity which had about it something almost superhuman, endeavoured to drag him in too.

A terrible struggle for dear life ensued between the three, on the one side, and the horrible, silent power which they had to fight against, on the other.

Gerald managed to free one of Alondra's arms, and gave him his own knife, taking Jack's in place of it. The two then hacked and slashed at the slimy, slippery, but wonderfully tough leaves. As fast as they cut themselves free from some, others laid hold of them; and it seemed at one time as though all three would be dragged bodily into the water.

Just then Jack caught sight of a coil of strong rope lying upon the floor in a corner, and he made a dart and possessed himself of it. In a trice he had passed one end to Gerald, and secured the other round one of the columns supporting the roof.

Gerald, in his turn, managed to slip the end round Alondra and pass it back to Jack, who caught hold of it, and, standing himself on the steps out of reach, hauled with all his might. This enabled the two who were struggling in the water—for by this time Gerald had also been drawn in—to use both hands. Little by little, step by step, they struggled backwards, until at last they reached the water's edge and were free.

Panting and exhausted, the three sat down on a low marble balustrade, and looked first at the pool, then at one another. Then they stared once more at the treacherous pool, where all now was silent and still, save for the bubbling and splashing of the water as it fell from the fountain.

'Jupiter!' cried Jack at last. 'Of all the awful death-traps I ever saw or heard of, commend me to this! A horrible death pool! But what in the name of all that is fiendish is that awful plant?'

'It's some kind of cannibal plant, I suppose,' said Gerald.

'Yes, that is right,' Alondra agreed. 'I have heard there are such plants on our globe in some remote corners, but I have never seen one before.'

'What does anybody want to keep such a monstrous, uncanny affair for?' queried Jack indignantly.

'I never heard that they grew to such a size,' Alondra added. 'This must have been growing here many years to become so large, I should say.'

'A nice sort of pet to cultivate and pamper!' Jack grumbled. 'What do they feed it on, I wonder? Such a thing ought not to be allowed! It's a public danger!'

'There's a warning on the door,' Gerald reminded him. 'After all, it's our own fault, I'm afraid people will say, for coming here.'

'My fault, you mean—for I was the one who yielded first to curiosity, and so drew you here,' Alondra confessed.

'Oh, we should have come in on our own, you may be pretty sure of that,' Jack declared. 'We were just discussing the point when we heard you call out.'

'It's a very beautiful flower,' Gerald observed, looking attentively at the large, handsome blossoms, 'and the scent is delicious. Who would imagine that anything so lovely to look at could be so treacherous—so deadly?'

He walked cautiously up near to it to get a clear view, and Jack followed him—partly, as it seemed, to satisfy his own curiosity, and partly to see that his chum did not become too venturesome and get unwittingly caught again.

Meantime, Alondra was evidently thinking deeply. He began to look and search about, first in this direction, then in that. Presently the others noticed his proceedings, and, leaving the side of the pool, went across and asked him what he was doing.

'Before I tell you,' was the reply, 'you must promise that you will say nothing to any one else. If what I am thinking of was mere fancy, I don't wish to be

laughed at; and if it turns out that it was not fancy—well, then I still wish that nothing should be said about it just now. Do you understand?’

The two friends readily gave the required promise. ‘Well, then, what is troubling me is this: Just as I called out—when I was struggling up to my neck in the water—when, as it seemed to me, I was at my last gasp, and all hope had gone—I saw, or imagined I saw, some one peering at me from among those thick bushes!’

‘My stars! That sounds funny!’ was Jack’s comment. ‘D’you mean to say that there was some one in here, some one so cold-blooded as to stand by and look on at you, and never offer to help?’

‘That is my—er—impression; but’—

‘Who was it, then? Anybody you know?’

Alondra hesitated. Then he said slowly, ‘I cannot say. I could hardly see more than the eyes, if I saw any one. But, understand me, I cannot declare positively that I saw any one at all. I was in such a state of horror that I may have imagined it. I was ready to imagine anything.’

Jack looked at him attentively.

‘I don’t think you are one to lose your wits to that extent, my friend,’ he declared, shaking his head, ‘though I admit it would be no discredit to you if you did. I can’t imagine a more frightful predicament, or one better calculated to try the nerves of the bravest man.’

‘Let’s all set to work and have a good hunt round,’ suggested Gerald. ‘If any one was here, he must be somewhere in hiding now, unless there is another way out. If there is, let’s find it!’

They searched the place in all directions, but for some time could find nothing to reward their trouble. They could see no trace of any person other than themselves having been there.

They were about to give it up and go away, when Jack suddenly uttered a cry. ‘See! What is that on the floor!’ he exclaimed. ‘Ah, I thought so! A diamond—a small diamond!’ He exhibited upon the open palm of his hand a little sparkling stone. While his companions were busy looking at it, he went on to examine attentively a number of slabs of carved marble which stood up from the floor some four or five feet, forming a many-sided enclosure. They made a ring, as it were, fifteen feet in diameter or thereabouts, and upon each slab were figures or scenes carved in bas-relief.

It was not unlike a huge, many-sided flower-pot; and it appeared to be intended for a similar purpose; for the space it enclosed was filled with mould up to the level of the top of the slabs, and this again was thickly planted with large shrubs.

Jack walked all round this affair, peering keenly into the dense leafy screen.

It was so thick that nothing could be seen of what was in the middle. Then he returned to the starting-point—that opposite to the place where he had picked up the diamond. He caught hold of the branches and pulled them apart. Then he uttered a low whistle. 'Come and look at this!' he cried.

The other two ran up to the place and peered in. There, upon the loose mould, could be seen a footprint, and a little beyond it another.

Jack pointed to one of the bas-relief figures on the slab. It was in a kneeling position, and the head formed a convenient step to any one wishing to mount to the top of the slab. 'Do you see?' he cried. 'This has been used as a step! You place a foot on it—thus, take hold of these branches—so, pull them apart—so, and you can spring up and through quite easily. Then the branches close up after you and hide all trace. But the last one who passed this way was in a great hurry. He was in such haste to get through that he snapped off a twig—here it is—and another twig caught against his breast, and tore off a little diamond, and cast it on to the floor where I found it.'

While talking, Jack had suited actions to words, and shown, by practical illustration, how easily what he had suggested might happen.

'Where, then, is that person now, do you suppose?' asked Gerald, in a low tone. 'Hiding in the middle of those bushes?'

Jack shook his head. 'I should say not,' he replied. 'I should say there must be a secret passage leading to this curious place, and that those bushes conceal the entrance to it. However, that's a question we'll soon put to the test. I'm going in to see what's in the middle. You fellows come after me!'

CHAPTER XXI.

A SECRET TREASURE-HOUSE.

Jack's theory proved to be well founded. In the middle of the clump of bushes they discovered a portion of an old tree-trunk. It was about three feet high by, perhaps, four feet in diameter. A glance over the side showed that it was hollow, and that inside it there were some steps leading downwards.

Jack pointed to them in quiet triumph. 'Are you going to explore farther?' he asked Alondra, in a low tone scarcely above a whisper. 'Because, if you are, I should suggest that we go very quietly.'

'Yes; I'm going to find out what it all means,' said Alondra firmly.

'What about arms?' queried Jack dubiously.

'I have my trident, or I had,' Alondra answered. 'I must have left it somewhere about on the floor.'

Jack went back to look for it, and Alondra followed; but it was nowhere to be seen.

'It has disappeared!' exclaimed Alondra, bewildered. 'What can have become of it? I remember putting it down when I went, towards the pool to pick one of those terrible flowers. Are you sure you have not picked it up, either of you?'

'What should we do with it—put it in one of our pockets?' laughed Jack. 'No; this is one more proof that what you saw was reality and not a vision of your fanciful brain. Some one was here—some one who coolly looked on while you were struggling for your life in the grasp of the dreadful floral monster beside yonder pretty-looking fountain. Some one who wears diamonds on his breast, and was in too great a hurry to notice that the bushes had scratched one off in passing. Some one, finally, who has walked off with your trident.'

'True. But why did he take that?'

'It seems to me that the reason is not difficult to guess at. It tells a little tale to me by itself. He considered that you were as good as dead, and would have no further use for your trident. So, as it is a very beautifully ornamented one, he thought he might as well have it.'

'I'm afraid you must be right!' Alondra rejoined, with a slight shiver. 'Yet, I don't understand it! However, let us see what we can find out. As to arms, who would dare to lay a hand openly on me?'

As Alondra asked this last question he drew himself up proudly, and his eyes flashed.

'It's not for me to say,' Jack remarked, with a philosophical air. 'Gerald and I have our own arms—what we call revolvers when we are at home. They're not like yours, though. They hurt if they are used properly, as you know.'

The two went back to where they had left Gerald, and a little later they were all three creeping noiselessly down the steps inside the hollow tree-trunk. At the bottom they found themselves in another passage, which they calculated must run under the floor of the glass-house, and then under the garden. It was in darkness, save for a little glimmer which came down the steps they had descended.

'Now, I wonder where this goes to?' muttered Jack. 'It doesn't seem to me to lead to the palace. I fancy it runs in the opposite direction.'

Alondra produced from his pocket a little electric lamp, and by its aid they followed the passage for some distance. Then they came to more steps, which went much farther down into the ground. They also came to other side-passages,

which branched off in different directions. Soon the passage became wider and higher, and finally ended in a heavily barred door, which, however, was standing ajar.

They listened cautiously, and, hearing no one about, pushed it open, and suddenly found themselves in a blaze of light. Yet it was certain that they were not in the open air.

They stared around, and then up, in wondering astonishment. They seemed to be in another glass-house, for certainly there was some kind of transparent or semi-transparent roof overhead. But the light was not the light of the sky exactly. It was a strange reflected light, such as puzzled the three who gazed at it.

Then an idea flashed into Jack's mind. 'I know what it is!' he whispered. 'We are looking up through water! This place is built underneath the large lake in the gardens.'

'Yes, you are right. It must be so,' Alondra agreed. 'But why? This must be some place constructed in this strange fashion on purpose that its very existence should be kept a secret! Now, why is that, I wonder? I do not believe that my father even knows of its existence. But why all this secrecy? There seems to be no one about. Let us try to find out what it all means.'

One thing they found it undoubtedly was—a treasure-house. They quickly saw enough to convince them that Agrando had a great store of treasure here. But there were also roomy chambers, and a spacious central place, with a great dome as large as a good-sized theatre, and not unlike one, having banks of seats around, one behind the other, arranged like semicircular steps. The use of this building seemed very doubtful, as did that of some small, dark side-chambers—mere cells—of which there were quite a number about.

While the explorers were wondering what it all meant, they heard the sound of voices. Jack pointed to one of the small cells high up in the wall, and led the way up the banks of seats, stepping from one to the other like going upstairs.

The cell had a strong door, the upper part of which consisted of a grille, and when they were well inside they pulled it to after them. Then, peering through the grille, they could see nearly all over the interior. The voices drew nearer, and in a few moments there entered King Agrando, Kazzaro, and Zuanstroom, with two attendants, each of whom bore small sacks. Judging by their manner, the sacks were pretty heavy.

'That will do. Put them down there!' ordered Agrando. 'We can examine them better here than in the other chambers. This has the best light of any.' The centre was occupied by a circular platform or staging of stonework, the use or meaning of which the three hidden spectators had not been able to guess at. Upon this the attendants deposited their bags, and immediately withdrew.

When assured that their servitors were out of sight and hearing, Zuanstroom opened the bags, and turned out from one a sparkling collection of jewellery of all kinds and designs, and from the other a dazzling heap of unset stones, some of them of great size and brilliancy.

It was curious to see the expressions of greed and avarice which crept into the features of the king and his favourite as they gazed upon this display.

'There!' cried Zuanstroom triumphantly, 'have I not kept my word? Have I not done as I promised? You doubted whether I could perform what I said; but you see I've managed it, spite of all Ivanta's edicts and precautions! He little dreams that all these are now in your hands, instead of reposing peacefully in his own treasure-house until it suits his royal fancy to allow me to deal as I please with my own. Ah, he is a clever man, in many ways—a wonderful man; but he does not know everything! He has yet to learn the real power that lies in diamonds. I learned it long ago! There is nothing too difficult to attain, no living being you cannot bribe, if you have only diamonds enough!'

Jack had put a hand on Alondra as a hint to keep his feelings under control. And it was well he had done so, for he felt him start, and could tell that he was battling with his rising indignation as he listened to this talk. Jack, however, had quickly decided in his own mind that it would be better to keep their presence there a secret if possible, and the pressure of his hand upon the young prince said so plainly. Alondra, on his side, was forced to admit to himself that Jack was right as to this; though he did so all unwillingly.

There ensued a good deal of talk between Agrando and the other two, the while that they turned the scintillating heaps over and over, but it was carried on for the most part in such low tones that the listeners heard but little of what was said. Now and then they heard exclamations, or caught scraps of sentences, but these did not convey much information.

At last the conspirators put the two heaps back into their respective receptacles, which they themselves then carried into another chamber. Presumably, they there locked them up in some vault, and went their way; and all once more became quiet.

'Now's our time!' said Jack. 'If you take my advice, Prince, we shall slip back the way we came, and get out—if we're lucky enough to meet no one—through the glass-house where we found you. I should keep what you have learned to yourself till you are safely back home, and then tell your royal father, who will know what to do better than you or I, or Mr Monck.'

'I think you are right,' said Alondra musingly, 'although'—

'I am sure Jack is right,' Gerald put in. 'Those men, now that the fire of covetousness has been lighted in their breasts, would stick at nothing. They would murder you, and me, and all your suite, as soon as look at us, rather than

give up their booty, or rather than risk our telling King Ivanta. So we'd better be discreet and keep still tongues in our heads.'

They left their hiding-place and made their way down the rows of seats. When, however, they reached the floor, Alondra looked round and whispered, 'I should like very much to know what this place is used for. It must have been constructed for some distinct purpose, and whatever the purpose it was a secret one. I see many things about, the uses of which I confess I do not understand, and yet I cannot help guessing; but I hope I am not right in my guesses, for they make me shudder.'

'I think I know what is in your mind,' returned Jack gloomily. 'I fancy the same thoughts came into mine; but I deemed it better not to say anything about them at present.'

As he spoke they distinctly heard a door opened and the sound of voices. There was nothing for it but to regain their former place of concealment. They had hardly entered it and closed the door, when a number of people came bursting into the place, looking about them as though in search of some one.

CHAPTER XXII.

MALTO.

In the shade of the cell in which they had concealed themselves, the three friends talked in whispers, while watching, through the grille, the doings of the newcomers.

Who were these people, and whom were they searching for? At first the watchers took it for granted that they were themselves the objects of their search; but a few moments later they had doubts as to whether it was so. If it was, Alondra was ready to 'take the bull by the horns' and show himself, quite believing that they would not dare to harm King Ivanta's son. Jack, however, was for waiting a while to see what happened.

'You can do that at any time—when it is forced upon us,' he whispered. 'They may not be looking for us at all; and we may learn something if we keep quiet.'

The reasoning seemed good, and Alondra agreed, though somewhat unwillingly. He was angry and indignant at what had already occurred, and was becoming impatient at being compelled to play hide-and-seek in what he consid-

ered was an undignified fashion.

At the same time, he was curious, and, for one thing, was wondering who these people could be who were hunting about. He had never seen them before. Not only were they strangers to him, but their dress was quite different from that usually worn by Agrando's followers. Their costumes were a very dark purple, and they were all big, powerful-looking men. Moreover, when they called out to one another they spoke in a strange language, one that even Alondra did not understand.

And now a fresh development occurred. Into the midst of these strangers strode three men in masks—men even bigger and taller than the rest. They seemed to speak angrily, as though rating the others for something they had done wrongly. Then they issued some sharp, short word of command, and the first-comers turned and marched out in perfect military order, the masked men walking behind them.

In a minute or two they had all disappeared. Sounds followed as of the closing and fastening of heavy doors, and the place was once more empty and quiet.

'What does it all mean?' exclaimed Gerald perplexedly, addressing Alondra. 'What are all these strange comings and goings? Who were those chaps who came in last, and why do they wear masks? It is all very mysterious and extraordinary! It seems to me there must be a good deal more going on here than you have any idea of!'

'It seems so, indeed,' Alondra replied, in a tone which showed that he was not less puzzled. 'I confess it is a mystery to me at present. But I mean to get to the bottom of it if the thing is possible.'

'What do you think King Ivanta will say to it all when you tell him?' asked Jack. 'What do you suppose he will do? You will tell him, will you not?'

'You may be sure I shall,' returned Alondra, 'and I think the sooner he knows the better. We must find some excuse for cutting short our visit here and getting back to Ivenia as quickly as possible,' he added with decision.

'If you will take me with you to King Ivanta,' said a strange voice behind them, 'I can tell him many more things which he ought to know—which he ought to have known long ago!'

The three friends started and looked round. From somewhere in the darkness, at the back of the cell, a figure now stepped forth, and stood looking at them with as much interest as they showed themselves.

He was a young fellow of scarcely more than twenty years of age perhaps, good-looking, well set up, and muscular in build. He was dressed like an official of Agrando's household; but Alondra detected at once that he was not a native of the country.

'Who are you?' he asked, eying him curiously. 'And why have you been hiding and listening to our talk?'

'Who I am doesn't matter just now,' returned the stranger quietly. 'You need not be afraid of me; you may trust me thoroughly. I am a friend, and you need a friend just now if you want to get out of this place without being captured by Kazzaro's myrmidons!'

'I am not afraid of them! You do not know who I am!' returned Alondra proudly.

'It does not matter to me who you are, any more than it matters to you who I am,' was the cool answer. 'You would need to be some one very wonderful, or very clever, to get out of this place alive if Kazzaro knew you were here. If I help you to escape, will you promise to take me to King Ivanta? He will thank you for doing so when he hears what I have to tell him, and I have little doubt will reward you handsomely.'

At this the three looked at each other and burst out laughing. Jack was about to tell the stranger that he was talking to the son of Ivanta, when a look from Alondra stopped him.

'I suppose you expect to be rewarded too,' said the young prince shrewdly. 'Well, I promise to take you to him; but if we do, and he gives you the reward you expect, it is only fair that we should share it.'

'That you cannot do,' answered the stranger with a sigh. 'I know not whether he will be able to give me what I am hoping for; but if he should it is not anything that I can share, or that you would care to have.'

'You are very mysterious, my friend!' Alondra commented. 'Why are you hiding in here?'

'Well, I came here upon a little errand of my own—one somewhat similar to that which brought you, I fancy, judging by what I heard you say—to look about and find out what I could. As to who those people in purple were, I will tell you that at another time. The fact is, my friends, I have no reason to love King Agrando, though I am an officer of his household. He brought me here against my will from a distant country, and has forced me to be a sort of slave to him and to take part in things that I loathe and detest. But that is not the worst; I have a deeper wrong to set right. I have long hoped that King Ivanta might pay us a visit here so that I might appeal to him. But if you can take me to him it will be better still. Will you swear to do so if I lead you safely out of this den?'

'You have my promise,' returned Alondra a little haughtily. 'There is no need for me to repeat it or to swear.'

The other looked at the young prince keenly, and then said, in a satisfied tone, 'Your face is honest to look at, and I will trust to your promise. Follow me and I will get you a disguise.'

'A disguise!' exclaimed Alondra. 'What next?'

'It is necessary. We cannot get out without the chance of running against some one.'

'We can get out the way we came,' Alondra asserted; but the stranger shook his head.

'No,' he said decidedly. 'I saw you come in, and the door you came through is now locked and barred, and neither you nor I can open it. You must come my way, or I must give up the idea of befriending you and leave you to your own devices.'

'Very well,' Alondra assented, somewhat ungraciously. He was getting restive at the masterful manner of this stranger, who, after all, was only an under-official—or, as he himself had admitted, a kind of slave. 'What is your name?' he added as an afterthought.

The stranger hesitated for a brief space, then said, 'You may call me Malto.'

With that he turned away, and began stepping down from one row of seats to another, walking as if plunged deep in thought, and seemingly taking but little further notice of his companions.

As for Gerald and Jack, they glanced at one another with perplexed and wondering looks. This cool, self-possessed young fellow had somehow impressed them favourably, and they were inclined to like him. But they did not in the least understand him; and, like Alondra, they were half-disposed to resent his assumption of so authoritative a manner.

'My stars!' muttered Jack, under his breath, to Gerald, 'I fancy he thinks we are some of the hangers-on amongst Mr Monck's suite!'

Meantime, the stranger had reached the floor of the place, and was now leading the way towards one end of it, which was closed in by some huge, massive-looking gates. There was something grand yet repellent about these gates. Upon them were carved two great heads as of some kind of giants, which frowned down upon them in forbidding ugliness.

Their leader turned to a small wicket gate at one side, and, taking a key from his pocket, opened it, waited for the three to pass inside, then closed it and locked it behind him. They were then in a dark lobby. A moment later he opened another door, and they all passed through it.

Here the three looked round in wondering silence. They were in what might have been either an immense underground cavern or a large enclosure roofed over. The light was dim, the air was oppressive, and there was a foul odour, which to the visitors seemed sickly and nauseating.

Before them, at some little distance, there was a network of metal bars, which rose to a great height like an immense cage. It attracted their attention at once to the exclusion of all other surroundings, for it seemed to be the source of

the evil smell which had assailed their nostrils.

Suddenly they were startled by a terrible scream. It was followed by a cry as of some one in the extreme of fear and dread. At the same moment a face distorted by terror came into view behind the bars. It was only visible for a moment, then melted again into the gloom beyond.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A FOUL DEN.

For a few moments the three friends stared without moving at the place where the agonised face had appeared. They were spellbound with horror of they knew not what; for though they could not see anything of what was going on in the den in front of them, they could hear strange sounds and weird noises.

There was a rushing sound as of large bodies darting to and fro through the air; they heard the beat of powerful wings, low gasps and gurgles, yet could make out nothing in the obscurity. Then another terrible cry was heard—this time an unmistakably human one: 'Malto! Malto! Is it you? Save me! save me!'

This appeal startled their new friend into instant action, and he dashed toward the bars, crying out as he went, 'Have you arms, you three? If you have, come and help me!'

In a moment Gerald and Jack gripped their revolvers and raced after him.

He made for a small metal gate in the bars, and after applying a key to the lock began feverishly to work away at other fastenings which still held it. The two chums stood beside him, gazing into the cage, trying to make out what was going on within. Suddenly something swished past them. It had the general appearance of a monstrous bat—certainly it had what looked like the body and wings of a bat—but it also had a human face!

'Malto! Malto!' cried this apparition, as it flew past—for it was certainly flying—'make haste or it will be too late! I am tired out! I'—

The last words were lost as it disappeared again into the darkness beyond. Hardly had it passed when a huge shape came into view, beating the air with great wings, evidently in hot pursuit of the other. It was undoubtedly a monster bat—much bigger than the strange apparition with the human face.

Without waiting for instructions from Malto, both the chums fired at the creature, but seemingly with no result; for it continued on its way, and a moment

later was lost in the shadows.

Malto looked up in surprise at the sound of the shots; then resumed his work at the fastenings, in which he was now assisted by Alondra.

A moment later the gate was open. Malto snatched up a long, heavy piece of wood which was lying near, and, entering the cage, stood boldly waiting for the expected return of the monster.

'This way, Malandris! this way! The gate is open!' he shouted, as he looked about, trying to pierce the gloom.

There was a low answering cry, and the form of the man-bat—as he seemed to be—came into view, made a desperate attempt to keep up, but fell exhausted at Malto's feet.

Then the great bat itself appeared, and made a swoop to seize its prey. It was met with a blow from the heavy wooden bar, whereupon it turned viciously upon the rescuer.

The great wings closed round him, and the immense claws with which they were armed gripped him, striving to draw him within reach of the head, with its open mouth and shining fangs.

The wooden bar, however, was jammed against its breast, and prevented it for the moment from coming to close quarters. Just then Gerald and Jack, who had entered the cage behind Malto, fired their pistols simultaneously.

As a result, one wing could be seen to be hanging limply, broken by a bullet; and as the creature gave utterance to another scream, Jack rushed in and despatched it.

Gerald and Alondra assisted the plucky young fellow to struggle out of the enfolding wings. Directly he was clear he sprang up, and, seizing upon the prostrate man, began to drag him towards the opening.

'Quick, quick!' he cried. 'That scream was to call its mate to its aid, and it will be here in another minute!'

The man they had saved was unconscious; but the two chums laid hold of him, and, picking him up with comparative ease, carried him out of the cage.

Hardly had the gate been closed behind them when there was heard a repetition of the scream. A second monster came rushing out of the gloom and hurled itself against the bars with a force which shook them as though they had been but wire.

Malto, badly mauled as he was, hastily fastened the gate, and then, turning to the others, said hurriedly, 'There is no time to lose! If you can carry my friend, who has fainted, bear him this way. The noise will bring people here, and we shall be captured ourselves if they see us!'

Between them they bore the one they had rescued across the floor to a small door upon the side opposite that by which they had entered. Malto unlocked it,

and when they were well inside closed it quickly.

There were here, amongst other things, a number of queer-looking dresses hung on pegs, and Malto took some down and urged the three friends to dress themselves in them.

'Make haste, while I attend to my friend!' he urged; and though Alondra strongly disliked the idea of dressing himself up in a disguise, there was that in their new friend's tone and manner which somehow silenced his objections. The stranger, meantime, had obtained a bowl of water from somewhere near, and sprinkled it in the face of the unconscious man. Then he drew from his pocket a flask, which he held to the man's lips, and a minute later the sufferer opened his eyes, gave a gasp, and sat up.

Presently he seemed to recollect what had happened, and, realising the need for action himself, he struggled to his feet. He looked a grotesque figure indeed, and the three who had helped to save him, busy though they were, trying to fit on their strange garments, could not help staring at him in wonder. He was evidently 'got up' in imitation of a great bat—that much seemed certain—but the reason of such an extraordinary get-up was for the time being a riddle to which they could find no answer.

Whatever the original intention in wearing the dress may have been, however, it was clear that Malto saw no use in its continuance, for he proceeded to assist the wearer to discard it and attire himself in some of the garments which were hanging on the pegs. Then he rolled up the whole affair into a bundle, and concealed it in a corner beneath a pile of skins.

They were now all garbed in a quaint kind of costume, the chief points of which consisted of a high hat and a loose cloak, which hid the clothes they were still wearing underneath. It was one of the dresses worn by the attendants of the palace, so Malto briefly explained, while peering out through a grating in the door to see what was going on in the place they had just left.

As he had expected would be the case, the noise of the revolver shots had brought some people upon the scene. He could see a group gathered near the cage, staring at the dead monster, while others were moving about in search of a clue to the mystery of how it had come by its death.

'They will be in here directly,' Malto said in a low tone, after a brief inspection. 'We had better be off!—Do you think you can walk, Malandris?'

'Ay, ay, and run too, if needs be,' returned the rescued man briskly. 'I am all right now. I owe you my life'—

'Never mind that now. This is no time for talk,' Malto interrupted. 'Just take a last look round, to make sure we have left nothing to tell that we have been here, and follow me!'

He unlocked a door on one side, and they passed out in silence into a pas-

sage, which was almost in darkness. A little farther on there were several flights of steps, and, having ascended these, they came out, after some careful reconnoitring through another door, into the open air in a spacious courtyard.

Malto locked the door behind him, and, enjoining caution upon his companions, led the way to a large gateway which they could see in front of them.

'If any one addresses you, say nothing, but leave it to me,' he said to Alondra and his friends. 'Your speech would betray you at once.'

As they drew near the gates they were pushed open, and a number of men in the purple dresses they had seen inside marched in, with soldierly bearing and military precision.

One, who seemed to be an officer, stopped and spoke to Malto; and again Alondra heard the strange tongue which he had noted before.

Malto remained a short time in talk, while his companions walked on with as good an imitation of carelessness as they could summon up on the spur of the moment.

When Malto came up with them he was smiling quietly to himself.

'It's lucky they did not see us come out of that door,' he said to Malandris, 'or they would have asked awkward questions as to how I came to have a key.'

'Ah, that is what has been puzzling me all this time,' observed Malandris.

'That is my secret for the present,' returned Malto. 'It is a little secret which would interest Kazzaro even more than it does you, if he happened to be aware that I had such a key.'

'What has been puzzling me,' said Alondra, addressing Malandris, 'is how you came to be in that cage, and in such an extraordinary dress—if one can call it a dress. I suppose some one must have placed you there. Who could have been guilty of such an atrocious act?'

Malandris, who was a tall, elderly man, with grizzled hair and a worn, haggard-looking face, shook his head with a sigh, as he answered, 'That you should wonder, young sir, only shows that you must be a stranger hereabouts—one who knows not the master we serve, or what he is capable of.'

'Hark! what is that?' exclaimed Malto suddenly. 'I'm afraid they've got upon our track! Do you see that tower yonder?'

Before them lay a wide, grassy expanse, at the end of which was a sort of ornamental pavilion or small tower.

'That is the place we have to make for,' he went on. 'If we can reach it, we shall be safe—at all events, for a time—till assistance comes. If necessary, we must run for it.'

As he spoke, the low murmur which he had noted behind them grew into a clamorous shouting, and a moment later a crowd of pursuers came running

through the gateway they had so recently passed through.

CHAPTER XXIV. AT THE PAVILION.

'You said a little while ago that you could run if needs were,' said Malto, addressing Malandris. 'You must try now, at any rate. I will help you.'

'I am quite recovered,' was the answer. 'We must look after these young people.'

'Oh, that I had my wings! Why did I leave them behind this morning!' exclaimed Alondra.

'You may as well throw off those disguises,' Malto advised. 'They are of no use now, and will only hamper you.'

As yet their pursuers were a long way off, for after the reconnoitre at the gateway the fugitives had stepped out briskly, and had covered nearly half the distance to the pavilion before the alarm had been given.

They now set off at a run, after discarding their disguises, and at first it seemed as though there would be no difficulty in reaching the tower well ahead of their pursuers. Indeed, the latter seemed, at one time, to have almost given up the chase; for only a few were to be seen coming towards them; the rest had halted.

A few moments later, however, the cause of the delay became clear. Suddenly a man rose in the air on motor-wings and began to sail rapidly towards them. He was armed with a trident. Convinced that he would easily effect the capture of the fugitives, who had, as could be seen, neither shields nor tridents, the remainder of the crowd followed quietly in the rear. They would be in plenty of time, they reckoned, to pick up the unconscious bodies when the man with the trident had dealt with them.

Malto muttered something between his set teeth.

'I'm afraid it is no use,' said Malandris despondently, as he ran along beside the others. 'He is bound to overtake us, and we are all unarmed.'

'Not quite,' Jack answered. 'If they think we are, so much the better; it may give us a chance to get on equal terms with that flying chap. His trident is no good at more than twenty yards. We have something here which reaches farther than that.'

He and Gerald had drawn their revolvers, and were looking to the hammers as they raced onwards, to make quite sure that they were in working order. Everything would depend upon making good practice with their first shots.

'You aim at one wing, Gerald,' said Jack; 'I will aim at the fellow's arm which carries the trident. Take it easy! Don't run too fast; it will make your hand shake.'

They continued on their way for some distance farther. The pavilion was now not far off; so also, unfortunately, was the flying man with his trident.

Jack gave a sign to Gerald, and they both turned and faced him. Alondra stopped too; and the others, although they did not exactly understand what was likely to happen, immediately halted, because they would not leave the three to their fate.

As it happened, this was the best thing they could have done. The flying man interpreted their action as an abject surrender. He slackened speed and came on carelessly.

Then two shots rang out. Jack's aim was true; his bullet struck the man's right arm, and the trident flew from the hand which had grasped it. Gerald's first shot missed, but his second struck one wing and smashed the light framework. The wing drooped, and the flier fell heavily to the ground.

[Illustration: The wing drooped, and the flier
fell heavily to the ground
(missing from source book)]

'Good! Good! Capital!' Malto and Malandris cried out, in surprised wonder and delight at this turn of affairs, for neither of them understood anything about pistols.

'Now, run for it, my friends! We shall get there first yet!' Jack called out.

'Let me have his trident, though,' said Alondra, as he picked up the fallen man's weapon. 'This may come in useful, you know.'

There was a great outcry behind them as the pursuers witnessed the discomfiture of the aeronaut. The crowd at once took up the chase in a manner which showed how confidently they had been counting upon his ability to capture the fugitives without their aid.

As has been stated, the men in the dark-purple dresses were big, fine men, all of them. There was that in their aspect, too, which betokened a fierce nature, used to warfare.

They quickly made it evident that they were good runners, and they started

off now in earnest and came on swiftly. But they had lost whatever chance they might at first have had of overtaking those they were chasing, by trusting too confidently to the man with the wings.

By the time they reached the base of the tower the fugitives had already dashed up the steps leading to the entrance, had opened and passed through some barred gates, fastened them behind them, and gained the shelter of the doorway.

A minute or two afterwards they appeared upon a balcony, of which there were several running round the tower on the outside, one above the other, and complacently smiled down upon their baffled foes.

'Well, we 've beaten 'em so far,' exclaimed Malto. 'I had almost given up hope. We should have been done for if it hadn't been for those noisy playthings of yours, young gentlemen. May I ask what they are, and where they come from? I have never met with that kind of weapon before.'

'They come from a far country, so far that your head would scarcely carry the tale of the figures if I were to attempt to give them to you,' Alondra declared laughingly. 'Now, what is to be done next? Our foes will be sending an airship against us, I suppose; and if assistance doesn't reach us pretty soon I am afraid they will have the best of it, after all.'

'No, I don't think there is any fear of that. They won't send an airship against us,' said Malto.

Malandris shook his head too. 'Not during the day,' he assented. 'They might when it gets dark, if we are still here.'

'Why not?' asked Jack, in surprise.

'It would attract attention. You see, our master has visitors. Prince Alondra, the son of King Ivanta, is staying here; and he, or some of his people, might be cruising about in his air-yacht or in some of the airships which came with him. If they caught sight of an airship engaged in fighting operations down here their curiosity might be aroused, and they might come and ask inconvenient questions.'

At this Gerald and Jack glanced at one another and then at Alondra, and nearly burst out laughing; but the latter made a sign, and they turned away and said nothing. The young prince wished to keep his identity a secret a little longer, in order that he might have an opportunity of quietly probing farther into the meaning of the extraordinary events of that eventful morning.

'What, then, do you suppose they will do?' Alondra went on.

'Oh, very likely nothing at all! Just loaf about to make sure that we don't get away during the day. They know they can't break into this pavilion; it has been strongly built on purpose. Then at night they will make sure of us. Our best hope is that we may see some passing airship and attract the attention of the people in her, and that they may come and take us off.'

'That doesn't sound very hopeful. It might be one of Agrando's airships,' Jack pointed out.

'On the other hand, it might be one belonging to his visitors,' said Malto. 'Then, I imagine, we should be all right. I suppose you belong to their party, don't you? I have been thinking it over, and can't guess who else you can be. You said you could take me to King Ivanta, and I don't see how you could make such a promise unless you belonged to the prince's party.'

He looked searchingly at Alondra as he spoke, and there was in his tone and look a suggestion of reproach at their keeping him in the dark.

'You are quite right, my friend,' Alondra now said gravely. 'We do belong to the party of visitors you speak of. I expect they are already wondering where we have got to, and will be coming out to look for us before long. So I hope our troubles are over, or soon will be. And now, as we have time for a little talk, I want to hear your stories—you two. Explain to me the meaning of all that has happened.'

But Malto shook his head.

'I wish to tell it all to King Ivanta, and to no one else,' he declared. 'You have promised to take me to him, and I shall ask you to keep your promise, and to refrain from questioning me meantime. Cannot you understand that the king might not be pleased if he found I had been talking freely of things which he may wish had been kept for his ear alone?'

Alondra was silent. He felt that Malto was right, and could not but respect him for his caution. At the same time, he was burning to have some explanation of their adventures.

'But you said you wished for our testimony to back up yours,' he reminded him. 'How can we help in that way if you do not enlighten us as to what it is we are to testify about?'

It was now Malto's turn to ponder, and he remained for a space gazing out thoughtfully over the expanse of ground which lay upon the other side of the pavilion.

The three followed his glance, and noted that the building formed part of the boundary wall of an extensive enclosure, which just here consisted of an extremely high and massive-looking stone fence, adorned at the top with formidable metal spikes.

Farther round, to right and to left, the boundary wall consisted of precipitous rocks, which shut the place in, and made it a kind of a park.

Alondra noted this, and, breaking off from the subject of his last question, asked why they could not descend from the pavilion into this enclosure. It seemed to him that it would be a difficult matter for their enemies to scale the wall in order to follow them.

Just as he had spoken there rose on the air a strange, weird, booming sound. It was a sort of bellowing roar, but far louder and more startling than the bellow of a bull or the roar of the largest lion ever seen or heard of. The sound seemed to come from a distance; yet it was so loud that it almost made the tower itself tremble. That it was produced by some member of the animal kingdom seemed pretty certain. But what horrible monster could it be which could make such a sound? There was something almost supernatural in its awful depth and power; something appalling in the menacing tones of the hoarse, ferocious growl into which it changed as it gradually died away.

'What in the name of all that is horrible is that?' cried the startled young prince.

'It is the answer to your question,' returned Malto quietly. 'That is to say, it partly answers both your questions. I may go so far as to explain that my original object in coming here, before we were found out and pursued, was that you might perhaps hear that terrible roar, and possibly catch sight of the creature which gave utterance to it. But it is not at present in sight, and I imagine that, after what you heard, you will scarcely care to get out on the other side of the pavilion and go to look for it?'

'I—I think not,' said Alondra. 'I will take your word for it that we are probably safer even here than we should be down there.'

'You are,' answered Malto drily. 'It is a creature upon which neither your trident nor the strange weapons of your young friends would make more impression than upon yonder rocks! Now you will be able, if we ever come before King Ivanta, to confirm one part of what I wish him to know. King Agrando has a name as a collector of all kinds of curiosities and monstrosities. King Ivanta has himself helped him to make his collection the most comprehensive that has ever been seen'—

'Yes, yes, I know all that,' Alondra put in impatiently.

'Ay, but what you do not know is this—that Agrando's object in gathering these out-of-the-way things about him is not altogether a mere harmless love of the curious. He is a monster of cruelty'—

'A perfect fiend!' Malandris interjected.

'His craze—for such it is—is a sort of madness,' Malto continued. 'It is to set men to fight for their lives with the most terrible creatures he can find to pit against them. That is the amusement he and that demon Kazzaro delight in! That is why they have constructed all these secret places, which none know of save themselves and their myrmidons. Little does the noble-minded Ivanta dream of the proceedings of these two, or of the way in which he has himself contributed to them. If he but knew'—

'Eh, what? How dare—I mean, how can King Ivanta have contributed to

such horrible cruelties as you are hinting at?’ demanded Alondra hotly.

‘I don’t wonder that you are moved to indignation, young sir. But I am not blaming King Ivanta. He has been deceived. For instance, he, it is said, paid a visit to another planet, and brought back with him many strange and horrible monsters never seen or heard of on our globe. Is it not so?’

‘Well?’

‘Many of them were the young of fearful creatures. But, young or old, he presented Agrando with specimens for his collection.’

‘Very likely. What then? I see no harm in that.’

‘No. For King Ivanta little guessed the use which the tyrant’s ingenious brain would put them to. Agrando gave out that most of them died in captivity, that the climate here did not suit them, and so on. Was it not so?’

‘Very likely. I have heard something of the sort. What then?’

‘It is untrue that they died—at least, as regards most of them. The greater part—some of the most ferocious, terrible creatures amongst them—he nursed with perverted tenderness and care. He has reared them and brought them to maturity. Now his sole use for them is to pit them against any one who happens to incur his anger; which means, of course, simply dooming the hapless wretch to a cruel and terrible death. You have just heard the voice of one; you saw others—monster bats which they call krudias—in the cage below; you have also seen one of the intended victims, and helped me to rescue him at the last moment.’

‘Ay, he sent me there—sentenced me to that awful fate merely in a fit of passing temper,’ Malandris declared. ‘My crime was only that I had mistaken an order he gave me!’

‘Horrible! Incredible!’ cried Alondra, his eyes flashing with indignation and disgust.

‘You may well say incredible,’ muttered Malto. ‘That is why I wished you to see some of the creatures for yourselves, you three, so that King Ivanta might have your testimony to confirm mine. Otherwise, he might think my statements, as you say, incredible. Little did I imagine then, however, that you would witness such a convincing proof or that I should find my friend Malandris in that cage!’

‘And why were you dressed up in that grotesque fashion?’ Alondra asked of Malandris.

‘Oh, that is one of Kazzaro’s little jokes! It is a whim of his sometimes to dress his victims up like the creatures they are doomed to fight against.’

‘But he wasn’t there to look on to-day,’ Jack commented.

‘I suppose he happened to be particularly busy over something else, or he would have been,’ said Malandris grimly. He shuddered, and looked around half-apprehensively. ‘Now you can understand how much depends upon our being able to escape from here, and what it will mean if we fall again into his power.’

Gerald and Jack stared at one another, almost stupefied with horror.

'Did ever two such miscreants exist before, I wonder?' said Jack. 'How right, Gerald, you were when you called Kazzaro the Ogre!'

'I am in for it, too, now, of course,' Malto added. 'They know by this time what I have done; and I shall find no mercy there if I am dragged back into their clutches.'

'But you sha'n't be!' cried Alondra, impulsively. 'I will not allow it! And King Agrando, strong as he may deem himself upon his own ground, dares not attempt to take you against my will.'

Malto and Malandris looked at him in astonishment at this unexpected outburst.

'Your feelings do you credit, young sir,' said the elder man; 'but I fear your brave words will not avail us much.' He smiled slightly and sighed.

'But who are you, then, to talk like that?' exclaimed Malto incredulously.

'This is King Ivanta's son, Prince Alondra!' said Jack.

CHAPTER XXV.

AGRANDO THROWS OFF THE MASK.

King Agrando sat in his own particular sanctum, watching, with absorbed attention, the proceedings of the Diamond King, who was engaged in fitting together, by way of trial, the several parts of a new crown.

Upon the table before him were spread out several heaps of lustrous, sparkling loose stones, some of which must have been among the finest of their kind in existence.

Agrando had made up his mind that this new crown was to be the most magnificent that ever adorned the head of mortal potentate. Had he not here at hand to advise him the greatest living authority upon such subjects—Zuanstroom to wit—who claimed that he had seen, handled, examined, and photographed the most splendid crowns which graced the various royal heads upon our planet?

Zuanstroom picked up the gems one by one, and placed them tentatively in the golden framework, stepping back from time to time to observe the effect, as does an artist with his picture. Then, if the result did not commend itself to his sense of the fitness of things, he would take some of them out, and replace them with others of a different size or colour.

Agrando looked on, a curious variety of expressions flitting across his face. He could not but admire the beauty of the work of art which was slowly growing under his eyes. Yet he grudged the worker the delight of handling the bewitching jewels.

To these two there entered Kazzaro. It was easy to see that he was put out about something or other, and that he was in a very bad humour even for him, which is saying a good deal. It should rather be said, perhaps, that it would have been easy to perceive this if any one had looked at him; as a matter of exact fact, no one did. Agrando's gaze was fixed upon the table as though he feared that if he removed it for a single instant some one would snatch at an odd stone and hide it away. He knew his henchman's voice, and had no need to make use of his sight to inform him who it was who had intruded upon his privacy.

'All gone wrong—miscarried!' he heard Kazzaro grumble. 'That young upstart Alondra has escaped my snare after all!'

'So,' said Agrando, without taking his glance off the table, 'you've managed to blunder again, then?'

'Blunder, indeed!' growled the Ogre. 'I thought he was safe. I as good as watched him drown! I saw him in the deadly coils which no one has ever escaped before, up to his very neck in water. Then I came away in haste, for fear some one might enter and find me there. Some one did enter—must have done, I imagine—and just in time to rescue him, after all!'

The king muttered something between his teeth.

Just then an officer came in and said something to Kazzaro in a low tone. The latter started, turned visibly pale, and then, without a word, left the apartment with him.

He was gone about a quarter of an hour, and when he returned he was almost choking with rage.

'It's all up!' he cried, throwing his hands into the air. 'There is treachery—treason—at work! Some strangers have made their way below and rescued Malandris from the cage. He is missing, and so is Malto; and there are signs that some of your visitors from the evening star have been there, for they have killed one of the krudias with their fire-weapons. Did I not warn you against ever allowing these people to come here prying about? This is what has come of it!'

Agrando at last was roused, and he turned his eyes from his beloved jewels. But when his gaze fell upon Kazzaro there was in it a menace which made even that hardened miscreant tremble.

'Miserable wretch!' thundered his master. 'You dare to say this to me as an excuse for your own clumsy blundering and lack of vigilance! By Krondris, I'—

What awful threat he was about to utter, however, cannot be told, for he was interrupted by the unceremonious entry of Zuanstroom's son Silas.

'Father, father!' he exclaimed, failing, in his excitement, to notice the black looks cast at him by Agrando. 'Gerald and Jack have been shooting some of King Agrando's soldiers, who have got them shut up in the pavilion tower! Alondra is with them, and two of King Agrando's officers. I know their names—they are Malto and Malandris! I saw them shoot down a man sent to bring them back when they were running away.' Out of breath, first with running and then with this speech, poured forth in a violent hurry, Silas subsided, panting, into a chair.

'They are in the pavilion—that tower by the side of the place where "the great beast," as you call it, lives?' asked Agrando with deadly calmness.

'Yes, sir. They are defying all your people there, hoping, I expect, to be taken off by Alondra's yacht.'

Agrando and Kazzaro looked at each other, the latter mutely asking for orders.

'We must have them out of that tower,' said Agrando, in a hard, resolute tone, 'before they can be taken off! Do you hear? We must have them at any cost. Send out war-vessels! Knock the tower down with the traitors in it! Crush them at any cost!'

'But how if Alondra's yacht reaches him first?' queried Kazzaro.

'Fight them! I 'm sick of this dissembling! Everything is prepared! We will throw off the mask, and show Ivanta that we have some teeth beneath it to bite with!'

CHAPTER XXVI. THE WIRELESS MESSAGE.

While Agrando was issuing the orders which would precipitate his long-thought-of revolt against his overlord King Ivanta, Alondra and his four companions were waiting, with what patience they could command, for the hoped-for arrival of their friends.

For a while there was a pause in the hostilities. Either their foes recognised that it was not possible to attack them successfully with the means then at their disposal, or they deemed it impolitic to do so. After taking counsel together, they appeared resolved to content themselves for the time with laying siege to the pavilion.

The only incident worthy of note during this interval was that a wind

sprang up, bringing with it heavy clouds. Rumbblings were heard more than once as of distant thunder, and there were other indications of a coming storm.

Jack's abrupt announcement of Alondra's identity had naturally produced a great effect upon the two officers of Agrando with whom they had become so strangely associated. So surprising had the statement seemed that Malto had at first been inclined to be incredulous. He half-suspected that the statement might be a bit of rather ill-timed levity on the part of the one who had made it. But a little reflection altered this view.

'I have been foolish—blind—not to have guessed it before!' he exclaimed. 'Prince, I have to ask your pardon for several things I said which may perhaps have displeased you, especially when I refused point-blank to answer some of your questions.'

'Nay, I think you were right in the circumstances,' said Alondra. 'It proves that one can rely upon you to be close and discreet when you deem it necessary.'

Malandris also had apologies to make; but Jack and Gerald both noticed that his demeanour was different from that of Malto. The former spoke and behaved just in the way that any one might be expected to do who is confused at finding he has been all unknowingly talking rather freely in the presence of a superior. Malto, on the other hand, appeared in no wise embarrassed. He made his apologies with perfect self-possession, and carried himself as though he were in the habit of associating with distinguished personages every day of his life.

Alondra noticed this too, and at first was a little inclined to resent it; but Malto's manner was so entirely unconscious and free from offence that, with his usual good nature, the young prince quickly thrust the idea aside. 'Well, now,' he said, when he had listened to their apologies and given kindly and suitable replies, 'we are wasting time. As my people don't seem to be coming to look for me of their own accord, I must summon them.'

His companions stared at him with puzzled looks.

'I don't see how you are going to do that!' observed Jack.

'I will let you into a little secret, then. My royal father lent me, just before we came away, one of his pocket telegraph-boxes; and he lent Monck Affelda another, so that we might be able to communicate with one another if we were separated. Perhaps he did not trust King Agrando quite so much as he appeared to do. Anyway, he lent us these. He usually keeps them for the exclusive use of himself and his most confidential officers, and very few people even know of their existence. He invented and designed them himself, and the working parts were made by workmen he could trust, who were sworn to secrecy.'

The term 'Affelda,' applied to Monck, it may be here explained, was a term of courtesy and respect in use among the Martians. It signified rather more than our 'Mr' and something less than 'lord.'

As Alondra spoke he drew from a side-pocket a small affair which looked at first sight like a gold chronometer attached to a gold chain. Just then there came another rumbling warning of the approaching storm.

'Come inside. We shall be quieter there,' he said.

They left the outside gallery, or balcony, and went into an inner chamber, where were seats and a plain wood table. Upon the latter he placed the little 'watch.'

'The wood acts as a sounding-board, and we shall hear better,' he explained.

He touched a spring and a lid flew open. Then he touched other springs, and at once there was heard the sound of little bells or gongs not unlike those of a repeater watch. He repeated this performance several times, waiting a little while between, as though expecting some reply which did not come.

The others stood around, looking on with perplexed curiosity and wondering what it was all about.

'It seems to me it is a repeater watch,' said Jack presently. 'The gongs are beautiful and silvery in tone; but how in the world they are going to'—

'Hush!' exclaimed Alondra, with a warning gesture. He had placed the instrument on the table and left it to itself; and now, lo! the little gongs were ringing away on their own account. Alondra bent over it and listened intently, holding up his hand the while to enjoin strict silence on his companions. Then, when the sounds ceased, he manipulated the gongs himself in turn; immediately he left them alone they again rung out by themselves.

It appeared to the onlookers as though a sort of conversation were being carried on in some mysterious fashion between Alondra and the curious little machine.

Then a thought flashed into Jack's mind. 'Wireless telegraphy—or I 'm a Dutchman!' he breathed. Still the curious performance went on, and the longer it continued the graver grew Alondra's face. His brow clouded over, and at last, when there came a pause, and he drew himself up, it could be seen that his face was flushed and his eyes flashing.

'Treason!' he cried. 'Foul treachery is at work! Agrando has made an attempt to seize my whole party! Some of them he has indeed already basely captured; and he has now actually attacked some of our airships. Monck is in difficulties himself, he tells me; but he hopes to be able to send my yacht to our aid soon, now that I have told him where we are. Whether he can do more than that, he says, he really does not yet know.'

There were exclamations of amazement at these sinister tidings, and the friends stared at one another in bewildered perplexity.

'I can scarcely, even now, believe it!' cried Alondra.

'You are sure there is no mistake? Or may it be that some one is playing a

joke upon you?’ suggested Gerald rather vaguely.

‘No one would dare to attempt such a thing!’ Alondra asserted haughtily.

‘But—it sounds impossible,’ said Jack helplessly.

‘It wouldn’t if you knew our master as well as we do,’ Malandris put in. ‘I have had an idea for some time past that something of the kind was hatching.’

‘If it be as you say, Prince, our position is critical indeed,’ Malto declared. ‘Agrado will not hesitate now to send one of his airships against us—the very thing I thought we were safe from so long as daylight lasted. I am afraid we must make up our minds to the inevitable—we shall all be his prisoners before another hour is over. And what that means you can now guess; although what we have already told you is but a small portion of the actual truth.’

‘My father will rescue us; and they dare not harm us meantime!’ cried Alondra proudly. ‘Agrado knows too well the terrible vengeance that would be exacted.’

Malto shook his head.

‘Do not count too much upon that, Prince,’ he said. ‘It was partly the fear that some such plot was brewing which made me wish to see King Ivanta in order that I might warn him. I had hoped that in return he would be willing to assist me in another matter on which my heart is set—to right a great wrong. But I fear it is useless to dream of it now.’ And he sighed.

‘But is there no other way of escape open to us?’ Jack asked. ‘Surely, if it be that our friends cannot come to our aid, we should do better to try some other plan rather than stay on here to be tamely captured whenever it pleases Agrando to send an airship to take us prisoners!’

‘Yes, it might be better even to risk a run across the enclosure where your monster lives,’ Gerald put in. ‘It is only a choice of monsters—that or Agrando.’

‘Very likely both—Agrado will give us to him later on,’ said Malandris grimly.

‘Well, then, what is this place that we are in?’ Jack went on. ‘Is it empty? Is there nothing in the place that might be useful to help us to defend ourselves?’

‘This pavilion is a sort of grand stand—a place of vantage from which the privileged spectators obtain a good view—and a safe one—of what takes place in the enclosure when there is anything exciting going on,’ Malandris explained. ‘It is not used for any other purpose, and is empty’—

‘Wait a moment!’ Malto interrupted, with a sudden light in his eyes. ‘I am not so sure that it is quite empty. Is there not a store-place below, where they keep’—

‘You are right, Malto,’ the other answered in some excitement. ‘I had forgotten it. There may be some arms and things there which would be useful indeed if we have to try to hold out for a time till assistance can reach us. But I am afraid

the place is locked up'—

'Perhaps my key will fit; if not, we must break it open.'

Just then there came a great gust of wind and another and louder growl of thunder; and a little later there was heard an outburst of shouting outside. Malto ran out on to the balcony to see what it meant.

There was a good deal of excitement amongst their enemies below. People were talking one to another, and some were pointing up at the pavilion, while a few were huddled together in a knot. In the middle of these last were seen two men who were doing something with some wings, seemingly preparatory to taking a flight in the air.

'They have thrown off all thought of concealment,' said Malto, coming inside again. 'You can see that. So what you told us, Prince, must be only too true! They are going to send a couple of fliers up to attempt our capture.'

'But in that case, why does not Agrando send an airship and settle the matter at once?' Gerald asked.

'I expect just now all his airships are busy fighting my friends,' said Alondra. 'They will attend to us presently, I suppose, if the people here don't succeed.'

'Well, we will make a fight of it, anyway!' cried Malto sturdily. 'I believe we may find the means down below, if you can keep them at bay for a little time while we search'—

'We can manage that, I think,' Jack answered him. 'Do you go below and see what you can find to help us.'

Again there came a blustering gust of the fast-rising wind. Then there was a blinding flash, followed by a deafening crash of thunder which shook the whole building to its foundations.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A DESPERATE VENTURE.

Malto and Malandris disappeared down a stairway; and Alondra and the two chums strolled on to the outside gallery to watch their foes.

The wind was now very high, and the darkening sky grew blacker every minute. The swirling gusts whistled and shrieked amongst the outer metal framework, and moaned dismally through the windows and doors.

On each floor of the pavilion there was one of these galleries which ran

the whole way round on the outside, being partitioned off from the interior by glass windows only. Hence there was almost as good a view from the inside as from without; except that one could not look over and see what was going on immediately beneath.

'The storm seems likely to be a bit of luck for us,' Jack observed, as he watched the preparations which were going on below. 'They don't seem to find it to their liking.'

So boisterous had the weather become that they found wings almost unmanageable. The two men were trying their best to manipulate some contrivances of the kind, but with scant success. Every time an attempt was made at a start, a blast would come along, swishing and buffeting the outspread wings, and dashing one or other of them to the ground ere the aeronaut could rise high enough to use them properly.

'Why, it doesn't seem much use to think of attacking us in that way in such a wind!' exclaimed Gerald. 'If they even succeed in making a start, they will only run a risk of being either dashed against the building or carried past it out of sight. And they couldn't hope to fly back in face of this wind, could they?'

'No, you are quite right,' Alondra returned. 'I must say those two fellows must be either unusually clever or uncommonly foolish, to think they can attack us under such circumstances. Nevertheless, we must be on our guard. One of them might, by some chance, get blown against the framework here, and cling to it. Then, with his trident, he would make short work of us if he caught us within reach.'

'And if we were idle meantime,' put in Jack, between his teeth. 'There, look at that!'

One of the daring aeronauts had taken advantage, as he thought, of a slight lull, and had sprung up into the air. But a sudden gust caught one of the wings and dashed it violently to the ground again, causing him to fall heavily.

'If that's all they can do, we haven't much to fear from them!' cried Gerald, rubbing his hands.

But his rejoicing came too soon, for even as he spoke there came another lull; and the other aeronaut rose into the air and came straight towards them.

Alondra laid a hand upon both of his companions and dragged them promptly back through the door, and closed it. Jack, who had been about to fire at the assailant, looked not a little surprised.

'Another moment—before you could use your weapon—he would have had the three of us!' exclaimed the young prince. 'We had better watch him from behind the glass, where we are safe, and wait to see what happens next.'

The two chums could but recognise the wisdom of this advice. They had not at first realised that the man had risen high enough to bring them within

range. They had been in imminent danger, therefore—supposing their foe had been able to use his trident—of being assailed and rendered helpless before their bullets could take effect. Inside the glass they were safe, for the fateful flash could not penetrate it.

The attacker seemed to be coming on gaily, or, at least, without any great trouble, when another blast caught him and spun him round like a great top. Then, ere he could reach the gallery, it carried him downwards with a sudden swoop, and left him helpless, but unhurt, at the foot of the building.

He picked himself up, and a crowd of his friends seized upon him and half-carried, half-dragged him back to a distance which they considered necessary for another attempt.

'We had a narrow escape,' Alondra declared. 'He is a plucky fellow; and he was as cool and unflustered just then as if there had been no roaring wind playing around. I saw it in his eye. It was lucky I did see it, and rushed you two into shelter in time.'

'We have to thank you for being so prompt, then,' Jack answered. 'We must be more careful next time. He 'll have another try, I suppose?'

'I don't know. I almost doubt if he will risk it, plucky as he evidently is. You can hear how the wind is increasing.'

He opened the door a little way as he spoke, and such a gust came in as almost forced it out of his hand.

'It's a regular tempest!' cried Gerald. 'The building itself seems to rock about with it and almost feels as if it might blow over.'

'Yes, it will certainly stop any further attempts of that kind,' Alondra decided. 'No man who is not a fool or a madman would trust himself on wings in such a storm. His life would not be worth a minute's purchase. He would be likely to be blown against the first thing that came in his way, and have his brains dashed out. No airship, even—unless it were the great *Ivenia*—could make headway against such a wind.'

'What you say is true enough, Prince; yet I am afraid we shall have to show ourselves mad enough to risk it,' said Malto, who had re-entered the apartment unperceived. 'If the chance were offered you of trying to escape on wings, now, at this moment, or waiting to be pounced upon by Agrando's people later on, which would you choose?'

'What is the use of asking such a question?' Alondra queried in return, somewhat impatiently. 'Surely we have something more urgent to think of just now than'—

'Not at all,' answered Malto coolly. 'It happens to be the most urgent question of the moment. To cut the matter short, Prince, we have met with a great find. We have discovered, besides the tridents and things I had hoped for, sev-

eral complete flying-outfits. They are motor-wings, and if you have the courage to try your luck with them in this storm, there is no reason why we should not bid Agrando's people a cheery "Good-bye," and flit off before his airships come buzzing about our ears in real earnest.'

The friends stared at one another in blank astonishment. Here was an unexpected turn indeed! Truly, it was a most momentous decision which they were called upon to make—to do that which Alondra but a minute before had pronounced none but a fool or madman would dare to risk, or stay and take their chance of being rescued.

'Honestly, it seems to me our only plan,' Malto declared. 'Malandris and I have been discussing it downstairs, and we came to the conclusion that your friends would have been here before this if they were coming at all. I am sorry to say I fear they must have got the worst of it; and Agrando is only waiting till the wind drops to come and seize us. He thinks he is sure of us; and need not, therefore, risk one of his airships in such a storm.'

'I fear you must be right, my friend,' said Alondra sadly. 'In that case, your plan, wild as it would otherwise be, is the only one open to us. For my part, I will risk it.'

'And I!' exclaimed Gerald and Jack together.

'Then the sooner we act upon that decision the better,' said Malto. 'At any moment the wind may drop, and our chance will have gone. Everything is ready. From the top outside gallery we can get a better send-off than those chaps down there had. We can slip out upon the farther side, and be off and away before they have time to understand what's afoot. Then we must trust to the very force of the wind to carry us well beyond their reach. There is one suggestion I have to make. It is that we shall be all five roped together with double ropes, so that we shall keep together; in that way, if one is in trouble, the others may be able to help him. Otherwise, we shall probably be blown about like flies, and lose touch with one another in the first ten minutes.'

No time was lost in further discussion. They all set to work with a will, dragging the necessary equipage up to the top floor. There they speedily completed their arrangements, went out on to the outside gallery, and, after some preliminary manoeuvring, Malto gave the signal.

Being on the lee side, sheltered for the moment from the gale, they managed to make a fairly good start. They threw themselves fearlessly from the gallery, and a great shout of rage and astonishment which came to their ears from below told them that their foes had just caught sight of them.

A moment more and the howling tempest had caught them and was whirling them madly forward. Upwards they sailed with poised wings, like immense birds, while their bewildered enemies below gazed after them with staring

eyes and open mouths.

There was another flash of lightning, followed on the instant by a crash that seemed to shake the very rocks around; and then there were cries and shrieks from the crowd as stones and pieces of metal-work came flying through the air.

The lightning had struck the pavilion and wrecked it!

CHAPTER XXVIII. SAILING ON THE STORM-WIND.

The five adventurous fliers were borne along by the wind in a fashion which can be better imagined than described.

To Gerald and Jack, at least, it was an absolutely novel experience, whatever it may have been to the others. Every time they glanced down it almost made them giddy to see the rate at which the various features of the landscape were racing, as it were, past them.

Of the wrecking of the pavilion by lightning they knew nothing. They had been dazzled by the awful flash, and almost deafened by the terrible crash which followed; but they were then already two or three hundred yards from the scene. A minute or two later, and they were a mile or more away; and the place itself would have been out of sight even if they could have looked round.

But they had no time to look round. They scarcely seemed to have time to look ahead. No sooner did they catch sight of something—a large building, a group of trees, or what not—in the distance, than, lo! it seemed to make a mad rush towards them. One moment it was half a mile away; the next it had vanished behind them.

But it was very difficult to distinguish any individual object.

The whole landscape beneath them was one vast blur. Cities, villages, trees, fields, woods, streams, lakes, hills, valleys—all seemed to be merged into a vague mass, and there was no time to single out details before they had slipped past.

Curiously enough—and contrary to all expectations of the two visitors from Earth—their progress, wild and mad as it seemed when they looked down, was serene, easy, almost quiet, when they looked up. So long as they made no effort to stop or turn they scarcely felt any wind at all; and so long as they could keep clear of possible obstacles in their course by sailing over them there appeared to be no immediate danger. Below them all was a wild, mad race amid a continuous, low,

booming roar; above, everything looked quiet, almost stationary, for the black clouds travelled noiselessly and kept exact pace with them.

Whether they would be able to continue to travel thus so long as the storm should last was another matter—as also was the question of where they were being carried. They had no control over their course, no idea of what their ultimate destination was likely to be, no possible means of arresting their wild career. To have ventured on a lower course, nearer the ground, in the hope of stopping, would have meant certain death.

Nor could they so much as speak to one another. They were all roped together, it is true, and this proved a very wise precaution, for without it they would undoubtedly have quickly become separated and hopelessly lost to one another. Malto had left plenty of rope between each, and this was now extended to its utmost, leaving too great an interval to permit even of shouting. They all looked to Malto—who was in the centre—for guidance; and he conveyed his directions and advice by signs.

Of other fliers, or of airships of any kind, they saw none. It was the custom to send warnings ahead in such case, and for all air-craft to seek shelter until the storm had passed.

The wings they had found and appropriated were a sort of combination—that is to say, they were supplied with electric motors, but could also be used as ordinary wings when the supply of electricity stored in the batteries ran out, just as one can work a motor-cycle with one's feet. At present the travellers were husbanding their power carefully, using only just enough to keep them at what seemed to be a safe height.

It had been Malto's hope, when they had started, that the storm would not continue in such fury for any length of time. But this expectation proved to be delusive. Hour after hour passed, and still they were carried along at a pace which would have rendered any attempt at stopping sheer madness. Cities and towns had long disappeared; villages, even, now seemed to be no more. The ground became hilly, and less and less cultivated till they came upon a region which was little more than a rocky desert. Here the hills were growing into mountains; and some of these towered up to such a height that possible collision with their rocky peaks became a very ugly possibility.

Malto grew alarmed, and signalled to his companions to ascend yet higher. Upwards they mounted accordingly, and passed into the midst of the swirling clouds. Here they were in a thick mist, but presently, to Malto's relief, they struck into an upper current free from cloud, and there they entered a region of perfect calm.

They could now even talk, and look round, and take rest of a sort. The sun was shining, and everything was bright and cheerful. Beneath their feet they

could see nothing save great masses of sombre, heavy-looking clouds scurrying furiously onwards.

'Whew!' Jack uttered a long whistle of relief. 'This is a change indeed! I began to wonder where on Earth—h'm, I mean where on Mars—we were rushing to! Where do you suppose we've got to? I mean, supposing we dropped straight down, what part of your world should we be in?' He asked the question in a general sort of way, and Malto answered him as vaguely, by admitting frankly that he had not the least idea.

'I confess I've lost count of all landmarks,' he declared. 'I am very much afraid we are now near what is known as the Great Desert. It is a more or less waterless tract which is uninhabited, save by some roaming tribes of wanderers who do not bear the best of characters.'

'Ha! You have deserts, then, as we have?' said Gerald.

Malto looked at him in surprise.

'Why, of course; I thought everybody knew that! Fully one-third of our globe is waterless desert, and, what is worse, the tract is gradually extending. Our scientific men prophesy that the proportion will grow larger and larger until the whole planet becomes a dried-up waste. That is the cheerful sort of doom they predict for future generations!'

'Curious, isn't it?' murmured Jack, glancing at Gerald. 'That is exactly what our earthly scientists have prophesied as likely to happen to Mars in the future!'

'And to our own planet also, some day, I suppose,' Gerald rejoined. 'Only, here, I suppose, the process has gone farther than it has with us.'

'Well, desert or no desert, it will be better than Agrando's dungeons,' said Jack. 'We shall have to go down into it, I suppose, when the storm subsides? We can't stop up here indefinitely. What are we to do meanwhile? Can't we try to work back in this upper current?'

Malto shook his head.

'It would probably be of very little use, and would certainly be unwise,' he counselled. 'We have come hundreds of miles—much farther than our whole store of electric force would carry us. If we expend it all in trying to work back we shall be in bad case if, when we come to the end of our store, we still find ourselves where we do not want to be. Now, to support ourselves up here quietly will take but very little of our reserve force, and we shall have a good stock left for emergencies. That is my advice; in fact, that is practically all we can do. We must wait here till the storm below has blown itself out. Then we will go down and try to find out what country we have got into.'

'I think you are right,' Alondra agreed.

'It is already well on in the afternoon—judging by the sun—and we have

had nothing to eat. I 'm getting hungry!' Jack grumbled. 'Don't you have aerial inns up in the clouds here, where storm-tossed travellers can get a meal?'

Needless to say, they were all hungry, but there was nothing to be done but wait. So, to pass the time, they began to compare notes, and Alondra related his adventure of the early morning in the pool in the glass-house. Malto and Malandris nodded their heads significantly as they listened.

'Ah, there are strange tales afloat about that glass-house and the deadly plant it shelters,' the elder man declared. 'I have never seen it myself, but I have heard quite enough concerning it.'

The talk went on, and an hour or two slipped by; and then, just as the sun drew near the horizon, Malto, looking down, suddenly ventured an opinion that the wind below had subsided.

To test the point, they swept downwards, passed through several strata of dense cloud, and found, sure enough, that the guess had been correct. Below the cloud all was now almost as calm as above. There was scarcely breeze enough to carry them along.

They finally descended, just before sunset, in a gloomy, forbidding valley of rocks, where there were no signs of Martian inhabitants to be seen in any direction. They found, however, a small stream—a fact which surprised Malto—and this enabled them to quench their thirst. But how to obtain the wherewithal to satisfy their hunger was another and more hopeless matter.

CHAPTER XXIX. ATTACKED IN THE DARK.

Presently Malto uttered an exclamation of surprise. He walked a short distance up the little watercourse and examined carefully some bushes growing on its banks. They seemed to excite both interest and pleasure.

'I know those plants,' he explained to his companions. 'They will provide us with a very fair and toothsome supper, and they also tell me a story. You wished to know where we had drifted to, and I can now tell you almost exactly.'

'This is not the Great Desert—fortunately, we have not travelled far enough to reach that—but a tract lying upon its borders. We are in a region situated between the desert and the country of Iraynia, which,' he added slowly, and with some sadness in his tone, 'is my native land.'

'Oh!' said Alondra; 'so you are a native of Iraynia! I have heard a good deal about that country, though I have never been there. Was there not some great fuss or trouble there some years ago, before my father'—

'Before King Ivanta allowed the tyrant Agrando to annex it, would you say? Yes, Prince, there was. And thereby hangs a tale. I will not tell it to you now, however—it will keep for another time; but I may say that it is a tale of terrible, almost incredible wrong, and treachery, and wickedness. It is that great wrong which I wished to induce King Ivanta to inquire into, in order that the memory of a good man's name may be cleared from dishonour. That man was my father, Prince; and that was the reward I was hoping to win from King Ivanta. Now you will understand why I said I could not share my reward, if I obtained what I hoped for, with any one else!'

There were notes of deep feeling and sadness in the young fellow's voice as he spoke in low, incisive tones, turning his face away the while as though afraid he might break down.

There was a pause; then Alondra said gently and sympathetically, 'I am sorry, indeed, that you have such a heavy trouble to bear. Later on you shall give me fuller particulars, and I will myself lay them before my father. He is just and fearless in punishing where wrong has been done, and if he finds, on investigation, that your story is true, I am certain he will right you, and the memory of your father, and punish the wrongdoers.'

'He will have to fight to maintain his own position ere that can come about, I fear!' rejoined Malto gravely. 'But I thank you, Prince, all the same, for your sympathy and your promise. Another day I will, as you say, give you the details—when the time comes. Let me now explain how we are situated here. We are in a desolate territory known as Kubandia. It is nothing but a maze of arid rocks and mountains, and wild, gloomy gorges and valleys, almost waterless, but not so bad, in that respect, as the Great Desert which lies beyond. For the reasons I have mentioned the tract has a bad name, and also for another—that there are bands of reckless outlaws who have made it their fastness. They are, I believe, for the most part remnants or descendants of men who were originally honest patriots—men who were driven into exile by Agrando's heavy hand when he took over the government of the country. Now, I fear, they are, most of them, no better than brigands and unscrupulous adventurers. It is said that there are many bands, under different heads, but all directed by one leader—a clever, daring chief, of whom wild tales are told. His name is Fumenta; and it is a name held in terror by Agrando's followers. But for this man's wonderful genius and bravery, it is believed these brigands would all have been exterminated before this. He has, somehow, managed to evade capture for many years, and carry on a guerilla warfare, holding his own in these wild valleys and gorges in spite of all the forces

Agrando has sent against him. Such, at least, is what we hear. I myself can say nothing as to this part from my own knowledge, because I have been brought up in Agrando's city and forced to be one of his servitors.'

'Naturally, however, you cannot help feeling a certain amount of sympathy for these outlaws, who are your own countrymen, and who have been driven, as you think, perhaps unjustly, into exile, eh?' queried Alondra, eyeing the other keenly.

'It may be so—deep down in my mind,' was the quiet answer. 'Certainly, however, I have no sympathy with tales of robbery and murder such as are related of these bands. But, of course, they may not be true, or they may be very much exaggerated. We only hear one side, that told by Agrando's people; and from my own experience I can tell you that it is not safe to believe all they assert.'

'But how do you know where we are, if, as you say, you only know of all these things by hearsay?' was Alondra's shrewd query.

'Oh, I have been in these parts before as a boy, and I know that those plants yonder are peculiar to this region. You do not find them anywhere else.'

'I see. Well, if they are good to eat, let us try them as soon as we can. For my part, I am hungry enough to devour anything that is fairly eatable.'

'We must have a fire. It is the root which is good to eat; and it requires cooking,' Malto returned. 'I have dug these roots up and cooked them many times when picnicking out here with other youngsters. If you others will get some wood together, and start a fire, I will soon have a first-rate supper ready for you.'

The young fellow proved as good as his word, and some half-hour later, just as darkness fell, they were all sitting round a cheerful fire, discussing a very agreeable meal off something which had a flavour not unlike baked potatoes.

'Humph! Not a bad thing to fall back upon in a wilderness like this!' Jack declared. 'And what are we going to do afterwards? How are we to get back to our friends?'

'That is not easy to say,' Malto answered soberly. 'We must have passed right over my country to get here, and that alone means two or three hundred miles. It is a land which is full of Agrando's followers, and you may be sure that his airships will, by this time, be cruising about in search of us.'

'That sounds cheerful! Looks as if we shall have to stay here and do a bit of outlaw business on our own account!' cried Jack.

Malandris glanced at him with a very grave expression in his eyes. 'Your remark exactly describes the position, young sir, though spoken, doubtless, half in jest. I am sorry to have to say it, for it is not a trifling matter. For myself, I accept it as preferable to the fate from which you all so pluckily aided to rescue me. But it grieves me that I should live to see the son of the good and wise King

Ivanta in the position of a hunted fugitive!

Alondra started and flushed up at these plain words. But there was in the elder man's eyes a look so thoroughly honest and kindly that it was impossible to take offence.

'Perhaps such an experience will do me no harm,' he answered, after a minute's thought. 'That is, provided it ends in the right way. It is better than passing the time in Agrando's palace as his captive. My father is sure to rescue us in his own good time. He will follow us up and find us out, wherever we are, and the punishment he will inflict on his daring enemies will be terrible. Does Agrando hug to himself the notion that he can pit himself against his overlord?' Alondra continued, with a proud curl of his lip. 'Why, where is his fleet? What means has he of resisting my father's power?'

'He has been making secret preparations ever since his return from his trip to the evening star. I feel sure of that!' Malto declared.

'Why don't you try a wireless message?' Jack asked of Alondra.

The young prince shook his head. 'It is useless. The little instrument you saw does not carry far enough,' he explained. 'Monck Affelda cannot hear me unless he is within a hundred miles. But you may be sure of one thing, the news of all that has happened has before this been flashed through to my father, and he is already on his way to our assistance in the *Ivenia*. How can Agrando think he can prevail in the end against such a monster of the skies as the *Ivenia*?'

As he spoke these words there was a sudden illumination of the spot where they were sitting round their fire, and the sound of voices was heard. Lights were flashed upon them from the air above, dazzling their eyes and rendering it impossible to make out what had happened or who the speakers were. But the words were unmistakable; some one had called out in harsh, hoarse tones, 'Surrender! You are my prisoners! If you make any attempt at resistance you are all dead men!'

CHAPTER XXX. CAPTURED.

When the ominous summons to surrender was heard, shouted down from some invisible person in the air above them, it was Malto who took upon himself to reply.

His brain had been working quickly. At first he had feared that it was Agrando's people who had thus found them out, but a moment's reflection convinced him that such a thing was extremely improbable. If it were indeed so, then, such was his detestation of his late master, and horror of again falling into his clutches, that he would rather have died fighting than yield.

But Agrando's men would have acted first. There would have been no preliminary summons; they would simply have used their tridents to render the fugitives powerless at once. The inference was that these must be some other people who were not armed with tridents. All the same, resistance was probably useless, as they could not even see their adversaries, and a fight could only end in one way. So he called out, 'Who are you? And why do you threaten us? We have no quarrel with you, whoever you are. We are peaceable folk.'

'You will find out who we are in good time,' was the answer, given with a grim laugh. 'Will you surrender quietly, or shall we'—

The speaker did not finish the sentence, but waited for an answer, as though he considered it unnecessary to say more.

There were other sounds, however, which had caught Malto's quick ear—sounds as of a number of men moving about amongst the surrounding rocks, and from these he drew the inference that the threat that had been made was not likely to prove an idle one.

'If we yield, what are you going to do with us?' he asked again.

'That is for us to say. We cannot make any bargain with you,' was the answer given roughly and impatiently.

'Will you guarantee us good treatment? Remember, I have told you we are peaceable folk. Have you no fear that King Agrando will call you to account?'

At this there was a harsh laugh.

'We have no fear of Agrando or his ruffians,' the voice declared jeeringly. 'You will gain nothing by appealing to him here.'

'Then you ought to welcome us as friends instead of treating us as enemies, for we have no more bitter foe than that same Agrando.'

'Why,' cried another voice, 'the fellow is mocking us! Is he not himself one of Agrando's myrmidons? He is dressed in the tyrant's uniform—ay, and so is another I can see beside him!'

'A man may wear another's uniform and yet be no friend of'— Malto began, when Malandris interrupted him. It struck him that the second speaker was not unknown to him.

'I ought to know that voice!' he exclaimed. 'I should recognise it among a thousand. Surely it is Landris, who was once a friend of mine!'

'It is Malandris,' they heard the second man then say; and there ensued a colloquy in a low tone between the unseen speakers. Presently the second man's

voice was heard again.

'If you are Malandris, what are you doing here? If you have come out at the tyrant's bidding to join in hunting us down'—

'We are fugitives, Landris. We have run away from him, as you yourself did once, and for the same reason—because we could put up with his treatment no longer. He condemned me to the cage of the krudias—his great monstrous bats—but by good chance these brave gentlemen, who are my companions, rescued me, and we all had to flee for our lives in consequence.'

Again there was a conference in low tones, and what seemed to be an argument ensued. At last the one called Landris said aloud, 'I tell you I will have it so! I know this Malandris to be an honest man, and once he saved my life; and I insist that he and those with him shall go before the chief and speak for themselves.'

'Oh, very well, if you insist!' the other replied. 'But, recollect, if there is trouble about it, it is your doing, not mine.'

'You will have to be bound and blindfolded, Malandris—all of you,' Landris now said. 'I will conduct you to our leader, and you can tell your story to him. If he believes that you speak the truth he will not harm you—indeed, he may welcome you if so be that you care to join him and fight against Agrando, even as he did with me.'

'Lead us to him, friend Landris. That is all I ask,' Malandris said.

A few moments later the fugitives found themselves in the midst of a crowd of rough-looking men, who climbed down from the adjoining rocks, bringing with them lanterns and pieces of rope.

They were certainly not by any means of attractive appearance, and their apparel was of the coarsest. Their hair and beards, too, were unkempt, and their manners gruff and surly. But they had the appearance of alert, hardy veterans of the wilds; and in their handling of their prisoners there was nothing cruel or insulting.

The one named Landris greeted Malandris with quiet friendliness, and his companion—the one who had called upon them to surrender—also came and conversed with the prisoners. His name, it appeared, was Duralda. He was a fine, picturesque figure of a man, with bearded face, shaggy hair, and dressed in what had probably once been a rich costume, but had evidently seen its best days. This man examined and questioned each prisoner in turn, but showed no resentment when, acting upon a hint from Malandris, they told him civilly that they preferred to tell what they had to tell to his chief.

Their wings and other belongings were packed up by the band—of whom it was now seen there were fully a hundred—and in due time the whole party commenced a march over very difficult, rocky ground.

At the end of some two hours a halt was called. They were then blindfolded, and the march resumed in slow fashion, each captive being led by two guards, one on each side.

[image]

They were then blindfolded, and the march resumed.

This time, after ascending some steep, broken ground, they came to steps, up which their guards assisted them.

At length there was another halt, and a low, tumultuous murmuring sound told them that they must have arrived in the midst of a considerable assembly.

Then the bandages were removed from their eyes, and they gazed round upon a marvellous scene.

CHAPTER XXXI. AT HOME IN A VOLCANO.

The prisoners found themselves in the middle of what they took to be a vast round building, with an immense domed roof, open to the sky in the centre. As a matter of fact, they afterwards knew it to be the interior of the crater of an extinct volcano.

Into the open part, one of Mars' two moons was peeping, throwing down a warm, mellow light, very different from the pale silvery beams of our own moon.

But this soft radiance was lost in the bright illumination given out by thousands of lights of some kind which were placed about within the great dome—some round the rocky walls, others high up in the wide, lofty roof.

Round the sides, below, were seats, rising tier upon tier, save at one place, where was a platform or dais, upon which were raised seats with a canopy over them. Just in front of the highest seat stood a man of commanding appearance, who gazed at the prisoners with a look of keen, searching scrutiny. This man, as they afterwards learned, was the chief of whom Malto had spoken—the one who was known as Fumenta. He was dressed as plainly as his followers—indeed, more plainly than some of them; but there was that in his face, in his manner, in his very pose, which singled him out from all the rest, and proclaimed the fact

that he was their leader.

That he must be old was apparent from the gray beard and the gray hair which showed beneath his head-covering—a kind of helmet. His face, too, was seamed and marked, and spoke eloquently of a life of hardship and adventure. But his tall figure was upright and stalwart, and exhibited no sign of failing strength; while his dark, piercing eyes were flashing with a fire almost as of youth.

Duralda and Landris mounted, by means of three or four steps, on to the platform, and, after a respectful salutation, conferred in a low tone with their leader. Meantime, those seated around—of whom there must have been many hundreds—ceased their talk, and gazed in silence at the prisoners.

Presently, Fumenta turned from his henchmen, and, fixing his eagle glance upon the captives, began to question them. 'Who are you?' he asked. 'And what are you doing in these parts?' His voice was sonorous, and, though stern, not unpleasing. He glanced from one to the other, as if to mark the effect of his question upon each in turn; but he evidently addressed himself more particularly to Malandris, who had been pointed out by Landris.

'We were storm-tossed travellers at the time we were captured, my lord,' Malandris answered. 'We had lost our way. Apart from that, we were fugitives fleeing from'—

Fumenta's eyes flashed and his brow grew dark.

'I want a plain answer,' he interrupted warningly. 'You—you two—wear Agrando's hated livery; you are evidently his servitors—some of his myrmidons! Woe to you if you have come here to play the part of spy for him!'

At the mention of the words 'livery' and 'servitors,' Malto had started and flushed. And now at the word 'spy' he seemed to lose control of himself. He laid a hand on Malandris, as though asking that the answering of the questions should be left to him. Then, drawing himself up, he said haughtily, 'Though we are your prisoners, sir, I fail to see why we should endure your insults without protest! It is true, alas! that I have for many years been one of Agrando's servitors—ay, even his slave, I may almost say. But I am not the first, nor the only one, of gentle birth, who has been forced by the tyrant to serve him thus. At last, however, I have escaped, and I only await the opportunity of picking up some other suit of clothes to throw off for ever what you aptly call his hated livery. If you are, indeed, as I suspect, the chief Fumenta of whom I have heard, I have no reason for fear, for I have been told of him that he is brave and just, an upright, chivalrous gentleman, though he has been sorely persecuted. I have never heard, however, that he was given to insulting his prisoners, and taunting them with having been forced to serve a hateful tyrant.'

Alondra, who had been engaged in 'taking stock,' so to speak, of every-

thing and every one around, turned and looked at Malto in surprise. The young man had suddenly come out in a new character. He was looking his questioner squarely in the face, his eyes flashing back glance for glance, his whole attitude full of indignant protest. Yet was there in it nothing of rudeness; on the contrary, even in his defiance, there was a subtle suggestion of that deference which a young man may always pay to age without lowering his own dignity.

But what was even more noticeable was the fact that Fumenta himself appeared to be just as much taken aback as Alondra had been. To the surprise of every one there—his own people most of all—he showed no sign of anger, and the look he cast at the speaker, shrewd, searching, as it was, was free from all trace of irritation. There was a pause, while he eyed the young man from head to foot. He looked at him as if trying to read his very soul. Then, for a moment, a quick, eager expression came into his face; but it faded again instantly, he passed his hand over his forehead in a strange, dreamy way, and finally shook his head.

When he spoke again his tone was gentler. 'You are bold, young sir,' he said. 'Few dare to speak to me as you have done. Yet if you tell the truth your boldness will be justified, for it shall never be said that those who have called me a just man spoke falsely. I confess I like your spirit; you remind me of— But it's useless now to speak of that. What is your name?'

'I have been known as Malto. But it is not my true name.'

'How so?'

'Agrado chose, for purposes of his own, that I should be called Malto while I was yet but a boy; and I had no choice but to submit.'

'Ha! But why, then, after serving him and submitting to him for so many years, did you suddenly wish to leave him?'

'Because, sir, something accidentally came to my knowledge of which I had previously been ignorant. It is rather a long story, but I may say briefly that I wished to make a personal appeal to King Ivanta. Instead, however, we had to flee for our lives in the midst of the great storm which has but just passed, and we were carried here by the high wind.'

'With these companions?' asked Fumenta. For the first time he seemed to notice the prince's rich dress. Malto's personality had so attracted his attention that for the time being he had troubled little about the others. Now he seemed suddenly interested in Alondra. 'And who, young sir, are you?' he queried.

Alondra drew himself up, and proudly answered, 'My name is Alondra, son of King Ivanta!'

The words had a marvellous effect; they seemed to electrify the assembly. Till then every one had been silent, content to await quietly the result of their chief's questioning, and anxious to hear all that was said. Now there burst out a great commotion. Every one present sprang up in amazement. Some simply

stood and stared in helpless astonishment; some leaned forward to gaze upon the youth as though scarcely able to believe their ears; others, again, turned to their nearest neighbours, and began talking and gesticulating excitedly.

Exclamations were heard, some of which gave a clue to the cause of this excitement: 'What a piece of luck for us!' 'What a hostage!' 'Now King Ivanta must listen to us; we can compel him!'

It was obvious that these outlaws regarded the young prince as a great prize—one which they meant to turn to account in negotiating with Ivanta.

As to Fumenta, he, it was easy to perceive, was nearly as much astonished by the statement as were his followers. He seemed, indeed, almost too surprised for speech, and for a few minutes exhibited some signs of incredulity. Then, suddenly making up his mind, he bent his head courteously, and said, 'It is a pity we did not know this sooner. Had you told my people at first who you were, Prince, they would have handled you a little more gently, I expect. They are rough fellows; the life we lead has made them so.'

'I have not complained,' said Alondra, with one of his good-natured smiles. 'But certainly I wish now that I had spoken sooner, if it would have been better for these friends of mine. They are my royal father's guests, and are supposed to be under his protection. But Agrando has suddenly revolted. We went there on a peaceful visit, and he made a treacherous attack upon my whole party, and sought to take us prisoners.'

Fumenta started, while from the listening throng came loud exclamations. Every one strained his ears in eager excitement.

'What do you tell me?' exclaimed Fumenta, evidently utterly amazed. 'Agrando in revolt! Tried to seize you and your party! Is that, then, the reason you are fleeing from him?'

'Truly, we had no other course open to us, as we were situated. I myself and these companions were cut off from my followers, and we had to make our escape as and how we could. It was a desperate venture, as you know, to cast ourselves loose in the air in such a storm. But it was our only chance. Had we not taken the risk we should have been Agrando's prisoners. I do not even now know how his traitorous attack turned out. I don't know whether my followers have got away or have been captured. But this I do know,' he concluded, looking round proudly, 'there will be a heavy reckoning for all this. My father King Ivanta will be already on his way, by this time, to look for us, and to punish Agrando and his treacherous crew.'

To the astonishment of Alondra and those with him, this speech was received by the whole assembly with a great burst of cheering. Again and again, and yet again, did it ring out. And the shouters, after cheering themselves hoarse, pressed forward and crowded round the 'prisoners,' seeking eagerly to kiss the

prince's hand, or, failing that, to shake hands with one or another of his companions.

Gerald and Jack found themselves suddenly treated with exuberant friendliness by those whom they had regarded but a few minutes before as dangerous enemies. They stared about them, bewildered, not understanding such a sudden change. Alondra was as perplexed as the rest, and his face showed it.

Fumenta smiled, and proceeded to explain: 'These followers of mine, rough fellows though they are, to whom Agrando and his tools have given a bad name, are really honest patriots who have been driven into exile to escape from the tyrant,' he said. 'We have fought against him, and against his bloodthirsty followers, it is true; but otherwise we have harmed no man. And, above all, we have no quarrel with King Ivanta, save in so far as he had been led—by false representations, doubtless—to espouse Agrando's cause against us. Now, therefore, that you have told us that Agrando has revolted, my friends are delighted, because they know it must lead to the tyrant's overthrow and to his just punishment. As to the rest, you can command us all, Prince. Every man here will join your standard and fight for you against Agrando. We are ready to offer our aid, our lives, to King Ivanta. We will fight to the death for him against that cruel monster.'

'We will! We will!' cried the shouting crowd. 'Long live King Ivanta! Long live Prince Alondra!'

Just then a messenger entered in breathless haste, and saluting Fumenta, spoke to him aside.

There was a brief colloquy between the two, after which Fumenta spoke aloud, so that all might hear: 'Some airships have been sighted in the distance, seemingly coming this way. All lights must be extinguished.' Then, addressing Alondra more particularly, he continued, 'There are two squadrons, it seems; but our scouts could not tell whose ships they are. They may carry your enemies or your friends, or a party of each, one in chase of the other. At the same time, a thick mist is rising, as is often the case here after such a storm as we have had, and most likely the airships will disappear in the fog and we shall see no more of them.'

'But that would be a bad thing if some of them are my friends,' said Alondra. 'Your people took charge of the motor-wings we brought with us; let us go out in them to reconnoitre. If we meet with friends we will all join together; but if we discover that they are enemies, and they do not look like going away, we will return and warn you.'

Fumenta considered for a few minutes, then answered, 'Very well; so be it.'

By this time all lights had been put out, and the whole vast interior was in black darkness, save for the opening in the centre, where some rays of moonlight were still feebly struggling through the thickening vapours.

Through this opening, a little later, Alondra and his companions rose, flying like spectres on silent wings, and disappearing into the mist.

CHAPTER XXXII.

IVANTA A FUGITIVE.

Alondria's companions in his scouting expedition were Gerald and Jack, Malto and the outlaw chief Fumenta, the latter having taken the place of Malandris, who had been left behind.

'You will want some one who knows this region as a guide, or you will not be able to find your way through the mist,' Fumenta had pointed out. Alondra had been prompt to recognise the wisdom of the suggestion, and gladly accepted it.

It seemed that these outlaws were without flying apparatus of any kind except the roughest sort of wings. They lived the life of hunted men, and even if they had possessed airships or other flying machines, they were without the necessary means of utilising them.

All kinds of air-craft required electricity to work them; which, in its turn, as with us, required machinery to produce it. Throughout Ivanta's dominions there were stations here and there at which passing aeronauts could refill their storage batteries on payment of certain specified sums. At these stations gigantic engines of immense power were ever at work, day and night, accumulating the necessary force, and it was upon this constant supply that all airships were dependent. When they journeyed beyond the districts in which these stations were situated, travellers were compelled to be careful not to venture too far afield—no farther, that is, than they could travel back again with the storage power on board.

For the same reason, the outlaws had none of the usual weapons—those tridents which wielded such strange, mysterious power; or, if they possessed any, they were useless to them for want of the needful force.

Throughout the inhabited portion of the planet the same state of things prevailed. There were no small weapons other than the tridents, save swords, spears, and the like. Nor were there any large weapons like our cannon and big guns. Owing to their great weight, all such contrivances had long ago been abandoned as too heavy to be carried in the air, and as being no longer of any use on the ground. An airship depended for its means of offence either upon

ramming an adversary, or being able to get above it, and drop upon it bombs, which, upon bursting, produced a similar effect upon living beings around it to that of the tridents—that is to say, they rendered them for the time being unconscious. Thus, warfare in the air resolved itself chiefly into a manoeuvring contest, the one which could soar uppermost, and get exactly over its adversary, usually—other things being equal—gaining the advantage.

Having no machinery for the production of electricity, and consequently no flying apparatus save the clumsy, slow wings without motors, Fumenta and the bands of which he was chief were for the most part restricted in their operations to nocturnal expeditions. They seldom ventured abroad in the daytime, but remained hidden in their underground retreats.

Fortunately for their purpose, their leader had discovered, amid the arid wilderness of rocky mountains into which he had been driven, an extinct volcano with an ancient crater open to the sky. Within was the immense cavity which they had made their chief hiding-place, and running into it from all points of the compass were endless galleries and passages—a veritable labyrinth which extended for miles in every direction. These led to numerous underground grottos, large and lofty caverns, which they had turned into dwelling-places. The whole formed a sort of subterranean town.

Not the least remarkable thing about this retreat was the ingenious ruse by which Fumenta had kept its existence unknown to his enemies. He had discovered, in some of the lower galleries, considerable accumulations of sulphur, and whenever, during the daytime, the approach of airships was signalled by his scouts, he had sulphur fires lighted in the crater just beneath the funnel-like opening, sending up columns of smoke and sulphur fumes.

As a consequence, the report had gone forth that the supposedly extinct volcano had become active again, and its neighbourhood was shunned as dangerous by all not in the secret. A few venturesome inquirers, who had attempted to make explorations, had been baffled by the sulphur fumes, and had returned declaring that there were evident signs of renewed volcanic activity.

Similarly, if, as sometimes happened, an occasional airship, driven out of her course by high winds, passed near the place at night, and saw a light coming up through the opening, it was put down to the same cause.

These notes are necessary to explain the events which follow.

The mist seemed to grow thicker as the adventurers sailed cautiously onwards, and it soon became obvious that they would quickly have lost themselves if they had not had Fumenta to guide them. He, however, seemed to know his way about in it with as much certainty as if it had been clear. He was aided, no doubt, by a dim radiance which struggled down from the moon above.

He led off to the right, mounting always upwards, till, after they had trav-

elled perhaps a mile, he brought them to a halt beside a towering peak.

'Here,' he said, in low, guarded tones, 'you had better rest for a little time, while I reconnoitre from the top of the mountain, which rises yet some hundreds of feet into the air. It is one of the highest peaks about here, and these occasional ground-mists scarcely ever reach its top. It may be that we can get a view from its summit over the top of the mist, but at the same time we shall run some risk of being seen ourselves. Let me, therefore, make the trial first, as I am more used to this kind of thing than you are. I will return in a short time and let you know the result. Do not leave this spot, and, whatever you do, do not talk loudly. Voices travel far in this mist; you cannot tell how near our enemies may be.'

With that he started off, mounting silently upwards, and the four he left behind began discussing their recent adventures, and the possible future, in low tones.

'So that's the great outlaw chief!' said Jack. 'What do you think of him? I suppose he is to be trusted? I must say I am agreeably surprised! I like his looks; yet one never knows! He might betray you, Prince, to your enemies. How if he could buy off Agrando's hostility that way? It might be a great temptation!'

'I do not think he is one of that sort,' Alondra returned.

'Nor do I,' Gerald put in.

Malto had remained silent. He had seemed to be pondering deeply over something. At these words from the others he suddenly woke up, as it were, from his reverie, and spoke warmly. 'I would stake my life on his loyalty!' he exclaimed passionately. 'He is a good man—a great man—an upright, brave, honourable man! I feel it, I know it! But why do I know it? Why does he rouse such a tumult of strange thoughts and ideas in my breast? That is what has been puzzling me ever since I set eyes on him! Have I seen him before? It seems to me that I have—must have done so! Yet when? Where? How could it be? My head seems to go round puzzling it out, and trying to seize upon some thought, some memory, which I feel, but cannot put into words!'

The others looked in surprise at this outburst.

'Hush! We were warned to be quiet!' said Alondra. 'Our opinions are really the same as yours. What was said was only spoken in the way of ordinary caution. You need not take it to heart as though we were wronging a friend of yours!'

'A friend of mine!' Malto answered bitterly and somewhat incoherently. 'Would that I could call such a man my friend! I have no such friend in the world! My life, since I was a boy, has been passed among deadly enemies, who destroyed my father and brought me up as a slave! I have ever been a child of misfortune; and now, see how ill-fortune dogs me! I come across you, and you promise to take me to King Ivanta, to give me the opportunity of pleading my

cause with him and asking for my rights; but what comes of it? At once treachery steps in again, and instead of your helping me, I only lead you into trouble and fresh misfortune!

'Nay, it was no doing of yours,' said Alondra gently. 'Have patience, my friend, and all will yet come right! I feel sure it will! My father is not going to be beaten by people like Agrando and his confederates. He will soon come to our aid and rescue us, have no fear! Then you shall tell him your story, and he will see that right is done. Meantime, it seems to me, we have been fortunate in meeting with Fumenta. If he and his people are to be trusted—and I feel sure they are—we have found useful and faithful allies, and a secure hiding-place where we can await developments!'

As the young prince finished, he started. While he had been speaking the last few words there had been heard a tiny, muffled 'ting-ting,' and now, in the surrounding stillness, it was heard still more plainly.

'Ting—ting-ting—ting—ting!' it rang out.

'By Jove!' exclaimed Jack, 'that's your wireless telegraph affair!'

Alondra plunged a hand into his breast and brought out the little instrument they had seen when they had been in the pavilion.

He placed it on his outstretched palm, and again were heard the clear, silvery notes of the little gongs.

Excitedly he opened it and began to manipulate the miniature levers and pins.

'What did I tell you?' he breathed, in low accents. 'Said I not that my father would be soon on his way to our assistance?'

Just then Fumenta came gliding back like some weird, mysterious shadow. 'Follow me,' he said, 'and I will show you a strange sight!'

First, however, they told him the news.

'My father King Ivanta has come to seek us,' Alondra said joyously. 'He is not far away!'

To their surprise the outlaw chief nodded his head and answered slowly, 'I know. But he cannot help us. He is in hiding, as we are. He cannot aid us at present. I may, however, help him by offering him a temporary refuge, as I have done to you.'

Alondra turned and faced him in amazement, his eyes flashing, and his cheeks flushing with indignation.

'My father—in hiding? You—offering him a refuge?' he gasped. 'Sir, have you suddenly'—

'Peace, my son! You speak too loudly,' rejoined the old man quietly. 'However painful it may be to you to hear it, what I have said is but the exact truth, as I will prove to you presently. Come with me, and I will show you something

that will surprise you.'

He commenced his upward flight as he spoke, and the others wonderingly followed. His words had, so to speak, struck them dumb; and no one uttered another word.

After a few minutes' flight it grew lighter, and they could tell that they were nearing the limits of the mist above them. Then Fumenta stopped upon a sloping rock, and, looking round at his companions to enjoin caution, signed to them to walk slowly up the incline.

They obeyed, and, behold! quite suddenly their heads were above the mist. It was almost as if they had put them up through a trap-door and looked around. The vapours closed round them below like a mantle. They could not see their own hands, but they could see for miles around on every side.

A large fleet of airships could be seen in the air above, going restlessly backwards and forwards. The moon which our astronomers call Phobos was throwing a rather feeble light over what seemed to be a pinkish-white sea, which was, in reality, the surface of the mist.

The airships were assisting the moonlight by throwing their searchlights around in all directions, prowling to and fro, and making sudden dashes here and there, exactly as might a swarm of huge birds of prey on the wing seeking for food.

'Those,' said Fumenta, indicating the airships, 'are the war-vessels of Agrando and the allies who have joined him. They know that King Ivanta, in his yacht—not his great "chariot of the skies," the mighty *Ivenia*, look you—is hiding somewhere in the mist below. He must have come hither to seek for you—why he should come in his yacht instead of the *Ivenia* I know not—and they have chased him here, and have lost him in the fog!'

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A QUEER HUNT.

Even as Fumenta spoke, two dark shapes rose quickly above the fleecy vapours as though to take a cautious observation.

Alondra and the two chums instantly recognised them as the two yachts the *Nelda* and the *Lokris*; but ere they could breathe a word both craft had dived back into the fog.

At once two or three of the hostile airships made a dart at the place where they had appeared, and so impetuous was their rush that they narrowly missed ramming one another. But for some reason they did not dive after the fugitives. They were evidently averse to trusting themselves in those foggy depths.

Fumenta nudged his companions, and they crept down the rocky slope into the concealment of the mist again.

'It wouldn't do to stay up there,' he said, when they had reached what he considered a safe distance. 'Now, Prince, if you can send a message to your friends, will you please ask them to remain in one place till we find them? You can explain to them that they have nothing to fear at present; evidently their enemies do not care to hunt for them down in the fog. They prefer to wait till it clears off, as they know it is pretty sure to do in an hour or two. In that hour or two we must manage to find your friends and conduct them to a place of safety.'

'How can you do that?' asked Alondra helplessly. 'I confess I feel bewildered. The world seems turned upside down! I could not have believed my father would'— He hesitated to finish the sentence.

'My son,' said the old chief kindly, 'you may comfort yourself with the thought that your august father is doing what he finds best in the circumstances. Now the fox is going to aid the eagle, and hide him in his burrow until the hunters have gone away. Then we must offer what assistance we can in finding and regaining possession of the *Ivenia*, from which—as I read it—King Ivanta has become separated, probably through a trick or some fresh treachery. If we can help him to do that, the eagle will then be able to turn on his enemies as though they were a host of small birds, and all will be well!'

Alondra looked fixedly for a moment at the outlaw leader, and then impulsively seized his hand and shook it, and there were tears in his eyes as he exclaimed, 'I don't know who you are, sir; but I know that you are a friend in need. I shall leave it to the king my father to thank you properly, later on; now I can only say your kindly words have filled my heart with gratitude.'

'Let us say no more, Prince, but set to work,' was the terse reply.

Alondra set to work accordingly, and after some delay, succeeded in getting into communication with his friends again.

'My father has understood my message,' he presently said, 'and agrees to your suggestion. They are resting on a hill-top below, and will stay there until we get to them.'

'Good!' observed Fumenta. 'Now, the thing is to find out where that hill-top is.'

'Is there any way of telling by means of that little instrument whether, as we move about, we are getting nearer to them or farther away?' asked Jack. 'In our world, when, as children, we played at hide-and-seek, we used to say we were

getting "cold" when we were on the wrong track, and "hot" when we were on the right one. Now, is there any way of telling with the help of that little contrivance whether, as we move about, we are getting "hot" or "cold"?"

'Why, yes, to some extent,' Alondra returned, but not without hesitation. 'I think I shall be able to form an idea, as we go on, by the sound it gives out. The nearer we are, the stronger the current, and the louder the little bells ring.'

'Exactly! That's what I was hoping for,' said Jack. 'With that to guide us, it ought not to be such a very long business.'

And then there began the most extraordinary hunt for the airships hidden in the mist that can well be imagined.

It proved to be more difficult and perplexing than the searchers had at first thought would be the case. They went up and down, to and fro, going too far in one direction, then turning, only soon to find that they had travelled too far in the opposite track. It was a veritable game of blindman's-buff, and as time went on, and Fumenta's prediction about the mist clearing seemed likely to be realised, the seekers became first anxious and then seriously alarmed. It was true that the sounds given out by Alondra's wondrous little instrument varied according to their distance from those who were signalling to them; but the differences were so slight as to be extremely difficult to detect.

At last, however, their perseverance was rewarded. Gerald was the first to catch sight of what they sought. A half-smothered exclamation from him drew the attention of the others to what seemed no more than a dark shadow. They were all actually passing it, and in another moment or two would have lost sight of it. But when Gerald pointed it out, Alondra made a dart towards it, and quickly called to his companions to follow him.

A few minutes later they were standing on the deck of the king's yacht, and Alondra was folded in his father's arms.

'What has happened, father?' he asked. 'Where is the *Ivenia*?'

'Ah, that is what I want to know!' Ivanta confessed. 'Some strange, unforeseen occurrence—an accident, or treachery, I know not what—has hidden her away. Thanks to the machinations of Agrando and Zuanstroom, the whole of the people of my realm seem to have gone mad and turned against me. For the time being, Alondra, your father is an exile, a fugitive, with scarce a friend in the world.'

'You have one friend, oh king!—one who has some followers you may depend upon,' said Fumenta, stepping forward. 'If you will accept my services'—

'Who are you?' the king asked, turning to him wonderingly.

Alondra explained, and Ivanta frowned.

'Fumenta! The one who is in rebellion against me!' he exclaimed, eying the outlaw chief keenly and coldly.

'Not so, oh king!' Fumenta answered, drawing himself up proudly. 'No rebel against you have I ever been! No one can say it! But against your vassal Agrando, yes! I have been his sworn enemy for many a year, and not without good reason; but against you I have had no other complaint to make than that you supported him against me. Doubtless you were misled by false and lying misrepresentations, and had you known the truth— But there is no time for the discussion of such matters now. I offer you safe asylum, not for yourself and your followers only, but for your airships. You will find that I and all my people are loyal to you, and will fight to the death against Agrando and his allies.'

'But how can you hide my airships away?' asked the king doubtfully.

'You shall soon see, oh king! Do not delay, I pray you. The mist is already getting thinner. A little longer, and our chance will be gone.'

Ivanta looked at Alondra, and the two conferred apart for a brief space. Then Ivanta returned to Fumenta, and, holding out his hand, said, 'I hear you have been a good friend to my son and his companions in the time of their need. That is enough for me! Henceforth you are my friends—you and all your followers.'

Fumenta thereupon took charge of the craft as a pilot might, issuing instructions in low tones to the officers. Under his guidance, the *Nelda* glided slowly through the mist, closely followed by the *Lokris*, which had been resting a few yards away.

Then, as they went along, Alondra asked for tidings of their friends, and heard bad news indeed.

Many of the party who had accompanied Alondra to Agrando's court had been treacherously seized.

Monck, it seemed, had got away in the *Lokris*, bringing with him the two sailors and—somewhat curiously—Zuanstroom's nephew Freddy, who had sought shelter with him and begged piteously not to be left behind. These were all safe on board the other yacht.

'But of others,' said the king, 'I am sorry to say that they are now held as prisoners by Agrando. Aveena and several of your friends, Alondra, are amongst them, and,' he went on, slowly and bitterly, 'most humiliating of all, for me to have to confess it—for it seems as though I had failed in a host's first duty—so, I am deeply pained to tell you, is our friend Armeath.'

CHAPTER XXXIV. A NIGHT EXPEDITION.

It was getting near dawn, and the mist was perceptibly clearing away, when the two air-yachts approached the great funnel-shaped opening leading down to the ancient volcano.

Ivanta, who had been wondering how Fumenta was going to keep the promise he had made that he would hide the airships away, looked with great curiosity at the dark, uninviting cavity.

'Are we to try to squeeze in there, friend Fumenta?' he asked. 'Is that your idea?'

For answer the outlaw asked what was the length of the larger of the two vessels, and Ivanta gave him the measurement upon the Martian scale.

'I thought so. Then there is room,' he declared.

And so it turned out. By means of a little manoeuvring, the two vessels were induced to sink slowly through the opening, without touching the sides. And when once through the funnel there was plenty of room for them in the great dome-like space below to rest, all upstanding, on the ground.

Then, upon some metal staging round the base of the funnel, high up in the domed roof, fires were lighted, and upon them, after a time, when they had started a sufficient draught, quantities of sulphur were thrown.

The draught was so great from the maze of underground galleries that all the fumes were carried up into the sky, while below the air was fresh and pure.

'There!' said Fumenta, in well-satisfied tones, when all was in working order, 'those sulphur fumes are carried thousands of feet up into the air. That I know to be the fact, because I have been up to make sure. No airships will come near us—they cannot do so without running the risk of asphyxiating every soul on board!'

King Ivanta laughed good-humouredly. His was just the nature to appreciate a clever scientific stratagem such as he saw this was.

'Fumenta, you are a man after my own heart!' he cried. 'I love a man who can use his brains and bend adverse circumstances to his will! You and I ought to have been acquainted before. I can see you have the capacity for ruling, by the way you have drilled and disciplined those ragged followers of yours. By the stars, I would have made you a king!'

'Perhaps I have been nearer to that than you think, King Ivanta,' was the unexpected answer.

Ivanta started and eyed him searchingly. He frowned and puckered his lips, and seemed to be thinking deeply.

'It almost seems to me that we have met before, and that I ought to know who you are,' he mused. 'Yet I don't see how such a thing could be.'

'Let us speak of the present and the future, oh king!' returned Fumenta, evidently desirous of changing the subject. 'What are your plans, sir?'

'My friend, I have not yet formed any. Until I know where my great airship is I am tied down, I fear me, to playing a waiting game. It is a strange experience for one like myself, Fumenta,' he went on philosophically, 'to find one's self a fugitive. I, who have solved the great problem of navigating space itself, who have visited distant planets, have been outwitted by men of grovelling instincts like Agrando and Zuanstroom; tricked, deceived, betrayed, and driven to welcome the protection and hospitality of outlaws!'

'Of outlaws, truly, but not of criminals, King Ivanta,' Fumenta answered firmly. 'All my followers are honest men, patriots, honourable fighters for their own and their country's rights, though their manner of life has made them rough and perhaps somewhat soured. Now, sir, let me make a suggestion. In Iraynia I have a much larger following than I have here. Let us go and show ourselves together there, and I warrant you the whole land will rise in your favour, and you will find you have at least one country loyal to you.'

Ivanta looked curiously at the old man, and hesitated.

'But we have need of airships,' he said.

'They have them.'

'And—the sinews of war—money—gold, my friend, gold! My treasure-house is by this time in the hands of my foes. Not only that, but they have in their control the fascination of diamonds too. But that would not matter so much if I had my own treasury. Without gold, even a king is helpless, my friend. We can do nothing without gold.'

'That I can supply also,' was the startling reply, made quite quietly, and without the least resemblance of boastfulness.

Again Ivanta started, and this time his keen eyes scrutinised the other's face as if doubtful whether he were a madman or a magician. Suddenly he inclined his head and said, 'That your statement astonished me I need scarcely say. As, however, you have performed all that you promised thus far, I will not pay you so poor a compliment as to doubt you in this. Well, now then, since you say you have plenty of gold, there is only one other thing necessary—machinery. Airships are of no use without a supply-station.'

'We will seize one,' answered the outlaw chief, with unexpected decision. 'Lend me your yacht and your outfit, and I will undertake to seize one of Agrando's chief power-stations. It is, as I happen to know, weakly held just now. But when we have captured it I will show you how you can defend it against the whole strength of your enemies. It is now daylight. The airships prowling around above us will draw off during the day when they find you have disappeared; and at night I will guide you to the place I have told you of, and we will seize it and hold it for you.'

'If you do that, Fumenta, you shall be made'—

But the old chief held up his hand. 'I am asking for no reward, oh king—or, at least, none of the kind you have in your mind. I have lived a hard, adventurous life, and am now getting old. Those I loved are dead, and I have none to care for, and no ambition for myself. I may, however, ask for some recognition in another form; one which, when the time comes, it will give you no trouble, cost you nothing, to grant. I crave your permission to keep my own counsel, and say no more in the meanwhile.'

'So be it, my friend,' said the king, simply and kindly. 'I have no desire to inquire into your secrets before you are ready to reveal them to me freely and of your own accord.'

Thus was the compact made between these two, who, but a few days before had seemed so far apart—the great and powerful king, who had then been a ruler over more than half the planet, and the outlaw leader, who led the life of the hunted, and lived in burrows 'like a fox.'

While this talk was taking place the chums and Alondra were comparing notes with Monck and the two sailors.

'We've seen some queer sort o' fightin', Mr Gerald, since we lost sight o' you,' said Tom Clinch. 'The catamounts played every scurvy trick they could think of against us! But me and Bob Reid and Mr Monck, we give 'em as good as they brought, and we scraped through and got away somehow.'

'Yes, but without Mr Armeath,' said Gerald sadly. 'I am not reproaching you,' he hastened to add, 'but I am terribly anxious about him. Will they harm him, do you think, Mr Monck? Why should they? He has nothing to do with this upset between King Ivanta and Agrando!'

'Well,' said Monck thoughtfully, 'Agrando and Zuanstroom have gone off to Ivenia, taking Kazzaro with them. They will have their hands pretty full for the present, at any rate, with organising their forces and establishing their position, not to mention the question of seizing and dividing out the diamonds. They have left Mr Armeath a prisoner behind them, and I do not suppose he is in any personal danger so long as they are absent.'

'That is some little comfort, though not much,' muttered Jack. 'If we could but find some way to get at him and rescue him from those brutes while they are away!'

'Just what I was thinking of,' said Alondra. 'If my father would allow me to take out my yacht, we might make a dash in the night, you know, eh? She and the *Nelda* are the two fastest fliers in the whole world, except the *Ivenia*. What think you, Monck Affelda? There are others of our friends, too, you know—Aveena, and nearly a dozen besides, I hear.'

'We will see, Prince. I will speak to the king about it, and if his consent can be gained I am quite ready to join in a forlorn hope of the sort on the chance of

rescuing our friends.'

When, however, Ivanta was asked to sanction the 'forlorn hope,' he said they must wait first to see the result of the expedition Fumenta had planned, for which the services of both yachts would be required. So, for the moment, the one enterprise had to give place to the other.

The day was passed in telling one another their adventures on both sides. Scouts came in at intervals and reported the movement of the hostile airships. Some of the latter hovered about for some hours after daylight had come and the mist had cleared, as though half-suspicious that some trick had been played upon them. They even made a half-hearted attempt to approach the column of smoke which ascended steadily from the mouth of the 'volcano.' But the smell of suffocating sulphur fumes was so strong that they came to the conclusion it would be safer to give the place a wide berth.

Soon afterwards they divided into two parties, one returning by the way they had come, while the other went off in the direction of the waterless desert, to which they finally concluded the fugitives must somehow have managed to flee.

Towards evening the fires were extinguished in readiness for the departure of the yachts, and the interior of the old crater was filled with Fumenta's followers, who were paraded in honour of Ivanta.

'I need not call for volunteers, King Ivanta,' said their chief. 'Every man is ready and willing to serve you! Select what men you have room for, and the rest will remain here awaiting your commands. All are ready to fight for you to the death.—Say, my men, is it not so?'

The great vaulted roof rang with the cheers and shouts which went up in response to this appeal.

'Long live King Ivanta!' 'Long live Prince Alondra!' was heard on all sides.

King Ivanta could not listen to their greetings given so heartily in his present circumstances without emotion. 'My children,' he said, 'your proffered devotion has touched my heart! That you are trustworthy and brave I feel assured; and I cannot quarrel with Destiny when, in my greatest need, it sends me such sturdy supporters.'

As soon as it was quite dark the party of hardy adventurers set out in the two yachts, Fumenta acting again as pilot on board the *Nelda*. Alondra was in charge of his own craft; and he had with him Gerald and Jack, Monck, the two sailors, and Malto and Malandris. Their young charge Freddy was left behind, with a couple of attendants to look after him.

During the day Alondra had presented Malto to Ivanta, and explained that he had some request to prefer; but Malto discreetly asked permission to defer it to a more suitable season, and so the matter had dropped.

The two craft glided swiftly onwards for some hours over a country which showed no signs of being inhabited. Then a few lights were seen here and there, telling of scattered villages, and at last a cluster of lights indicated that they were approaching a large town.

While yet some distance away, Fumenta called a halt, and at his request the king ordered a small airship to be got out which acted the part which a steam pinnace fulfils in regard to one of our men-of-war.

Ivanta, with Arelda and Abralda, two of his officers, entered this with Fumenta, and they dropped gently and silently down through the air, and landed on the ground near a large building which stood alone on the outskirts of the town.

From the town itself came the hum and low murmur of many people.

Fumenta gave a curious signal, which sounded like the cry of some bird of the night. At first there was no response, but after it had been twice repeated, a door in the building opened, and a figure came out, closed it, and advanced cautiously towards them.

There were further signs and countersigns given and received on both sides, and then the stranger spoke. 'Is it the Chief?' he asked.

'It is the Chief,' Fumenta replied. 'You have heard the news, and know that the hour has come? Is all prepared?'

'All is prepared, Chief,' answered the man, saluting. 'We have had everything ready and waiting for you since the news came; for we thought that you might be here to-night. Do you wish to speak to the men before we start?'

'Yes. I have with me some one they will be very surprised to see. Lead the way.'

With another salute, the man turned and led the way towards the door from which he had just emerged.

CHAPTER XXXV. HOW IVANTA GAINED A FLEET.

Fumenta and those with him passed through the doorway into a spacious, well-lighted vestibule, in which other doors could be seen leading to the interior of the building. In particular, there were two large ones in the centre immediately opposite to that by which they had entered. These were evidently very jealously

guarded, for at the entrance of the strangers some armed men, who had been standing in front of them, advanced in a rather threatening manner.

The one who had gone out to meet Fumenta and had brought him in, spoke to the officer in charge of these guards.

'Throw open the doors, friend Medro. It is the Chief.'

'The Chief! And who besides, good Lymento?' asked the officer cautiously.

'One for whom I will be answerable,' answered Fumenta brusquely. 'Waste not time in idle talk. This will be a critical night for us; and we have no time to lose.'

Without other reply than a salute, the officer turned on his heel and ordered his men to throw open the doors. And as they fell back he advanced and cried in sonorous tones, 'Friends all, the Chief!'

Fumenta stepped past him, conducting Ivanta, and called out in ringing accents, 'And with him the King! Friends, I bring into your midst King Ivanta. He has been deserted by those he trusted. He is, indeed, actually now being hunted by those upon whom he has conferred benefits, and stands at the present moment in sore need of trustworthy friends. I assured him he would find them here. Tell me, have I promised aright?'

Before them was a great hall filled with people in varied dresses, as though they had been brought together from many different parts. There were ragged, rough, but stalwart men, very much of the style of Fumenta's followers; and there were others, both soldiers and civilians, of different grades, some plainly, some richly dressed.

It was, in fact, a meeting gathered from far and near of those of the inhabitants of Iraynia who had secretly sympathised with Fumenta and his outlaws, and who had been hoping for, almost expecting, some such 'burst up' as had now taken place between Agrando and Ivanta. And they had been secretly planning to rise, when that time arrived, against Agrando themselves, and endeavour to throw off his yoke once and for all.

But they had not exactly expected what had actually happened. King Ivanta had always wielded such power, and had shown himself so strong, that the possibility of his ever being in his present position had never entered into their calculations. Consequently, Fumenta's words fell upon the assembly almost as a bombshell might have done—that is to say, with a temporarily stunning effect.

For a space there was silence—a dead silence, which seemed at first to be chilling, irresponsive. Then suddenly some one in the body of the hall jumped up and shouted, 'We have no quarrel with King Ivanta. We are ready to help him against Agrando! Fumenta, you have done well to tell the king that in his present difficulty he will find friends here.'

At once others seized the cue, and hastened to declare their approval of the

words spoken. A few moments more, and the scene at Fumenta's stronghold was being repeated here.

'Long live King Ivanta!' was the cry which was taken up on all sides, and repeated till the roof shook.

Fumenta turned to Ivanta with a slight smile upon his usually hard-grained visage. 'You hear, oh king! These are the men of Iraynia! You see that I did not act without reason in bringing you here. All these will be henceforth your followers, and they, again, have more—a thousand times more—at their backs, who will flock to us as soon as the news spreads.'

Ivanta was visibly affected. Never in his life till this day had he known what it meant to stand in need of a few true friends. He who had led conquering armies, and had listened to the acclamations of vast multitudes representing nearly half the nations of the planet, and received the homage of their rulers as his vassals—he was now listening with gladness and gratitude to the kindly welcome of those whom he had—unknowingly, it is true—treated with injustice, and allowed Agrando to tyrannise over!

He now addressed them, telling them in simple but dignified language how he thanked them all for their welcome; and after a brief conference with their chiefs he gladly agreed to their request that he should become their leader himself, and for the future take the direction of the operations they had planned.

Then they conducted him to a large enclosure where a number of airships were lying.

'These we seized immediately we heard the news of Agrando's revolt,' Lymento explained. 'Their crews we made prisoners, and they are under lock and key. What we now need is a storage station to keep these craft supplied with electricity. They have enough reserve power to last a day or two, but not longer.'

'That station we can seize this very night,' Fumenta again declared. 'It is at a place called Crudia, some two hours' journey from here, and, as I have already said, I happen to know that it is at the present moment weakly held. But we have no time to lose, for one of the first things Agrando will do will doubtless be to reinforce the garrison as a precaution. Extra men and airships may even now be on their way there, so if we desire to get there first we must hasten. Which of these airships will you choose, sir, to sail in yourself?'

Rapidly Fumenta ran over the list of their sizes and special characteristics. At the end of it, Ivanta decided that he would keep to his own yacht.

'My two yachts,' he reminded his new friends, 'are, with the exception of my great vessel, the *Ivenia*, the fastest craft in the world. When they cannot fight they can always run away,' he went on meaningly. 'It may sound strange, perhaps, to some of you to hear me talk thus of running away; but there are others doubtless among you who will understand my meaning. Of late years you

have not seen much fighting in the air, but you may nevertheless be aware that in such warfare swiftness and quick manoeuvring often count for as much as size and numbers.'

The cheers which greeted this speech showed that his words were understood and their meaning appreciated; and the few remaining preparations were quickly completed.

Half an hour later Ivanta and Alondra, in their respective yachts, sailed off at the head of a strong squadron of airships, all filled with crews of enthusiastic followers.

CHAPTER XXXVI. THE OLD WELL.

Like weird, gigantic night-birds the fleet of flying craft sailed onwards through the night. The two moons of Mars—to which our astronomers have given the names of Deimos and Phobos—were just then in sight at the same time. The former was near to setting, while the latter had but just risen. Together they were throwing a faint, mellow light over the landscape, dimly illuminating hill and dale, rocky height and sombre valley, slumbering villages and isolated dwellings, as they seemed to slip away beneath the swift, silent airships.

Alondra was busy on board his yacht serving out tridents and shields and other necessary articles.

'You are forgetting me, Prince,' Jack presently observed, after patiently waiting some time, and finding that he had been left out in the distribution.

'And me,' Gerald put in. 'What have we done, friend Alondra, that we should be left out?'

Alondra looked perplexed.

'Well, you see,' he said hesitatingly, 'you are our guests. It is not fair to you to call upon you to take part in our quarrels, or help in fighting our battles.'

'Pooh, what nonsense!' exclaimed Jack. 'Why, what new idea is this? You did not talk like it in the pavilion, when we had to defend ourselves.'

'Because there was no help for it. My followers were far away, and we had to do the best we could. Here it is we who are going out to make an attack, and'—

'And we are going to join and help all we can,' Jack declared stoutly. 'Your

quarrel is ours. Please say no more, but give us our share of your arms—or would you prefer that we should trust to our pistols?’

‘Better have our usual weapons, if you are determined, and keep your own as a reserve,’ Alondra decided.

And so it was settled; and not only the two chums, but Clinch and Reid—who had, during their visit, learned the use of the Martian weapons—were duly fitted out after the fashion of the rest of Ivanta’s following.

As they proceeded, the exact direction and other necessary instructions were signalled from the leading yacht by means of curious devices in coloured points of light, which appeared from time to time like tiny coloured fireworks upon the masts.

After a run of a couple of hours, a halt was called, and Alondra was signalled to come alongside the king’s yacht.

One moon had set, and the other had become obscured by clouds. The landscape was now in shadow, and the squadron was almost invisible from below; for, save the occasional twinkling of the signals, the flying craft showed no lights.

‘The place we are going to attack,’ Ivanta explained, when the leaders had been assembled in his cabin, ‘may be, as our friend Fumenta declares, weakly held so far as the number of the garrison is concerned, but in other respects it is a most difficult place to assail. No one should know this better than I,’ he continued, a little bitterly, ‘because I myself designed the fortress and its defences. I knew that it lay in a very exposed region, where it would be difficult to keep a large garrison, and where a surprise might at any time be attempted. So I did everything that my ingenuity could devise to render it practically impregnable.’

‘I know all that to be true, sir,’ observed Fumenta quietly.

‘It is neither more nor less than a great cavern—or, rather, series of caverns—in the side of a precipitous mountain,’ Ivanta went on. ‘One can neither approach it nor leave it except by flying-machine. There is no path, no ledge, which anything but a fly could cling to. There is only one defensive wall—that which closes the outer side of the caverns—and this has been so built in as to resemble a continuation of the precipice. One cannot tell by looking which is the natural rock and which is the artificial stone wall. There are gates, or rather iron doors, and these are specially defended by being connected with the electric storage batteries. When the current is turned on—as is supposed always to be the case at night, or when the doors are not in actual use—it is death to any one who touches them.’

‘All that I know, oh king!’ said Fumenta. ‘There is also an underground waterfall—an immense body of water ever tumbling through the great caverns.’

‘Yes. It works the engines which collect and store the electric power.’

‘Exactly; and it cannot be used for any other purpose. It is of no use, for

instance, for drinking purposes, because the water has a disagreeable, brackish taste. Therefore, there is a well of fresh water. Is it not so, sir?’

‘True,’ returned Ivanta, eyeing him keenly. ‘But what of that?’

‘That well was made by boring downwards till a stream of pure water was found. When this was met with it rushed into the bottom of the well and found its own way out, thus affording an ample supply for the garrison without further trouble. So no one bothered himself further about it as to whence the stream came or whither it went. But all that was many years ago. Since then, however, this fresh-water stream has been gradually drying up; and now there is not enough to supply the people on guard there. That is one reason why the garrison is now so small. Then another well was bored in another part, which gave a sufficient supply for the reduced garrison, and the very existence of the first well was almost forgotten. But where the stream once ran there is now an underground passage or tunnel, which starts from a grotto high up in another part of the mountain.’

Ivanto started.

‘Say you so? Are you sure?’ he exclaimed.

‘Certain am I of what I say, oh king! No one seems to have noted that the drying up of this stream has opened a back way, so to speak, into the stronghold, which renders it possible to attack it by a surprise visit. No one seems to have troubled about it, or to have made it his business to report that so simple a fact has rendered useless all the work and time and trouble expended upon your elaborate defences.’

At this Ivanta frowned a little; then a smile passed over his countenance, and he cried, ‘Said I not that you were a man after my own heart, friend Fumenta? Of a truth, the next time I design a fortress I shall ask you to look at my plan, and tell me of all its weak points before I carry it out. But this seems to happen most fortunately for us. Do you mean to say we can make our way in by the channel of that dried-up watercourse? Can you guide us to it?’

‘That is my plan. It is a very simple one, after all,’ returned the outlaw chief modestly; ‘but I think you will find that it will suffice for our purpose. I suggest that you send out two parties, one to attack the place in front, while I will guide the rest, so that they can creep in by the route I have indicated. The other party must show no sign till we have gained the interior and manipulated the levers which cut off the electric current from the doorways. Then they can make a dash and help us to overpower the garrison.’

‘And thus easily,’ murmured Ivanta, with a sigh—‘thus simply are all my elaborate and complicated defences to be set at nought and overcome—laughed at, in fact! However, so be it! ’Tis a good plan; and if it succeeds, the possession of such a stronghold, with its machinery and underground waterfall, will be a

piece of good fortune indeed.'

'And we will take good care,' said Alondra, laughing, 'to have that back entrance well guarded in future. Now, I want to be one of your party, friend Fumenta. That will suit me better than waiting about with the rest till some one else, having done all the fighting, opens the door to us.'

At this Gerald and Jack and their party asked to be allowed to go with Alondra, and pressed their claims so eagerly that at last Ivanta acceded.

'I shall myself make one,' he said. 'And since you so much desire it, you shall all join.'

Later on, the fleet of airships divided into two bodies, and one, the smaller portion, made direct for the heights of the mountain in which the stronghold was situated. The rest were to wait about till the time should come for making their presence known by a direct frontal attack.

Fumenta led his section into a small cave, which opened out, first into a gallery, and then into a spacious grotto. All were provided with small glow-lamps, ropes, metal staples for climbing, and other requisites, in addition to their arms, which consisted of tridents, shields, and the usual swords or spears.

The grotto had several galleries running out of it, and selecting one of these, Fumenta followed its windings for some distance, till he came to a small stream running into a deep cutting. A little farther on, this little watercourse took a sudden turn and disappeared into a hole on the left.

'That,' said the outlaw chief, 'is all that is left of the stream which formerly completely filled the tunnel it here plunges into. Nowadays you can walk along its bed and the water will not in any place reach to your knees.'

'How do you know?' Ivanta asked.

'I have traversed the whole distance,' was the answer. 'I even climbed up the sides of the well to see whether it was fenced off in any way, and I found it quite open. Moreover, the place where I emerged was empty and deserted. One could see it is never used now.'

Fumenta then directed that some of the tridents and shields should be tied into bundles, and these were given to bearers to carry on their shoulders clear of the water. By this means the leading adventurers were left free to climb the sides of the well and attach ropes, which could then be utilised, first to pull up the bundles, and afterwards to assist the ascent of the rest of the party.

These details having been duly arranged, they entered the waterway in twos and threes, wading in the water, which at first reached nearly to their knees, but became much more shallow as they proceeded.

Presently those in front arrived at the well and halted, the others crowding up as closely as they could get, some passing into the waterway on the farther side, where they stood awaiting orders.

Fumenta and his lieutenants, Duralda and Landris, began the ascent, pushing iron staples into the chalk sides to assist those who came after them. Behind them followed Malto, Malandris, and others. Upon another side of the well Ivanta and Alondra, with the two chums and the sailors, imitated this operation. All worked in perfect silence, and almost in darkness, only the carefully screened gleams from their glow-lamps being visible.

The leaders reached the top in safety, and found themselves in a roomy cavern, which was in complete darkness. No sound was to be heard; and, satisfied that their presence was unsuspected, they secured one of the ropes they had brought with them and threw the end down, that the bearers below might attach their bundles to it.

Not until they had hauled up these indispensable weapons, and had them in their hands, could they hope, should they be discovered and attacked, to hold the mouth of the well long enough for the body of followers behind to climb up to their assistance. Every one lent a hand, for it was necessary that their plan should be carried out as expeditiously as possible.

Tom Clinch and Bob Reid were hauling up the first bundles, when the former, in his zeal, leaned over too far, lost his balance, and fell headlong into the well. About half-way down, coming into collision with one of the bundles, he managed to grip the rope, and thus saved himself from going farther. His weight, however, broke away the cord by which it was fastened, and sent the whole lot of tridents clattering to the bottom, where they created a panic by falling upon the heads of the crowd waiting there. A chorus of cries and shouts, mingled with groans and shrieks of pain, followed, which sounds were magnified as they came up the well as though it had been an immense speaking-trumpet, and were echoed back from the rocky roof of the cavern.

There followed a brief silence—deep, tense, and anxious. Then a high, wide door swung open, the place was flooded with light, and a number of armed men burst in and made a rush at the group gathered round the mouth of the well.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE FIGHT FOR THE STRONGHOLD.

It was a critical moment for those of the adventurers who had gained the top of the well. Being without tridents and shields, they were absolutely at the mercy

of any enemy who carried them. They were armed only with swords, spears, or daggers, which were useless against the other weapons. It seemed as though they must all inevitably, within a few minutes, be lying at the mercy of their foes.

A second glance, however, revealed an unexpected piece of good fortune. Their enemies were no better armed than themselves! The members of the garrison had dwelt in the place so long in peace and security that it had become their habit to stack away their tridents in their stores, as articles for which they had no use from day to day. Moreover, they knew that their stronghold was reputed to be impregnable, and they never dreamed of its being thus suddenly attacked.

Hence, when the outcry arose in the cavern in which was the old disused well, they had rushed in on the spur of the moment, wondering what the noise could be, and armed only with those weapons which formed part of their everyday equipment.

Swords flashed from their scabbards on both sides, and a moment later the two parties were engaged in a fierce hand-to-hand fight. A number of Fumenta's people had followed him up his side of the well, while those on the other side were hauling at their rope. Thus, for the time being, the adversaries were about equally matched in point of numbers as well as weapons. It was pretty certain, however, that the defenders would be reinforced at a much greater rate than the assailants could be, to say nothing of the fact that at any moment some of the former might arrive on the scene bringing with them the dreaded tridents.

Ivanta turned to Jack and Gerald, and whispered a few words at the moment of drawing his sword.

'You have your pistols! Try to close the door and hold it fast. That will give us time!'

The hint was sufficient. The two acted upon it at once, and calling to Bob Reid to follow, they made a circuit, and avoiding the rush of the defenders, got round to their rear. The first group passed without noticing them, and there was no one else inside the door. But upon the other side of it they could see another group, who were running to the support of their friends, and two of them, who were in advance, were carrying tridents.

It was doubtful which would reach the door first; but two shots rang out, and the trident-bearers dropped their weapons. They had each been wounded in the arm. Their comrades, wondering what was wrong, and, startled by the reports of the firearms—added to by a hundred echoes from the rocky vault overhead—paused in their advance, and crowded round the wounded men.

The three near the door on the inside took advantage of their halt to bang it to, and hastily shoot some bolts which they found upon it.

Then they turned to ascertain how it fared with their friends, and see what they could do to help them.

Ivanta and Fumenta had apparently been singled out for special attack, and each was defending himself against two or three adversaries. Both were fighting like heroes of old, and for a brief space the two chums paused to watch them, spellbound by the fascination of the combat.

Fumenta was fighting as such an old war-dog might be expected to fight. Grim, hard-visaged, and stalwart, his grizzled locks shaking at every turn of his head, he rained blows so quickly upon his foes that two had already fallen under them; and the others now seemed more anxious to keep at arm's length than to trust themselves near enough to strike.

Ivanta, on his side, was fighting not less valiantly, but in somewhat different fashion. As Gerald subsequently expressed it, he fought 'like the king that he was.' In his flashing glance there was nothing of the cold gleam of hatred, bred of long experience as a hunted outcast, which showed in the eyes of the outlaw chief. Rather was there dignified disdain, and even something of pity for those with whom circumstances forced him into conflict. In his whole appearance there was that which reminded the spectators of a lion defending himself in contemptuous fashion against the attacks of a number of curs; while Fumenta might be likened rather to an old wolf driven to bay.

Suddenly one of those opposed to Ivanta lowered his sword, and stepped backward, as if in surprise, crying out loudly, 'It is the king! Down with your swords! It is the king!'

At this there was a general pause. The man's comrades imitated his action, and the rest of the defending force desisted also in surprise. Thus, for a space, there was a cessation of hostilities all round.

'What said you, Sedla?' cried one near the speaker. 'The king! What king? We serve Agrando! He is not here!'

'This is Agrando's overlord, King Ivanta,' the first one answered. 'We must not fight against him.'

'How do you know?' 'What does it mean?' 'How can we tell?' 'How can such a thing have come about?' such were the questions which were called out, first from one and then from another.

Evidently the garrison of this isolated post knew nothing as yet of Agrando's revolt. No news of it had reached them, nor had any messengers come from Agrando instructing them that he was now at war with his overlord, and expected them to espouse his cause. Neither, as it seemed, were they—with one or two exceptions—acquainted with Ivanta's person. Of those then present, only the one who had first spoken knew him by sight.

Ivanta was quick to take advantage of this favourable turn.

'It is well that you spoke,' he haughtily said. 'It explains, I suppose, why you and your friends have attacked me. Otherwise, you would be guilty of treason!

Down with your weapons, all of you!

'But,' objected one who was evidently an officer, 'if you are King Ivanta—I ask, sir, with all respect—why have you forced an entrance in this strange fashion?'

'And,' said another dubiously, 'how comes it that the great King Ivanta is here attacking us hand and glove with the outlaw Fumenta and his band—the sworn enemies of our master Agrando?'

Ivanta smiled.

'I can understand your perplexity, my friends. Strange things have happened outside these walls of which I see you have as yet heard nothing. Let your chief officers confer with me, and I will give them the information which I see you are in need of.'

There ensued some discussion, carried on in a low tone amongst three or four who were the leaders of the garrison. Evidently there were differences of opinion among them. Some were for submitting to Ivanta; while the others, doubtful of his identity, and fearing some trick, were for continuing the combat.

Suddenly one of the little council broke away from the others and looked angrily at Fumenta.

'You may do as you please with those others!' he cried. 'That gentleman may be King Ivanta or he may not! What is certain is that yonder old villain is Fumenta, the leader of the outlaw bands, and I for one have an old-standing grudge against him, which I mean to take this chance of paying off!'

With sudden fury and upraised hand, in which gleamed a naked dagger, he made a rush at the one he had denounced. Fumenta had been quietly talking to some of his people, and just then had his back to his assailant.

Another moment and the weapon would have been buried in his breast, when Malto, who had been standing near, threw himself between the two. There was a smothered exclamation, a blow, then Malto reeled back and was caught by Malandris; while, with a cry like an enraged tiger, Fumenta darted upon the would-be assassin.

One hand closed upon the man's throat, and the other upon his wrist. There was a brief, fierce struggle; then the assailant was lifted high in the air and flung down with terrible force upon the rocky floor, where he lay prone without a sign of life.

Fumenta glanced round as though to challenge the man's friends to try conclusions with him; but as no one seemed inclined to take the quarrel upon himself, he turned to where he now saw Malto lying, supported by a group of anxious friends.

The young fellow was evidently badly wounded, for he had fainted, and

[image]

The assailant was lifted high in the air and flung down with terrible force.

Malandris was engaged in trying to stanch the blood which flowed from a wound in the breast.

'Let me come to him! Leave him to me!' cried Fumenta. 'He offered his life to save mine; it is my place to care for him!'

They made way for him, and formed a circle around to guard the two from any more treacherous attacks; while Ivanta, seeing that these events had roused bad blood on both sides, applied himself to preventing the threatened renewal of the fighting.

Sedla, however, the one who had recognised Ivanta, was, fortunately, firm in his refusal to take sides against him; and his particular friends were content to follow his lead. Those who were for continuing the strife thus found themselves in a minority; and, recognising this, they sullenly submitted.

All this time there had been much knocking and banging at the closed door on the one side; while, on the other, men had come scrambling up the well, adding, every moment, to the numbers of Ivanta's supporters, and bringing with them this time the tridents which had been left below.

Very soon Ivanta was in a position to dictate his own terms to those present; but there was still the rest of the garrison to be considered.

After some talk, Sedla undertook to act as negotiator with these, and presently the door was thrown open, and he and his friends stood in the entrance.

It was a curious scene, that which followed. Behind Sedla, at a little distance, was Ivanta, at the head of rank after rank of men, all armed with their tridents and shields. On the other side of the doorway there were again to be seen rank upon rank of the garrison, similarly armed, and evidently ready for the fray, yet wondering what had been going on behind the closed door, and doubtless curious to know, before they began, who it was they were to fight, and what it was all about.

Sedla cleverly took advantage of this natural curiosity to gain a hearing for what he had to say, and followed it up so tactfully that he eventually gained over the whole garrison.

Thus was the place captured with but little actual fighting; and Ivanta gained thereby a valuable base for the supply of his aerial fleet, as well as a stronghold in which he and his following could find secure refuge in case of

necessity.

CHAPTER XXXVIII. A GREAT AERIAL BATTLE.

Having made his dispositions within and without—taking note of the resources now at his disposal, sending out airships as scouts, &c.—Ivanta turned his attention to the wounded. He found Fumenta in close attendance upon Malto, who was still lying in an almost unconscious state; and Ivanta, who was himself well skilled in such matters, made an examination of his wound.

'I think he will pull round,' was his verdict. 'I shall hope yet to see him, with you, and others of my new friends, around me at my Court at Karendia—my "palace in the clouds."'

Fumenta shook his head. 'I am too old—ay, and too rough and rugged now—for Court life, sir,' he answered. 'Time was—but we must wait and see what happens. I shall help you with might and main so long as you need a trusty ally; after that, when you have succeeded in getting back your own, I shall make the request which I have already prepared you for. Then I shall ask but one favour more—the permission to withdraw into obscurity, and pass the rest of my days in peace. But I am meanwhile sorely concerned about this brave young fellow. I was strangely taken with him when I first saw him, and I need not say how that feeling has been intensified by his heroic act of bravery and self-sacrifice. But for his devoted action I should now be lying in his place, or more likely I should be already dead.'

'It was truly, as you say, an act of heroism,' Ivanta declared with emotion. 'It is passing strange that you two should be joined, as it were, by such a link; the more so that I have understood that you each had some special request to make to me. I shall be curious to see, when the time comes, whether the two requests have any connection.'

'I do not see how that could possibly be,' returned Fumenta, with another shake of his head. 'I have never heard of him before, and he knows no more about me. But his future, if he lives, shall be my care. I can make him rich, wealthy—ay, I can make him one of the wealthiest men on our globe—and I will do so out of gratitude for what he did. For know, oh king, that I made but recently a great discovery! In one of the passages beneath the ancient volcano I came across a

gold-mine—a veritable cave of gold! It was to that I referred when I said I could supply you with gold to carry on your warfare with Agrando. What you do not require I shall divide between this young man and those who have been my faithful followers.'

'You shall tell me more about it at another time,' rejoined Ivanta kindly. 'As to what I shall myself require, it will, all being well, be paid back later on; for I have no wish to make your friends' share less than it would otherwise have been. Send me word if you notice any change in the young man's condition,' he added, as he left to continue his round of inspection.

Meanwhile, the two chums and Alondra were constantly in and out asking for news of Malto. To them the unexpected success, thus far, of their expedition was cruelly saddened and overshadowed so long as his life was in danger.

'We owe him much,' Alondra declared. 'But for him we should now be Agrando's prisoners, to a certainty.'

'There is no doubt as to that,' Gerald agreed. 'But apart from any such consideration, I like him immensely on his own account. I wonder who he is? There is some mystery about him, I feel sure. Some sad event, I fancy, must have happened to him which has thrown a blight over his whole life.'

'For the matter of that, to be a sort of slave to Agrando is enough to blight anybody's life!' cried Jack warmly. 'Anyway, whoever he is, I feel sure he is well-born. His whole manner and bearing—ay, and his instincts, so to speak—tell you that much.'

Thus, in low and sorrowful tones, did they speak of their wounded friend while they waited about, anxious for bulletins. It was curious to see what a good impression the young fellow had made upon all those who had been his companions, even for so short a time.

But their talk was suddenly ended, and their thoughts turned into other channels, by news that was just then brought in that a large fleet of airships had been descried by their aerial scouts.

'Those who think they know,' Monck announced to Ivanta, 'declare that Agrando himself is probably with them. They recognised the *Alsperro*, which, as you know, sir, is the former warship which he has been using as a yacht. She is now, I suppose, to act the part of a war-vessel once more.'

Fumenta, on hearing the news, hurried from the couch of the wounded youth to confer with Ivanta.

'The fleet which is approaching is far stronger than yours,' Ivanta explained to him. 'You cannot hide your vessels here in the fortress, so they must either fight or make their escape—if they can, which, as you know, is doubtful. As they are manned by and belong to your friends, it is fitting that I should ask you which course they will prefer to adopt.'

'I am for fighting at all hazards; and so will they be, I know,' returned Fumenta, with grim determination. 'You need not put the question to them.'

'I am glad to hear that, since it accords with my own wishes,' was Ivanta's answer. 'I shall take my measures at once in accordance with your decision. But you must take charge of your fleet, and, for the time being, do the best you can at first, as though my yachts were out of it. They are not fitted to bear the brunt of the first attack from heavier craft, but you will find we shall be able to render you help in another way. We can rise higher and manoeuvre better than any airship belonging either to you or to Agrando.'

'So be it,' said Fumenta simply. 'We will do our best, sir, rest assured, apart from your yachts; and if you can help us so much the better.'

It was the *Nelda*, the king's yacht, from which Monck had observed the approach of the hostile squadron. She could soar so high that, by the aid of powerful glasses, the strangers had been sighted at an immense distance. Then, thanks to her swiftness of flight, she had carried the news to the fortress before the foe had appeared above the horizon.

When, an hour later, therefore, those in charge of Agrando's powerful fleet drew near, they found a smaller squadron waiting to give them battle.

The oncoming fleet halted, and for a while the hostile forces remained watching each other. Then amongst Agrando's airships there was seen the flutter of a white flag, which on Mars, as on our own globe, is the generally recognised sign of a desire for a parley.

Presently a small pinnace, bearing the white emblem, came flying towards the vessel which Fumenta had made what we should term his 'flagship'—a large-sized craft called by the Martian equivalent for Crescent.

As the pinnace approached, it was seen that the officer in charge of her was Gorondo, Agrando's generalissimo. A little later he was within speaking distance, and delivered his message, which conveyed to Fumenta two or three pieces of information. The first was that Agrando himself was in command of his fleet; the second, that he had somehow heard of the outlaw's chief feat—the seizure of the Iraynian squadron; the third, that he was still ignorant of the capture of the fortress.

The message itself was a haughty and peremptory demand for immediate and unconditional surrender, the bearer taking the trouble to point out that resistance would be useless, as not only were Agrando's ships larger and far more numerous than those opposed to him, but another fleet was on its way to join him. Between the two, Fumenta's position would be hopeless, more especially as he had no power-station to look to to renew his supply of electricity. This last assertion it was which showed that Agrando was unaware of the capture of the fortress.

Fumenta did not enlighten him as to this, but contented himself with a refusal to surrender, couched in terms as curt and peremptory as those of the summons.

With a shrug of the shoulders and a sarcastic expression of pity for the forthcoming fate of the 'rebels,' the ambassador returned to his master.

Both fleets then began their aerial war manoeuvres. Agrando formed his force into two divisions—not lines, but two planes or tiers, one above the other. Fumenta replied by forming his vessels into three similar divisions; whereupon Agrando altered his formation to four tiers.

Each side sent out a number of smaller craft—a kind of mosquito fleet, consisting of different kinds of 'fliers.' Many of these were parties of boarders, whose duty it would be to watch their opportunities and then swarm round any of the opposing vessels which met with a mishap or got into difficulties.

Upon both sides the men had been already provided with 'parachute costumes,' which would enable them to float in the air for a while in case of disaster to their vessel, and aid them in making a safe descent to the ground. Then a certain number were fitted out with motor-wings, while others again had wings without motors, and all these different classes were organised into separate groupings, just as we divide fighting-men into various classes—such as infantry, cavalry, &c., on land, and sailors, marines, and so on, upon the sea.

Agrando sent up first one, then others of his craft, soaring high into the air, with the object of getting above the enemy and dropping down missiles upon them. But even as they mounted above their companion vessels, similar craft were seen rising from the other side to oppose them, and it was between these 'soarers' that the actual conflict commenced.

All the larger vessels on each side were provided with movable turtle-decks or shields as a protection against missiles hurled from above. The real danger from these, however, lay in the injury which might be done to the upright spirals or the extended wings, thereby crippling the manoeuvring power of the craft, or causing her to fall headlong to the ground.

On this account war-vessels did not depend upon one pair of wings alone, but all were fitted with at least two pairs, and some—the biggest—with even three or four pairs. Spare wings were also held in readiness to be run out at any moment to take the place of those which might suffer. The soarers, as stated, began the actual fighting with the efforts of those on one side to get above the vessels opposed to them, and of the other to prevent them from doing so.

While these craft were darting to and fro, chasing each other round, now shooting upwards, now diving to avoid a threatened collision, suddenly a shock was heard, as two of them met in mid-air, with consequences mutually disastrous.

A moment or two later both vessels were falling towards the ground,

though the course followed was in each case most erratic. Just previously they had met and remained for a brief space as though glued together; then they flew apart, and began whirling and whizzing round in seemingly mad fashion, like gigantic bluebottles which have singed their wings.

As they pursued their eccentric, irresponsible flight, darting this way and that, now spinning round like humming-tops, now rushing through the air like stray rockets, dangerous alike to friends and foes, each left behind it a sort of 'trail,' which wound round and about, marking its exact course.

This 'trail' consisted of the members of the crews who had jumped or been thrown off, and were now floating downwards in their parachute dresses.

Occasionally there were conflicts in mid-air, as individual castaways from the two airships happened to be thrown one against another in their descent.

But such incidents as these were but trifles in an aerial battle; and, since they exercised practically no effect in deciding its ultimate issue, attracted little general notice. The main struggle would have to be fought out between the larger craft when they came to close quarters—a state of things which Agrando was manoeuvring to bring about.

Fumenta, however, by previous arrangement with Ivanta, was equally anxious to avoid close fighting just then. Accordingly, he was exercising every stratagem his lengthened experience could devise which might tempt his enemies to alter their close formation and draw them on to attack him in loose order.

Agrando, moving slowly forward, sent out yet more boarders, armed with tridents and shields, in readiness for the attack, and these formed another curious feature in this strange battle-scene.

They were towed through the air in long strings, holding on to ropes made fast to their respective vessels, their parachute dress serving for the most part to maintain their position, with the aid of the ropes, and small motor-machines here and there.

As the great array advanced, Fumenta retired—at first as though with reluctance, then more hurriedly, till at last the retreat began to look like the beginning of a panic-stricken flight.

Then Agrando sent his swiftest vessels ahead, towing with them their strings of boarders. In the excitement of pursuit some went faster than the rest, whilst others swerved off to right or to left to outflank the fugitives and head them back, thus creating gaps and spaces in their own ranks.

Meantime, where were Ivanta and his two yachts? That was the question that was being asked by Fumenta and his trusted lieutenants, and they asked it more anxiously as the minutes went by.

The outlaw chief had—sorely, it must be confessed, against his own feelings—consented to carry out a plan which involved the appearance of ig-

nominious flight. The old fighter did not like the role he was thus playing; but he had promised, and he was carrying out his part. The question was, would Ivanta arrive soon enough to carry out his part? If he was to do so it was time he put in an appearance.

Fumenta looked upwards and scanned the sky anxiously. Nothing was to be seen but some rather heavy-looking clouds, which were floating with the wind, and would shortly be overhead.

Suddenly, in the midst of one of these clouds, two dark shadows showed. A moment later they had taken form and burst out into the open, and then the two yachts came swooping wildly down, with closed wings, like huge birds stooping to strike their prey.

CHAPTER XXXIX. THE END OF THE STRUGGLE.

When Ivanta, with the two yachts, had gone off, leaving Fumenta with his fleet to face Agrando's powerful force, he had not, in reality, gone very far.

At first he had travelled swiftly to windward, till he met with a bank of cloud drifting with the breeze. Then he had been content to penetrate into it just far enough to conceal his two vessels and remain there, floating slowly back with the cloud in the direction from which he had come.

Well versed in the movements of the varying currents of air and the clouds they bore with them, he calculated that by remaining thus inactive he would be carried back to the scene of the coming conflict without any one suspecting his whereabouts, and that he would arrive just about the time when he would be able to act with the best effect.

Gerald and Jack, on board Alondra's yacht, watched from afar the beginning of the battle. The yachts took up a station near the edge of the cloud, just far enough from its fringe for concealment, yet not so deep in the mist as to prevent them from watching, through powerful glasses, all that was taking place.

Both yachts were supplied with turtle deck-shields, and these had been duly fitted in their places. The framework of the vessels was constructed of ivantium, the light but marvellously hard metal which formed the outer shell of the great aerostat, the *Ivenia*. Moreover, the ornamental prows were solid pieces of the same metal, and thus formed formidable rams of enormous strength. These

constituted advantages which Ivanta's fertile brain had planned to turn to good account.

'The practice you have had when preparing for our racing competitions,' he pointed out to his son and the two chums, when unfolding his scheme, 'will now come in useful. What we have to do is to take the enemy by surprise as soon as they are sufficiently scattered. You must be ready to execute some of those daring aerial dives with which you have many times excited the wonder and admiration of the crowds of spectators assembled at our aerial regattas. Then they were executed merely as feats of manoeuvring and aerial craftsmanship; now they may decide the fate of the battle. I am going to show you youngsters my reliance upon your nerve and steadiness by trusting you to follow my lead. It will be a risky card to play, but if we keep our heads, and carry it through successfully, it may mean the defeat of the whole hostile fleet and the capture of Agrando himself—if he is there, as I believe he is!'

'We 're ready, father!' cried Alondra. 'And you can trust Gerald and Jack. They know how to manage the *Lokris* now as well as I do.'

'We'll do our best, sir!' said Gerald modestly. 'And thank you for giving us the chance! If we can do anything towards defeating Agrando we shall feel we are aiding in the deliverance of Mr Armeath—especially if, as you suggest may be the case, we can capture the tyrant himself.'

Preliminaries having been thus settled, the yachts drew apart and took up positions in readiness for the work before them.

Meantime, they were as yet far from the contending forces, and there was nothing to be done, while they were drifting slowly towards them, but observe what went on through their glasses with such patience as they could muster.

The two sailors were watching, too, not less eagerly than their leaders, and their remarks and comments upon what they saw were both quaint and original.

'What a queer way o' fightin'!' sniffed Tom Clinch scornfully. 'No smell o' powder, no noise o' big guns! An' look at their formation—one lot above another, an' another above them agen an' agen! A reg'lar four-decker business!'

'Ay, it do seem stoopid like,' Bob Reid agreed.

'S'pose some o' the top uns dropped, they 'd go bang on top o' them below! Did ye ever 'ear o' sich a way o' settin' out in battle array?'

'By Jingo, Bob, look at them there strings o' chaps bein' towed inter battle hangin' on ter hawsers, an' swingin' an' swayin' about in the air! Did ye ever 'ear o' the likes o' that, now?'

Presently a signal came from the king to be in readiness, and all talk ceased. For a while there was tense expectation, and those on board Alondra's yacht kept their eyes upon the *Nelda*.

Suddenly the king's yacht lurched forward with poised wings, and then

dived headlong, the wings closing as it descended.

The spirals, working at high pressure, the flat bottom, which in itself formed an aeroplane, aided by the fanlike stern or tail, were sufficient, at the tremendous speed, to hold her up long enough to effect the intended purpose, which was to force her way through the outstretched wings of a line of the enemy's ships.

In the line or row selected there were six vessels, one behind the other, and the *Nelda* passed along close to them like a whirlwind, crashing through the wings, snapping them off like twigs, and effectually disabling the whole line.

Alondra followed suit, selecting for his attack other six craft in line, and managing the operation not less adroitly.

Both evolutions were effected with lightning-like rapidity. It seemed but an instant before they had passed, their wings had opened, and they had shot upwards upon the other side so quickly that they appeared only as specks in the upper air.

Then they turned in long, graceful curves, and came down in another deadly plunge, selecting this time other vessels, which they served as they had the first.

They left behind them a trail of wrecked craft, some of which fell at once headlong to the ground, while others spun helplessly round and round, their remaining wings assisting to break their fall, though unable to prevent it.

Vainly those on board made desperate efforts to replace the broken wings by the spare ones held in readiness. One they could have quickly replaced; but where all on the same side had gone the task was difficult, almost hopeless. But they were not allowed the time even to attempt it, for Fumenta's flying airships had turned, and were now rushing back, heading straight for their crippled enemies. They crashed in amongst them, effectually finishing what the swifter-flying yachts had begun.

With Fumenta's larger craft came smaller ones, which dashed about amongst the strings of 'boarders,' breaking them up, and hurling whole batches to the ground.

And still the yachts continued their deadly raids, flying to and fro like thunderbolts, leaving everywhere in their track scenes of indescribable confusion and panic.

It is but fair to Agrando to say that throughout he kept his head, and struggled hard to avert the complete defeat which threatened him. As far as he could he huddled his vessels together for mutual support, thus reducing the yachts' power for mischief, since they could only work on the outside lines.

Finally, Agrando retreated in the direction of the fortress, which he imagined was still held by his own people. There, close to the towering precipice, his

remaining warships would be safer from the yachts' mad rushes; and he and his chief officers, he reckoned, could in the last resort, take refuge within and await the arrival of his second fleet.

Great was his dismay when, on his approach to the place, he met with a hostile reception, and realised that it had been already captured by his foes!

On all sides there was for him, now, nothing but disaster and defeat. Fumenta's vessels were cruising up and down almost unopposed, capturing here, destroying there, triumphant everywhere, save as regards the few remaining ships with which Agrando had surrounded himself. He had formed these into a circle, each one facing outwards, and in this way managed for a while to keep their assailants at bay.

Then a great shout went up from them—a loud chorus of exultation and defiance. In the distance they had sighted the expected second fleet.

But their rejoicings were short-lived! Far away, behind the oncoming ships, there was visible a great mass, which it required but a second glance to tell them was the *Ivenia*. It was evident that she was in chase of the longed-for reinforcements, which, in fact, were in headlong flight. They were making for the fortress, where they hoped they might find a refuge.

Agrando next saw the two yachts signalling to the *Ivenia*, and watched them sail off to meet her. Then, somewhat to his surprise, the whole of Fumenta's forces followed. But this only meant that Ivanta had called them off in the midst of their half-finished work, contemptuously giving his enemy an opportunity to rally his demoralised followers, if he thought it worth while to do so.

But Agrando knew it was not worth while. He knew that nothing could withstand the *Ivenia*. He realised too well that he was hopelessly beaten; that the great coup which he and the Diamond King had played for had failed, and come to an ignominious end.

It was now evident that, somehow or other, a few of Ivanta's devoted followers must have regained possession of the *Ivenia*, after Agrando's myrmidons had treacherously seized her, and had hastened to the aid of their liege lord. For the defeated tyrant and his aiders and abettors there was therefore nothing now left but to throw themselves upon the mercy of the conqueror.

This fact was, however, recognised by Agrando's followers as quickly as by himself. With the great *Ivenia* looming overhead, they too realised that further fighting, or escape, would be alike impossible. They were wise in their generation, and perceived that their best hope lay in forcing their leader to make surrender; and this they promptly did.

They surrounded him in a body, and under their coercion Agrando sullenly sent out another messenger bearing the white flag. The result was that, less than an hour later, he and his principal officers were prisoners on board the *Ivenia*.

Then an unpleasant discovery was made. Kazzaro was not among the captives, and inquiry elicited the fact that, when he had perceived the day was lost, he had slipped off in one of the fastest of Agrando's airships. Further, it appeared that he had declared his intention of returning to Agrando's palace.

Thereupon, Ivanta decided to leave the completion of the arrangements on the spot to Fumenta and his lieutenants, in whose charge he also left the yachts. Taking Alondra and his companions on board the *Ivenia*, he started at once in pursuit of the runaway—the cunning, cruel, crafty old 'Ogre.'

Fortunately, the airship in which Kazzaro had gone off broke down before she reached her destination, and thus the chase did not prove a very long one. Doubtless, the 'Ogre,' in his fear of pursuit, and his impatience to wreak a last vengeance upon the hapless prisoners Agrando had left behind, had overstrained the machinery.

But the chase, if short, was certainly an exciting one, and afforded the visitors from Earth an experience they had not had before—that of seeing the *Ivenia* put to her utmost speed through the air. Ivanta, in his righteous anger and his determination to rescue the prisoners, sent her rushing along almost like a comet. Had it been night, indeed, she would certainly have seemed to leave a fiery, comet-like tail behind her, for the tremendous, almost appalling, rate at which she tore through the dense air caused an amount of friction which sent forth showers of electric sparks. To a structure built of any other metal than the marvellous ivantium it would have meant utter destruction.

Before night the prisoners—including Mr Armeath, Aveena, and others of Alondra's friends—had been rescued; and the 'Ogre' was safely locked up in one of his own dungeons.

CHAPTER XL. CONCLUSION.

With the defeat and capture of Agrando and his chief confederates, the rebellion which they had fomented ignominiously collapsed. None of their allies in other parts of King Ivanta's empire made any serious attempt to continue the struggle. The mere appearance of the great *Ivenia* was sufficient to enforce submission, as she visited in turn each disaffected country or district.

With characteristic energy, the victor set to work to restore complete order,

and to efface the after-effects of the general disturbance. Thanks to the wonderful tact and discernment he brought to bear upon this delicate task, affairs settled down far more quickly than had at first seemed possible. It was but a few weeks ere King Ivanta returned in triumph to his 'palace in the clouds,' again the undisputed ruler of his vast realm, his supremacy once more unchallenged throughout his dominions.

Then commenced the further task of judging and punishing his vanquished foes. This was a longer and more tedious business, involving much journeying to and fro, and the holding of numerous local inquiries and state trials.

Here again King Ivanta surprised even his own friends, and heaped coals of fire upon the heads of his enemies, by the nature of the treatment he meted out. Firm and determined in arriving at exact facts, discriminating in apportioning blame, he showed himself generous and magnanimous almost to a fault in regard to punishment. Only those who, like Agrando and Kazzaro, had been guilty of acts of deliberate cruelty or injustice were severely dealt with; all others were let off far more lightly than they had any right to expect.

'I feel, my friend,' said Ivanta to Armeath, at the very beginning of the inquiries, 'that I myself have been much to blame in ever introducing among my people the costly toys you call diamonds and other precious stones. In the future they shall be unknown here, even as they were before I first visited your planet. They have been the means of fostering greed and avarice, increasing vanity and envy, exciting evil passions, and creating discord where peace and goodwill reigned before. Every one—every stone, large or small—shall be collected. I will compel my subjects to give up those they have, and I will return them, including all that Zuanstroom brought—with Zuanstroom himself—to the world whence they came. Henceforth I will have none of them; my subjects—our globe—shall know them no more!'

This reference to the Diamond King is sufficient to indicate the extreme leniency exhibited towards even the most blameworthy of those who had rebelled against the Martian monarch. Zuanstroom was, indeed, imprisoned for the remainder of his visit; but no suggestion of any severer punishment seemed to have entered King Ivanta's thoughts. And even the imprisonment was more nominal than real; the captive's son and nephew were allowed free access to him, and they were allowed to make occasional excursions together, under the escort of his jailers.

'He's being treated a jolly sight better than he deserves, and so are many others,' observed practical-minded Jack. 'They intended to kill him, and us too, if they had succeeded in their plans. I doubt if such leniency will turn out to be altogether the wisest course for King Ivanta's own security in the future.'

'I don't agree with you, Jack. You are taking a wrong view of it. To my

mind, the king is only acting just as I should have expected him to do,' cried Gerald enthusiastically. 'What did I always say of him, from the very first time I set eyes upon him? I knew—yes, *knew*—something seemed to tell me—how high-minded, how truly noble he was! I always declared it! But at that time it was only a feeling in my mind, a sort of instinct. Now we have before us proofs such as every one can see for himself.— What do you think, sir?' he added, addressing his guardian.

'Truly, my son, your instinct in this case led you aright,' returned Armeath, nodding his head and smiling. 'It is a goodly lesson for all of us; a grand example, one worthy to be remembered and pondered for the rest of our lives!'

It was a great time for the two chums and their guardian, that which followed. As the honoured guests of the king, and the special friends and companions of the amiable prince his son, they travelled about continually. Sometimes in the *Ivenia*, at others in the prince's splendid air-yacht, they made numerous journeys; and everywhere they met with cordial receptions from the rulers and nobles of the various nations, visited everything that was worth seeing, and enjoyed to the full all the varied entertainments provided for their amusement.

One day there was a great assembly of nobles and dignitaries at the 'palace in the clouds,' the special occasion being—so it had been given out—to do honour to some of those whom King Ivanta wished to reward. Foremost amongst these he placed the outlaw-chief Fumenta, and the young stranger Malto, who had now quite recovered from his wound.

Then it was that King Ivanta made an announcement which came as a surprise indeed. He began by calling upon Malto to declare the nature of the request he wished to prefer. 'My dear son Prince Alondra,' the king said, 'has never ceased to remind me again and again of the promise he made to you, Malto. Not, indeed, that I required any such reminders; I am far too sensible of the great service you rendered him and his two companions, our guests, when you enabled them to escape from Agrando's power. No, I had not forgotten! So far from forgetting, I may tell you that I have been busily making inquiries of my own in anticipation of what your request was likely to be. At last my vague guesses have been completely confirmed by certain confessions made to me by those two traitors Agrando and his creature Kazzaro. So, Malto, my friend, speak out, and ask without fear.'

'It concerns my father, sir—my father who died many years ago in exile, an outcast, driven from his country at your orders, owing to the machinations of his enemies, of whom that same Kazzaro was the chief.'

King Ivanta nodded, and his fine features lighted up with one of his kindest smiles as he looked across at Fumenta. 'And you, the Fox, as you called yourself, who befriended the fugitive Eagle, and hid him from his enemies in your

burrow; what is your request?’

‘Mine, oh king, is less unselfish than that of this persecuted young gentleman, since it concerns myself alone. Once upon a time’—

‘Once upon a time,’ interrupted the king, ‘you were known as Lufendis, King of Iraynia.’

Here Malto started and turned pale. He seemed to be trembling, and stared first at the king and then at Fumenta—or Lufendis—with eyes that were almost starting out of his head. Ivanta paused and held his hand out towards him.

‘And you, Malto, are the son of the king whom I displaced and sent into exile because of accusations which both Agrando and Kazzaro have now admitted were false!’—‘Lufendis! formerly King of Iraynia, henceforth you are king not only of Iraynia but also of Sedenia, for I give to you the position forfeited by the traitor Agrando! There, oh king, is your son, Prince Yumalda, whom you thought to be dead; but who was really stolen by Kazzaro and brought up to be the slave of the tyrant he served.—Malto! or rather, Prince Yumalda! this is your father whom you have so long mourned as dead!’

Who shall describe the scene that followed? Who can worthily depict the wondering delight of the father, the amazement of the son, or the sympathetic emotions of those who stood around? Congratulations, eager, tumultuous, poured in on all sides, Prince Alondra, Gerald, and Jack being among the first to offer them. Then the father and son, thus strangely reunited, retired together to talk to one another alone.

At a later date the chums accompanied Prince Alondra and Monck on another visit to Sedenia. This time they went as the guests of the newly appointed King Lufendis. And there they visited again, with Prince Yumalda and Malandris, all those places where the former, as Malto, had so adroitly aided them in their fortunate escape from Agrando’s dungeons. There, too, they saw the wrecked pavilion, and learned for the first time how narrowly they had avoided being buried in its ruins.

Of Agrando, or the ‘Ogre,’ they saw nothing. They had already gone to their lifelong doom—exile and imprisonment in that same dismal wilderness in which their victim, King Lufendis, had passed so many years as the famous outlaw-chief.

* * * * *

And so it came to pass that when, in due time, the wondrous aerostat *Ivenia* set out upon her return to Earth, she brought back with her a larger load of treasure even than she had carried to Mars. What had belonged to the Diamond King, Ivanta, with royal scrupulousness, restored to him. The rest of the jewels he presented to Armeath and his two wards, who in turn made over a share to their

faithful servitors, all thus becoming rich beyond their wildest dreams.

At the last moment, before leaving Mars, the chums experienced a great disappointment. They had quite expected that Prince Alondra would accompany them; but King Ivanta firmly refused his permission. For the present, at any rate, he said, his son must remain to represent him, and to take his place in looking after his people. At some future time, perhaps, things might be different.

'That means,' Alondra whispered to Gerald and Jack, 'that he has it in his mind to bring me to see you later on. He is thinking of going upon a voyage of discovery to another planet, and I think I may be able to induce him to call for you to go with us.'

'Then,' said Gerald, 'it is not "Good-bye," but "*Au revoir*," which, being freely interpreted, means "Perhaps Jack and I will see you again before very long!"'

And perhaps they will. Who can say? The two chums, at least, firmly believe that it will come to pass; and that they are destined to take their part in yet other journeys through space in the company of the genial King Ivanta and his vivacious son Alondra.

THE END.

* * * * *

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