

**OLGA
ROMANOFF.**

BY
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“THE ANGEL OF THE REVOLUTION,” “THE OUTLAWS
OF THE AIR,” “VALDAR THE OFT-BORN,” “BRITON
OR BOER?” “THE ROMANCE OF GOLDEN STAR,”
ETC., ETC.

“And so they waited—waited while the ages-old snow and ice melted from the bare, black rocks under the fierce breath of the fire-storm; while the ocean of flame seethed and roared and eddied about them, licking up the seas and melted snows, and fighting with them as fire and water have fought since the world began; while the foundations of the Southern Pole quivered and rocked beneath their feet, and the walls of their refuge quaked and cracked with the throes of the writhing earth, and cosmos was dissolved into chaos once more.”—[p. 368](#).

WITH SIXTEEN ILLUSTRATIONS
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TO
HIRAM STEVENS MAXIM

THE FIRST MAN WHO HAS FLOWN
BY MECHANICAL MEANS
AND SO APPROACHED MOST NEARLY
TO THE LONG-SOUGHT IDEAL
OF
AERIAL NAVIGATION

THE FOLLOWING PAGES ARE INSCRIBED
BY
THE AUTHOR

[vii]

CONTENTS.

	PAGE
PROLOGUE	1
CHAP.	
I. THE SURRENDER OF THE WORLD-THRONE	8
II. A CROWNLESS KING	14
III. TSARINA OLGA	26
IV. A SON OF THE GODS	35
V. A VISION FROM THE CLOUDS	47
VI. DEED AND DREAM	53
VII. THE SPELL OF CIRCE	66
VIII. THE NEW TERROR	75
IX. THE FLIGHT OF THE "REVENGE"	83
X. STRANGE TIDINGS TO AERIA	94
XI. THE SNAKE IN EDEN	102
XII. THE BATTLE OF KERGUELEN	110
XIII. THE SYREN'S STRONGHOLD	129
XIV. FROM THE SEA TO THE AIR	138
XV. OLGA IN COUNCIL	146

XVI.	KHALID THE MAGNIFICENT	159
XVII.	AN UNHOLY ALLIANCE	174
XVIII.	A MOMENTOUS COMMISSION	188
XIX.	FACE TO FACE AGAIN	202 [viii]
XX.	THE CALL TO ARMS	215
XXI.	THE HOME-COMING	226
XXII.	THE EVE OF BATTLE	243
XXIII.	THE FIRST BLOW	253
XXIV.	WAR AT ITS WORST	271
XXV.	A MESSAGE FROM MARS	289
XXVI.	SENTENCE OF DEATH	303
XXVII.	ALMA SPEAKS	314
XXVIII.	THE SIGN IN THE SKY	319
XXIX.	THE TRUCE OF GOD	325
XXX.	THE SHADOW OF DEATH	338
XXXI.	THE LAST BATTLE	350
XXXII.	THE SHE-WOLF TO HER LAIR	359
	EPILOGUE	369

EVIL IN SUCH A SHAPE MIGHT BE SOMETHING MORE THAN GOOD	<i>Frontispiece</i>
NOT A VESTIGE OF OUR AIR-SHIP OR HER CREATORS REMAINED	22
AS SHE GAZED UPON IT, THE FIRES DIED AWAY	57
FLINGING LONG STREAMS OF RADIANCE FOR MILES INTO THE SKY	83
THE CLOUDS WERE RENT AND ROLLED UP INTO VAST SHADOWY BILLOWS	122
THE COMBINED SQUADRONS SWEEP ACROSS THE MOUNTAIN BARRIER	237
BATTERIES WHICH WOULD BE ABLE TO SURROUND AERIAL WITH A ZONE OF STORM AND FLAME	248
THE FOUR HUNDRED BATTLESHIPS OF THE TWO SQUADRONS ROSE INTO THE AIR	252
THREE OF THE AIR-SHIPS SEEMED TO BREAK-UP AND ROLL OVER	259
A GREAT BATTLESHIP LEAPT UP OUT OF THE NETHER WATERS	266
THE "ISMA" SWOOPED DOWN	281
A FEARFUL SCENE UNFOLDED ITSELF AS THEY SWEEP UP OVER PARIS	286
"ONLY YOU CAN BID ME LIVE, ALMA"	317
STILL THE FIGHT WENT ON AT LONG RANGES	354
THE BLAZING SKY WAS LITERALLY RAINING FIRE OVER SEA AND LAND	367

[1]

OLGA ROMANOFF.

PROLOGUE.

THE PROPHECY OF NATAS.

These are the last words of Israel di Murska, known in the days of strife as Natas, the Master of the Terror, given to the Children of Deliverance dwelling in the land of Aeria, in the twenty-fifth year of the Peace, which, in the reckoning of the West, is the year nineteen hundred and thirty.



MY life is lived, and the wings of the Angel of Death overshadow me as I write; but before the last summons comes, I must obey the spirit within me that bids me tell of the things that I have seen, in order that the story of them shall not die, nor be disguised by false reports, as the years multiply and the mists gather over the graves of those who, with me, have seen and wrought them.

For this reason the words that I write shall be read publicly in the ears of you and your children and your children's children, until they shall see a sign in heaven to tell them that the end is at hand. No man among you shall take away from that which I have written, nor yet add anything to it; and every fifth year, at the Festival of Deliverance, which is held on the Anniversary of Victory,^[1] this writing of mine^[2] shall be read, that those who shall hear it with understanding may lay its warnings to heart, and that the lessons of the Great Deliverance may never be forgotten among you.

It was in the days before the beginning of peace that I, Natas the Jew, cast down and broken by the hand of the Tyrant, conceived and created that which was known as the Terror. The kings of the earth and their servants trembled before my invisible presence, for my arm was long and my hand was heavy; yet no man knew where or when I should strike—only that the blow would be death to him on whom it should fall, and that nowhere on earth should he find a safe refuge from it.

In those days the earth was ruled by force and cunning, and the nations were armed camps set one against the other. Millions of men, who had no quarrel with their neighbours, stood waiting for the word of their rulers to blast the fair fields of earth with the fires of war, and to make desolate the homes of those who had done them no wrong.

In the third year of the twentieth century, Richard Arnold, the Englishman, conquered the empire of the air, and made the first ship that flew as a bird does, of its own strength and motion. He joined the Brotherhood of Freedom, then known among men as the Terrorists, of whom I, Natas, was the Master, and then he built the aerial fleet which, in the day of Armageddon, gave us the victory over the tyrants of the earth.

At the same time, Alan Tremayne, a noble of the English people, into whose soul I had caused my spirit to enter in order that he might serve me and bring the day of deliverance nearer, caused all the nations of the Anglo-Saxon race to join hands, from the West unto the East, in a league of common blood and kindred; and they, in the appointed hour, stood between the sons and daughters of men and those who would have enslaved them afresh.

The chief of these was Alexander Romanoff, last of the[3] Tsars, or Tyrants, of Russia, whose armies, leagued with those of France, Italy, Spain, and certain lesser Powers, and assisted by a great fleet of war-balloons that could fly, though slowly, wherever they were directed, swept like a destroying pestilence from the western frontiers of Russia to the eastern shores of Britain; and when they had gained the mastery of Europe, invaded England and laid siege to London.

But here their path of conquest was brought to an end, for Alan Tremayne and his brothers of the Terror called upon the men of Anglo-Saxondom to save their Motherland from her enemies, and they rose in their wrath, millions strong, and fell upon them by land and sea, and would have destroyed them utterly, as I had bidden them do, but that Natasha, who was my daughter and was known in those days as the Angel of the Revolution, pleaded for the remnant of them, and they were spared.

But the Russians we slew without mercy to the last man of those who had stood in arms against us, saving only the Tyrant and his princes and the leaders of his armies. These we took prisoners and sent, with their wives and their children, to die in their own prison-land in Siberia, as they had sent thousands of innocent men and women to die before them.

This was my judgment upon them for the wrong that they had done to me and mine, for in the hour of victory I spared not those who had not known how to spare. Now they

are dead, and their graves are nameless. Their name is a byword among men, for they were strong and they used their strength to do evil.

So we made an end of tyranny among the nations, and when the world-war was at length brought to an end, we disbanded all the armies that were upon land and sank the warships that were left upon the sea, that men might no more fight with each other. War, that had been called honourable since the world began, we made a crime of blood-guiltiness, for which the life of him who sought to commit it should pay; and as a crime, you, the children of those who have delivered the nations from it, shall for ever hold it to be.

[4]

We leave you the command of the air, and that is the command of the world; but should it come to pass—as in the progress of knowledge it may well do—that others in the world outside Aeria shall learn to navigate the air as you do, you shall go forth to battle with them and destroy them utterly, for we have made it known through all the earth that he who seeks to build a second navy of the air shall be accounted an enemy of peace, whose purpose it is to bring war upon the earth again.

Forget not that the blood-lust is but tamed, not quenched, in the souls of men, and that long years must pass before it is purged from the world for ever. We have given peace on earth, and to you, our children, we bequeath the sacred trust of keeping it. We have won our world-empire by force, and by force you must maintain it.

In the day of battle we shed the blood of millions without ruth to win it, and so far the end has justified the means we used. Since the sun set upon Armageddon, and the right to make war was taken from the rulers of the nations, we have governed a realm of peace and prosperity which every year has seen better and happier than that which went before.

No man has dared to draw the sword upon his brother, or by force or fraud to take that which was not his by right. The soil of earth has been given back to the use of her sons, and their wealth has already multiplied a hundredfold on every hand. Kings have ruled with wisdom and justice, and senates have ceased their wranglings to soberly seek out and promote the welfare of their own countries, and to win the respect and friendship of others.

Yet many of these are the same men who, but a few years ago, rent each other like wild beasts in savage strife for the meanest ends; who betrayed their brothers and slaughtered their neighbours, that the rich might be richer, and the strong stronger, in the pitiless battle for wealth and power. They have become peaceful and honest with

each other, because we have compelled them to be so, and because they know that the[5] penalty of wrong-doing in high places is destruction swift and certain as the stroke of the hand of Fate itself.

They know that no man stands so high that our hand cannot cast him down to the dust, and that no spot of earth is so secret and so distant that the transgressor of our laws can find in it a refuge from our vengeance. We stand between the few strong and cunning who would oppress, and the many weak and simple who could not resist them; and when we are gone, you will hear the voice of duty calling you to take our places.

When you stand where we do now, remember who you are and the tremendous trust that is laid upon you. You are the children of the chosen out of many nations, masters of the world, and, under Heaven, the arbiters of human destiny. You shall rule the world as we have ruled it for a hundred years from now. If in that time men shall not have learnt the ways of wisdom and justice, you may be sure that they will never learn them, and deserve only to be left to their own foolishness. Since the world began, the path of life has never lain so fair and straight before the sons of men as it does now, and never was it so easy to do the right and so hard to do the wrong.

So, for a hundred years to come, you shall keep them in the path in which we have set them, and those that would wilfully turn aside from it you shall destroy without mercy, lest they lead others into misery and bring the evil days upon earth again.

At the twenty-fifth celebration of the Festival of Deliverance, you shall give back the sceptre of the world-empire into the hands of the children of those from whom we took it,—because they wielded it for oppression, and not for mercy. At that time you shall make it known throughout the earth that men are once more free to do good or evil, according to their choice, and that as they choose well or ill so shall they live or die.

And woe to them in those days if, knowing the good, they shall turn aside to do evil! Beyond the clouds that gather[6] over the sunset of my earthly life, I see a sign in heaven as of a flaming sword, whose hilt is in the hand of the Master of Destiny, and whose blade is outstretched over the habitations of men.

As they shall choose to do good or evil, so shall that sword pass away from them or fall upon them, and consume them utterly in the midst of their pride. And if they, knowing the good, shall elect to do evil, it shall be with them as of old the Prophet said of the men of Babylon the Great: Their cities shall be a desolation, a dry land and a

wilderness; a land wherein no man dwelleth, neither shall any son of man pass thereby.

For from among the stars of heaven, whose lore I have learned and whose voices I have heard, there shall come the messenger of Fate, and his shape shall be that of a flaming fire, and his breath as the breath of a pestilence that men shall feel and die in the hour that it breathes upon them.

Out of the depths beyond the light of the sun he shall come, and your children of the fifth generation shall behold his approach. The sister-worlds shall see him pass with fear and trembling, wondering which of them he shall smite, but if he be not restrained or turned aside by the Hand which guides the stars in their courses, it shall go hard with this world and the men of it in the hour of his passing.

Then shall the highways of the earth be waste, and the wayfaring of men cease. Earth shall languish and mourn for her children that are no more, and Death shall reign amidst the silence, sole sovereign of many lands!

But you, so long as you continue to walk in the way of wisdom, shall live in peace until the end, whether it shall come then or in the ages that shall follow. And if it shall come then, you shall await it with fortitude, knowing that this life is but a single link in the chain of existence which stretches through infinity; and that, if you shall be found worthy, you shall be taught how a chosen few among your sons and daughters shall survive the ruin of the world, to be the parents of the new race, and replenish the earth and possess it.

[7]

Out of the Valley of the Shadow of Death I stretch forth my hands in blessing to you, the children of the coming time, and pray that the peace which the men of the generation now passing away have won through strife and toil in the fiery days of the Terror, may be yours and endure unbroken unto the end.



[8]

CHAPTER I.

THE SURRENDER OF THE WORLD-THRONE.



A HUNDRED years had passed since Natas, the Master of the Terror, had given into the hands of Richard Arnold his charge to the future generations of the Aerians—as the descendants of the Terrorists who had colonised the mountain-walled valley of Aeria, in Central Africa, were now called; since the man, who had planned and accomplished the greatest revolution in the history of the world, had given his last blessing to his companions-in-arms and their children, and had “turned his face to the wall and died.”

It was midday, on the 8th of December 2030, and the rulers of all the civilised States of the world were gathered together in St. Paul’s Cathedral to receive, from the hands of a descendant of Natas in the fourth generation, the restoration of the right of independent national rule which, on the same spot a hundred and twenty-five years before, had been taken from the sovereigns of Europe and vested in the Supreme Council of the Anglo-Saxon Federation.

The period of tutelage had passed. Under the wise and firm rule of the Council and the domination of the Anglo-Saxon race, the Golden Age had seemed to return to the world. For a hundred and twenty-five years there had been peace on earth, broken only by the outbreak and speedy suppression of a few tribal wars among the more savage races of Africa and Malaysia. Now the descendants of those who had been victors[9] and vanquished in the world-war of 1904, had met to give back and assume the freedom and the responsibility of national independence.

The vast cathedral was thronged, as it had been on the momentous day when Natas had pronounced his judgment on the last of the Tyrants of Russia, and ended the old order of things in Europe. But it was filled by a very different assembly to that which had stood within its walls on the morrow of Armageddon.

Then the stress and horror of a mighty conflict had set its stamp on every face. Hate had looked out of eyes in which the tears were scarcely dry, and hungered fiercely for the blood of the oppressor. The clash of arms, the stern command, and the pitiless words of doom had sounded then in ears which but a few hours before had listened to the roar of artillery and the thunder of battle. That had been the dawn of the morrow of strife; this was the zenith of the noon of peace.

Now, in all the vast assembly, no hand held a weapon, no face was there which showed a sign of sorrow, fear, or anger, and in no heart, save only two among the thousands, was there a thought of hate or bitterness.

For three days past the Festival of Deliverance had been celebrated all over the civilised world, and now, in the centre of the city which had come to be the capital, not only of the vast domains of Anglo-Saxondom, but of the whole world, a solemn act of renunciation was to be performed, upon the issues of which the fate of all humanity would hang; for the members of the Supreme Council had come through the skies from their seat of empire in Aeria to abdicate the world-throne in obedience to the command of the dead Master, from whom their ancestors had derived it.

At a table, drawn across the front of the chancel, sat the President and the twelve men who with him had up to this hour shared the empire of the human race. Below the steps, on the floor of the cathedral, sat, in a wide semicircle, the rulers of the kingdoms and republics of the earth, assembled to hear the last word of their overlords, and to receive from them[10] the power and responsibility of maintaining or forfeiting, as the event should prove, the blessings which had multiplied under the sovereignty of the Aerians.

The President of the Council was the direct descendant not only of Alan Tremayne, its first President, but also of Richard Arnold and Natasha; for their eldest son, born in the first year of the Peace, had married the only daughter of Tremayne, and their first-born son had been his father's father.

Although the average physique of civilised man had immensely improved under the new order of things, the Aerians, descendants of the pick of the nations of Europe, were as far superior to the rest of the assembly as the latter would have been to the men and women of the nineteenth century; but even amongst the members of the Council, the splendid stature and regal dignity of Alan Arnold, the President, stamped him as a born ruler of men, whose title rested upon something higher than election or inheritance.

At the last stroke of twelve, the President rose in his place, and, in the midst of an almost breathless silence, read the message of Natas to the great congregation. This done, he laid the parchment down on the table and, beginning from the outbreak of the world-war, rapidly and lucidly sketched out the vast and beneficent changes in the government of society that its issues had made possible.

He traced the marvellous development of the new civilisation, which, in four generations, had raised men from a state of half-barbarous strife and brutality to one

of universal peace and prosperity; from inhuman and unsparing competition to friendly co-operation in public, and generous rivalry in private concerns; from horrible contrasts of wealth and misery to a social state in which the removal of all unnatural disabilities in the race of life had made them impossible.

He showed how, in the evil times which, as all men hoped, had been left behind for ever, the strong and the unscrupulous ruthlessly oppressed the weak and swindled the honest and the straightforward. Now dishonesty was dishonourable in fact as well as in name; the game of life was played fairly, and its prizes fell to all who could win them, by native genius or earnest endeavour.

There were no inequalities, save those which Nature herself had imposed upon all men from the beginning of time. There were no tyrants and no slaves. That which a man's labour of hand or brain had won was his, and no man might take toll of it. All useful work was held in honour, and there was no other road to fame or fortune save that of profitable service to humanity.

"This," said the President in conclusion, "is the splendid heritage that we of the Supreme Council, which is now to cease to exist as such, have received from our forefathers, who won it for us and for you on the field of the world's Armageddon. We have preserved their traditions intact, and obeyed their commands to the letter; and now the hour has come for us, in obedience to the last of those commands, to resign our authority and to hand over that heritage to you, the rulers of the civilised world, to hold in trust for the peoples over whom you have been appointed to reign.

"When I have done speaking I shall no longer be President of the Senate, which for a hundred and twenty-five years has ruled the world from pole to pole and east to west. You and your parliaments are henceforth free to rule as you will. We shall take no further part in the control of human affairs outside our domain, saving only in one concern.

"In the days when our command was established, the only possible basis of all rule was force, and our supremacy was based on the force that we could bring to bear upon those who might have ventured to oppose us or revolted against our rule. We commanded, and we will still command, the air, and I should not be doing my duty, either to my own people or to you, if I did not tell you that the Aerians, not as the world-rulers that they have been, but as the citizens of an independent State, mean to keep that power in their own hands at all costs.

“The empire of earth and sea, saving only the valley of Aeria, is yours to do with as you will. The empire of the air[12] is ours,—the heritage that we have received from the genius of that ancestor of mine who first conquered it.

“That we have not used it in the past to oppress you is the most perfect guarantee that we shall not do so in the future, but let all the nations of the earth clearly understand, that we shall accept any attempt to dispute it with us as a declaration of war upon us, and that those who make that attempt will either have to exterminate us or be exterminated themselves. This is not a threat, but a solemn warning; and the responsibility of once more bringing the curse of war and all its attendant desolation upon the earth, will lie heavily upon those who neglect it.

“A few more needful words and I have done. The message of the Master, which I have read to you, contains a prophecy, as to the fulfilment of which neither I nor any man here may speak with certainty. It may be that he, with clearer eyes than ours, saw some tremendous catastrophe impending over the world, a catastrophe which no human means could avert, and beneath which human strength and genius could only bow with resignation.

“By what spirit he was inspired when he uttered the prophecy, it is not for us to say. But before you put it aside as an old man’s dream, let me ask you to remember, that he who uttered it was a man who was able to plan the destruction of one civilisation, and to prepare the way for another and a better.

“Such a man, standing midway between the twin mysteries of life and death, might well see that which is hidden from our grosser sight. But whether the prophecy itself shall prove true or false, it shall be well for you and for your children’s children if you and they shall receive the lesson that it teaches as true.

“If, in the days that are to come, the world shall be overwhelmed with a desolation that none shall escape, will it not be better that the end shall come and find men doing good rather than evil? As you now set the peoples whom you govern in the right or the wrong path, so shall they walk.

[13]

“This is the lesson of all the generations that have gone before us, and it shall also be true of those that are to come after us. As the seed is, so is the harvest; therefore see to it that you, who are now the free rulers of the nations, so discharge the awful trust and responsibility which is thus laid upon you, that your children’s children shall not, perhaps in the hour of Humanity’s last agony, rise up and curse your memory rather than bless it. I have spoken!”



[14]

CHAPTER II. A CROWNLESS KING.



LATE in the evening of the same day two of the President's audience—the only two who had heard his words with anger and hatred instead of gratitude and joy—were together in a small but luxuriously-furnished room, in an octagonal turret which rose from one of the angles of a large house on the southern slope of the heights of Hampstead.

One was a very old man, whose once giant frame was wasted and shrunken by the slow siege of many years, and on whose withered, care-lined features death had already set its fatal seal. The other was a young girl, in all the pride and glory of budding womanhood, and beautiful with the dark, imperious beauty that is transmitted, like a priceless heirloom, along a line of proud descent unstained by any drop of base-born blood.

Yet in her beauty there was that which repelled as well as attracted. No sweet and gentle woman-soul looked out of the great, deep eyes, that changed from dusky-violet to the blackness of a starless night as the sun and shade of her varying moods swept over her inner being. Her straight, dark brows were almost masculine in their firmness; and the voluptuous promise of her full, red, sensuous lips was belied by the strength of her chin and the defiant poise of her splendid head on the strongly-moulded throat, whose smooth skin showed so dazzlingly white against the dark purple velvet of the collar of her dress.

[15]

It was a beauty to enslave and command rather than to woo and win; the fatal loveliness of a Cleopatra, a Lucrezia, or a Messalina; a charm to be used for evil rather than for good. In a few years she would be such a woman as would drive men mad for

the love of her, and, giving no love in return, use them for her own ends, and cast them aside with a smile when they could serve her no longer.

The old man was lying on a low couch of magnificent furs, against whose dark lustre the grey pallor of his skin and the pure, silvery whiteness of his still thick hair and beard showed up in strong contrast. He had been asleep for the last four hours, resting after the exertion of going to the cathedral, and the girl was sitting watching him with anxious eyes, every now and then leaning forward to catch the faint sound of his slow and even breathing, and make sure that he was still alive.

A clock in one of the corners of the room chimed a quarter to nine, as the old man raised his hand to his brow and opened his eyes. They rested for a moment on the girl's face, and then wandered inquiringly about the room, as though he expected someone else to be present. Then he said in a low, weak voice—

“What time is it? Has Serge come yet?”

“No,” said the girl, glancing up at the clock; “that was only a quarter to nine, and he is not due until the hour.”

“No; I remember. I don't suppose he can be here much before. Meanwhile get me the draught ready, so that I shall have strength to do what has to be done before”—

“Are you sure it is necessary for you to take that terrible drug? Why should you sacrifice what may be months or even years of life, to gain a few hours' renewed youth?”

The girl's voice trembled as she spoke, and her eyes melted in a sudden rush of tears. The one being that she loved in all the world was this old man, and he had just told her to prepare his death-draught.

“Do as I bid you, child,” he said, raising his voice to a querulous cry, “and do it quickly, while there is yet time. Why do you talk to me of a few more months of life—to me,[16] whose eyes have seen the snows of a hundred winters whitening the earth? I tell you that, drug or no drug, I shall not see the setting of to-morrow's sun. As I slept, I heard the rush of the death-angel's wings through the night, and the wind of them was cold upon my brow. Do as I bid you, quick—there is the door-telephone. Serge is here!”

As he spoke, a ring sounded in the lower part of the house. Accustomed to blind obedience from her infancy, the girl choked back her rising tears and went to a little cupboard let into the wall, out of which she took two small vials, each containing

about a fluid ounce of colourless liquid. She placed a tumbler in the old man's hand, and emptied the vials into it simultaneously.

There was a slight effervescence, and the two colourless liquids instantly changed to deep red. The moment that they did so, the dying man put the glass to his lips and emptied it at a gulp. Then he threw himself back upon his pillows, and let the glass fall from his hand upon the floor. At the same moment a little disc of silver flew out at right angles to the wall near the door, and a voice said—

“Serge Nicholaivitch is here to command.”

“Serge Nicholaivitch is welcome. Let him ascend!” said the girl, walking towards the transmitter, and replacing the disc as she ceased speaking.

A few moments later there was a tap on the door. The girl opened it and admitted a tall, splendidly-built young fellow of about twenty-two, dressed, according to the winter costume of the time, in a close-fitting suit of dark-blue velvet, long boots of soft, brown leather that came a little higher than the knee, and a long, fur-lined, hooded cloak, which was now thrown back, and hung in graceful folds from his broad shoulders.

As he entered, the girl held out her hand to him in silence. A bright flush rose to her clear, pale cheeks as he instantly dropped on one knee and kissed it, as in the old days a favoured subject would have kissed the hand of a queen.

“Welcome, Serge Nicholaivitch, Prince of the House of[17] Romanoff! Your bride and your crown are waiting for you!”

The words came clear and strong from the lips which, but a few minutes before, had barely been able to frame a coherent sentence. The strange drug had wrought a miracle of restoration. Fifty years seemed to have been lifted from the shoulders of the man who would never see another sunrise.

The light of youth shone in his eyes, and the flush of health on his cheeks. The deep furrows of age and care had vanished from his face, and, saving only for his long, white hair, if one who had seen Alexander Romanoff, the last of the Tsars of Russia, on the battlefield of Muswell Hill could have come back to earth, he would have believed that he saw him once more in the flesh.

Without any assistance he rose from the couch, and drew himself up to the full of his majestic height. As he did so the young man dropped on his knee before him, as he had done before the girl, and said in Russian—

“The honour is too great for my unworthiness. May heaven make me worthy of it!”

“Worthy you are now, and shall remain so long as you shall keep undefiled the faith and honour of the Imperial House from which you are sprung,” replied the old man in the same language, raising him from his knee as he spoke. Then he laid his hands on the young man’s shoulders, and, looking him straight in the eyes, went on—

“Serge Nicholaivitch, you know why I have bidden you come here to-night. Speak now, without fear or falsehood, and tell me whether you come prepared to take that which I have to give you, and to do that which I shall ask of you. If there is any doubt in your soul, speak it now and go in peace; for the task that I shall lay upon you is no light one, nor may it be undertaken without a whole heart and a soul that is undivided by doubt.”

The young man returned his burning gaze with a glance as clear and steady as his own, and replied—

“It is for your Majesty to give and for me to take—for you[18] to command and for me to obey. Tell me your will, and I will do it to the death. In the hour that I fail, may heaven’s mercy fail me too, and may I die as one who is not fit to live!”

“Spoken like a true son of Russia!” said the old man, taking his hands from his shoulders and beckoning the girl to his side. Then he placed them side by side before an *ikon* fastened to the eastern wall, with an ever-burning lamp in front of it. He bade them kneel down and join hands, and as they did so he took his place behind them and, raising his hands as though in invocation above their heads, he said in slow, solemn tones—

“Now, Serge Nicholaivitch and Olga Romanoff, sole heirs on earth of those who once were Tsars of Russia, swear before heaven and all its holy saints that, when this body of mine shall have been committed to the flames, you will take my ashes to Petersburg and lay them in the Church of Peter and Paul, and that when that is done, you will go to the Lossenskis at Moscow, and there, in the Uspènski Sobōr, where your ancestors were crowned, take each other for wedded wife and husband, according to the ancient laws of Russia and the rites of the orthodox church.”

The oath was taken by each of the now betrothed pair in turn, and then Paul Romanoff, great-grandson of Alexander, the Last of the Tsars, raised them from their knees and kissed each of them on the forehead. Then, taking from his neck a gold chain with a small key attached to it, he went to one of the oak panels, from which the walls of the room were lined, and pushed aside a portion of the apparently solid beading, disclosing a keyhole into which he inserted the key.

He turned the key and pulled, and the panel swung slowly out like a door. It was lined with three inches of solid steel, and behind it was a cavity in the wall, from which came the sheen of gold and the gleam of jewels. A cry of amazement broke at the same moment from the lips of both Olga and Serge, as they saw what the glittering object was.

Paul Romanoff took it out of the steel-lined cavity, and laid it reverently on the table, saying, as he did so—

“To-morrow I shall be dead, and this house and all that is[19] in it will be yours. There is my most precious possession, the Imperial crown of Russia, stolen when the Kremlin was plundered in the days of the Terror, and restored secretly to my father by the faith and devotion of one of the few who remained loyal after the fall of the Empire.

“In a few hours it will be yours. I leave it to you as a sacred heritage from the past for you to hand on to the future, and with it you shall receive and hand on a heritage of hate and vengeance, which you shall keep hot in your hearts and in the hearts of your children against the day of reckoning when it comes.

“Now sit down on the divan yonder, and listen with your ears and your hearts as well, for these are the last words that I shall speak with the lips of flesh, and you must remember them, that you may tell them to your children, and perchance to their children after them, as I now tell them to you; for the hour of vengeance may not come in your day nor yet in theirs, though in the fulness of time it shall surely come, and therefore the story must never be forgotten while a Romanoff remains to remember it.”

The old man, on whom the strange drug that he had taken was still exercising its wonderful effects, threw himself into an easy-chair as he spoke, and motioned them with his hand towards a second low couch against one of the walls, covered with cushions and draped with neutral-tinted, silken hangings.

Olga, moving, as it seemed, with the unconscious motion of a somnambulist, allowed her form to sink back upon the cushions until she half sat and half reclined on them; and Serge, laying one of the cushions on the floor, sat at her feet, and drew one of her hands unresistingly over his shoulder, and kept it there as though she were caressing him. Thus they waited for Paul Romanoff to teach them the lesson that they had sworn to teach in turn to the generations that were to come.

The old man regarded them in silence for a moment or two, and as he did so the angry fire died out of his eyes, and his lips parted in a faint smile as he said, rather in soliloquy to himself than to them—

[20]

“As it was in the beginning, it is now and for ever shall be until the end! Empires wax and wane, and dynasties rise and fall! Revolutions come and go, and the face of the world is changed, but the mystery of the sex, the beauty of woman, and the love of man, endure changeless as Destiny, for they are Destiny itself!”

As he spoke, the fixed, rigid look melted from Olga’s face. The bright flush rose again to her cheeks, and she bowed her royal head, and looked almost tenderly at the blond, ruddy, young giant at her feet. After all, he was her fate, and she might well have had a worse one.

Then after a brief pause, Paul Romanoff began to speak again, slowly and quietly, with his eyes fixed on the glittering symbol of the vanished sovereignty of his House, as though he were addressing it, and communing with the mournful memories that it recalled from the past.

“It is a hundred and twenty-five years since the hand of Natas, the Jew, came forth out of the unknown, and struck you from the brow of the Last of the Tsars. On the day that Natas died, I was born, a hundred years ago. There are barely a score of men left on earth who have seen and spoken with the men who saw the Great Revolt and the beginning of the Terror, and I alone, of the elder line of Romanoff, remain to pass the story of our House’s shame and ruin on, so that it may not be forgotten against the day of vengeance, that I have waited for in vain.

“But I have no time left for dreams or vain regrets. Listen, Children of the Present, and take my words with you into the future that it is not given to me to see.”

He passed his hands upwards over his eyes and brow, and then went on, speaking now directly to Olga and Serge, in a quick, earnest tone, as though he feared that his fictitious strength would fail him before he could say what he had to say—

“When Alexander, the last of the crowned Emperors of Russia, fell down dead on the morning after he reached the mines of Kara, to which the Terrorists had exiled him as a convict for life, those who remained of his family, and who had[21] taken no part in the war, were allowed to return to Europe, on condition that they lived the lives of private citizens and sought no share in the government of any country to which they were allied by marriage or otherwise.

“Only two of those who had survived the march to Siberia were able to avail themselves of this permission, and these were Olga, the daughter of Alexander, and Serge Nicholaivitch, the youngest son of his nephew Nicholas. These two settled at

the Court of Denmark, and there, two years later, Olga married Prince Ingeborg. Her first-born son, the only one of her children who lived beyond infancy, was my father, as my own first-born son was yours, Olga Romanoff.

“Serge married Dagmar, the youngest daughter of the House of Denmark, three years later, and from him you, Serge Nicholaivitch, are descended in the fourth generation. Thus in you will be united the only two remaining branches of the once mighty House of Romanoff. May the day come when, in you or your children, its ancient glories shall be restored!”

“Amen!” said Olga and Serge in a single breath, and as she uttered the words, Olga’s eyes fell on the lost crown upon the table, and for the moment they seemed to flame with the inner fires of a quenchless rage. Paul Romanoff’s eyes answered hers flash for flash, for the same hatred and longing for revenge possessed them both—the old man who had carried the weight of a hundred years to the brink of the grave, and the young girl whose feet were still lingering on the dividing line between girlhood and womanhood.

Then he went on, speaking with an added tone of fierceness in his voice—

“From the day of my birth until this, the night of my death, it has been impossible to do anything to recover that which was lost in the Great Revolt. Not that stout hearts and keen brains and willing hands have been wanting for the work; but because the strong arm of the Terror has encircled the earth with unbreakable bonds; because its eye has never slept; and because its hand has hurled infallible destruction upon all who have dared to take the first step towards freedom.

[22]

“Natas spoke truly when he said that the Terrorists had ruled the world by force, and Alan Arnold to-day spoke truly after him when he said that the supremacy of the Aerians was based upon the force that they could bring to bear upon any who revolted against them, through their possession of the empire of the air.

“It is this priceless possession that gives them the command of the world, and for a hundred years they have guarded it so jealously, that they have slain without mercy all who have ventured to take even the first step towards an independent solution of the mighty problem which Richard Arnold solved a hundred and twenty-six years ago.

“The last man who died in this cause was my only son, and your father, Olga. Remember that, for it is not the least item in the legacy of revenge that I bequeath to

you to-night. He had devoted his life, as many others had done before him, to the task of discovering the secret of the motive power of the Terrorists' air-ships.

"The year you were born, success had crowned the efforts of ten years of tireless labour. Working with the utmost secrecy in a lonely hut buried in the forests of Norway, he and six others, who were, as he thought, devoted to him and the glorious cause of wresting the empire of the world from the grasp of the Terrorists, had built an air-ship that would have been swifter and more powerful than any of their aerial fleet.

"Two days before she was ready to take the air, one of his men deserted. The traitor was never seen again, but the next night a Terrorist vessel descended from the clouds, and in a few minutes not a vestige of our air-ship or her creators remained. Only a blackened waste in the midst of the forest was left to show the scene of their labours. Within forty-eight hours, it was known all over the civilised world that Vladimir Romanoff and his associates had been killed by order of the Supreme Council, for endeavouring to build an air-ship in defiance of its commands.



Not a Vestige of our Air-Ship or her Creators remained. [Page 22.](#)

“Such are the enemies against whom you will have to contend. They are still virtually the masters of the world, and the[23] task before you is to wrest that mastery from them. It is no light task, but it is not impossible; for these Aerians are, after all, but men and women as you are, and what they have done, other men and women can surely do.

“The Great Secret cannot always remain theirs alone. While they actively controlled the nations, nothing could be done against them, for their hand was everywhere and

their eyes saw everything. But now they have abdicated the throne of the world, and left the nations to rule themselves as they can. For a time things will go on in their present grooves, but that will not be for long.

“I, who am their bitterest enemy on earth, am forced to confess that the Terrorists have proved themselves to be the wisest as well as the strongest of despots. Under their rule the world has become a paradise—for the *canaille* and the multitude. But they have curbed the mob as well as the king, and abolished the demagogue as well as the despot. Now the strong hand is lifted and the bridle loosed; and before many years have passed, the brute strength of the multitude will have begun to assert itself.

“The so-called kings of the earth, who rule now in a mockery of royalty, will speedily find that the real kings of the old days ruled because, in the last resource, they had armies and navies at their command and could enforce obedience. These are but the puppets of the popular will, and now that the moral and physical support of the Supreme Council and its aerial fleet is taken from them, they will see democracy run rampant, and, having no strength to stem the tide, they will have to float with it or be submerged by it.

“In another generation the voice of the majority, the blind, brute force of numbers, will rule everything on earth. What government there may be, will be a mere matter of counting heads. Individual freedom will by swift degrees vanish from the earth, and human society will become a huge machine, grinding all men down to the same level until the monotony of life becomes unendurable.

“Hitherto all democracies in the history of the world have^[24] been ended by military despotisms, but now military despotism has been made impossible, and so democracy will run riot, until it plunges the world into social chaos.

“This may come in your time or in your children’s, but it is the opportunity for which you must work and wait. Even now you will find in every nation, thousands of men and women who are chafing against the limitations imposed on individual aspirations and ambition; and as the rule of democracy spreads and becomes heavier, the number of these will increase, until at last revolt will become possible, nay, inevitable.

“Of this revolt you must make yourselves the guiding-spirits. The work will be long and arduous, but you have all your lives before you, and the reward of success will be glorious beyond all description.

“Not only will you restore the House of Romanoff to its ancient glories in yourselves and your children, but you will enthrone it in an even higher place than that which your

ancestor had almost won for it, when these thrice-accursed Terrorists turned the tide of battle against him on the threshold of the conquest of the world.

“Do not shrink from the task, or despair because you are now only two against the world. Think of Natas and the mighty work that he did, and remember that he was once only one against the world which in the day of battle he fought and conquered.

“Above all things, never let your eyes wander from the land of the Aerians. That once conquered and the world is yours to do with as you will. To do that, you must first conquer the air as they have done. Aeria itself, by all reports, is such a paradise as the sun nowhere else shines upon. Some day, whether by force or cunning, it may be yours; and when it is, the world also will be yours to be your footstool and your plaything, and all the peoples of the earth shall be your servants to do your bidding.

“Yes, I can see, through the mists of the coming years and beyond the grave that opens at my feet, aerial navies, flying the Eagle of Russia and scaling the mighty battlements of Aeria,[25] hurling their lightnings far and wide in the work of vengeance long delayed! Behind the battle, I see darkness that my weak eyes cannot pierce, but yours shall see clearly where mine are clouded with the falling mists of death.

“The shadows are closing round me, and the sands in the glass are almost run out. Yet one thing remains to be done. Since Alexander Romanoff died at the mines of Kara, no Tsar of Russia has been crowned. Now I, Paul Romanoff, his rightful heir, will crown myself after the fashion of my ancestors, and then I will crown you, the daughter of my murdered son, and you will place the diadem on your husband’s brow when God has made you one!”

So saying, the old man rose from his seat, with his face flushed and his eyes aglow with the light of ecstasy. Olga and Serge rose to their feet, half in fear and half in wonder, as they looked upon his transfigured countenance.

He lifted the Imperial crown from the table, and then, drawing himself up to the full height of his majestic stature, raised it high above his head, and lowered it slowly down towards his brow.

The jewelled circlet of gold had almost touched the silver of his snowy hair when the light suddenly died out of his eyes, leaving the glaze of death behind it. He gasped once for breath, and then his mighty form shrank together and pitched forward in a huddled heap at their feet, flinging the crown with a dull crash to the floor, and sending it rolling away into a corner of the room.

“God grant that may not be an omen, Olga!” said Serge, covering his eyes with his hands to shut out the sudden horror of the sight.

“Omen or not, I will do his bidding to the end,” said the girl slowly and solemnly. Then her pent-up passion of grief burst forth in a long, wailing cry, and she flung herself down on the prostrate form of the only friend she had ever known and loved, and laid her cheek upon his, and let the welling tears run from her eyes over those that had for ever ceased to weep.

[26]

CHAPTER III. TSARINA OLGA.



THREE days after his death, the body of Paul Romanoff was reduced to ashes in the Highgate Crematorium, a magnificent building, in the sombre yet splendid architecture of ancient Egypt, which stood in the midst of what had once been Highgate Cemetery, and what was now a beautiful garden, shaded by noble trees, and in summer ablaze with myriads of flowers.

Not a grave or a headstone was to be seen, for burial in the earth had been abolished throughout the civilised world for nearly a century. In the vast galleries of the central building, thousands of urns, containing the ashes of the dead, reposed in niches inscribed with the name and date of death, but these mostly belonged to the poorer classes, for the wealthy as a rule devoted a chamber in their own houses to this purpose.

The body was registered in the great Book of the Dead at the Crematorium as that of Paul Ivanitch, and the only two mourners signed their names, “Serge Ivanitch and Olga Ivanitch, grand-children of the deceased.” The reason for this was, that for more than a century the name of Romanoff had been proscribed in all the nations of Europe. It was believed that the Vladimir Romanoff who had been executed by the Supreme Council, for attempting to solve the forbidden problem, was the last of his race, and Paul had taken great pains not to disturb this belief.

[27]

Long before his son had met with his end, he had called himself Paul Ivanitch, and settled in London and practised his profession as a sculptor, in which he had won both fame and fortune. Olga had lived with him since her father's death, and Serge, who at the time the narrative opens had just completed his studies at the Art University of Rome, had passed as her brother.

They took the urn containing the ashes of the old man back with them to the house, which now belonged, with all its contents, to Olga and Serge. On the morning after his death, a notice, accompanied by an abstract of his will, had been inserted in *The Official Gazette*, the journal devoted exclusively to matters of law and government.

Paul Romanoff had, however, left two wills behind him, one which had to be made public in compliance with the law, and one which was intended only for the eyes of Olga and Serge. This second will reposed, with the crown of Russia, in the secret recess in the wall of the octagonal chamber; and the instructions endorsed upon it stated that it was to be opened by Serge in the presence of Olga, after they had brought his ashes back to the house and had been legally confirmed in their possession of his property.

Consequently, on the evening of the 11th, the two shut themselves into the room, and Olga, who since her grandfather's death had worn the key of the recess on a chain round her neck, unlocked the secret door and gave the will to Serge. As she did so, a sudden fancy seized her. She took the crown from its resting-place, and, standing in front of a long mirror which occupied one of the eight sides of the room from roof to floor, poised it above the lustrous coils of her hair with both hands, and said, half to Serge and half to herself—

“What age could not accomplish, youth shall do! By my own right, and with my own hands, I am crowned Tsarina, Empress of the Russias in Europe and Asia. As the great Catherine was, so will I be—and more, for I will be Mistress of the West and the East. I will have kings for my vassals and[28] senates for my servants, and I will rule as no other woman has ruled before me since Semiramis!”

As she uttered the daring words, whose fulfilment seemed beyond the dreams of the wildest imagination, she placed the crown upon her brow and stood, clothed in imperial purple from head to foot, the very incarnation of loveliness and royal majesty. Serge looked up as she spoke, and gazed for a moment entranced upon her. Then he threw himself upon his knees before her, and, raising the hem of her robe to his lips, said in a voice half choked with love and passion—

“And I, who am also of the imperial blood, will be the first to salute you Tsarina and mistress! You have taken me as your lover, let me also be the first of your subjects. I will serve you as woman never was served before. You shall be my mistress—my goddess, and your words shall be my laws before all other laws. If you bid me do evil, it shall be to me as good, and I will do it. I will kill or leave alive according to your pleasure, and I will hold my own life as cheap as any other in your service; for I love you, and my life is yours!”

Olga looked down upon him with the light of triumph in her eyes. No woman ever breathed to whom such words would not have been sweet; but to her they were doubly sweet, because they were a spontaneous tribute to the power of her beauty and the strength of her royal nature, and an earnest of her future sway over other men.

More than this, too, they had been won without an effort, from the lips of the man whom she had always been taught to look upon as higher than other men, in virtue of his descent from her own ancestry, and the blood-right that he shared with her to that throne which it was to be their joint life-task to re-establish.

If she did not love him, it was rather because ambition and the inborn lust of power engrossed her whole being, than from any lack of worthiness on his part. Of all the men she had ever seen, none compared with him in strength and manliness save one—and he, bitter beyond expression as the thought was^[29] to her, was so far above her as she was now, that he seemed to belong to another world and to another order of beings.

As their eyes met, a thrill that was almost akin to love passed through her soul, and, acting on the impulse of the moment, she took the crown from her own head and held it above his as he knelt at her feet, and said—

“Not as my subject or my servant, but as my co-ruler and helpmate, you shall keep that oath of yours, Serge Nicholaivitch. We have exchanged our vows, and in a few days I shall be your wife. We will wed as equals; and so now I crown you, as it is my right to do. Rise, my lord the Tsar, and take your crown!”

Serge put up his hands and took the crown from hers at the moment that she placed it on his brow. He rose to his feet, holding it on his head as he said solemnly—

“So be it, and may the God of our fathers help me to wear it worthily with you, and to restore to it the glory that has been taken from it by our enemies!”

Then he laid it reverently down on the table and turned to Olga, who was still standing before the mirror looking at her own lovely image, as though in a dream of future glory.

He took her unresisting in his arms, and kissed her passionately again and again, bringing the bright blood to her cheeks and the light of a kindred passion to her eyes, and murmuring between the kisses—

“But you, darling, are worth all the crowns of earth, and I am still your slave, because your beauty and your sweetness make me so.”

“Then slave you shall be!” she said, giving him back kiss for kiss, well knowing that with every pressure of her intoxicating lips she riveted the chains of his bondage closer upon his soul.

To an outside observer, what had taken place would have seemed but little better than boy-and-girl’s play, the phantasy of two young and ardent souls dreaming a romantic and impossible dream of power and glory that had vanished, never to be brought back again. And yet, if such a one had been^[30] able to look forward through little more than a single lustrum, he would have seen that, in the mysterious revolutions of human affairs, it is usually the seemingly impossible that becomes possible, and the most unexpected that comes to pass.

The secret will of Paul Romanoff, to the study of which the two lovers addressed themselves when they awoke from the dream of love and empire into which Olga’s phantasy had plunged them both, would, if it had been made public, have given a by no means indefinite shape to such vague dreams of world-revolution as were inspired in thoughtful minds, even in the thirty-first year of the twenty-first century.

It was a voluminous document of many pages, embodying the result of nearly eighty years of tireless scheming and patient research in the field of science as well as in that of politics. Paul Romanoff had lived his life with but one object, and that was, to prepare the way for the accomplishment of a revolution which should culminate in the subversion of the state of society inaugurated by the Terrorists, and the re-establishment, at anyrate in the east of Europe, of autocratic rule in the person of a scion of the House of Romanoff. All that he had been able to do towards the attainment of this seemingly impossible project was crystallised in the document bequeathed to Olga and Serge.

It was divided into three sections. The first of these was mostly of a personal nature, and contained details which it would serve no purpose of use or interest to reproduce here. It will therefore suffice to say, that it contained a list of the names and addresses of four hundred men and women scattered throughout Europe and America, each of whom was the descendant of some prince or noble, some great landowner or millionaire, who had suffered degradation or ruin at the hands of the Terrorists during

the reorganisation of society, after the final triumph of the Anglo-Saxon Federation in 1904.

The second section of the will was of a purely scientific and technical character. It was a theoretical arsenal of weapons[31] for the arming of those who, if they were to succeed at all, could only do so by bringing back that which it had cost such an awful expenditure of blood and suffering to banish from the earth in the days of the Terror. The designs of Paul Romanoff, and the vast aspirations of those to whom he had bequeathed the crown of the great Catherine, could have but one result if they ever passed from the realm of fancy to that of deeds.

If the clock was to be put back, only the armed hand could do it, and that hand must be so armed that it could strike at first secretly, and yet with paralysing effect. The few would have to array themselves against the many, and if they triumphed, it would have to be by the possession of some such means of terrorism and irresistible destruction as those who had accomplished the revolution of 1904 had wielded in their aerial fleet.

By far the most important part of this section of the will consisted of plans and diagrams of various descriptions of air-ships and submarine vessels, accompanied by minute directions for building and working them. Most of these were from the hand of Vladimir Romanoff, Olga's father; but of infinitely more importance even than all these was a detailed description, on the last page but two of the section, of the solution of a problem which had been attempted in the last decade of the nineteenth century, but which was still unsolved so far as the world at large was concerned.

This was the direct transformation of the solar energy locked up in coal into electrical energy, without loss either by waste or transference. How vast and yet easily controlled a power this would be in the hands of those who were able to wield it, may be guessed from the fact that, in the present day, less than ten per cent. of the latent energy of coal is developed as electrical power even in the most perfect systems of conversion.

All the rest is wasted between the furnace of the steam-engine and the dynamo. It was to electrical power, obtained direct from coal and petroleum, that Vladimir Romanoff trusted[32] for the motive force of his air-ships and submarine vessels, and which he had already employed with experimental success as regards the former, when his career was cut short by the swift and pitiless execution of the sentence of the Supreme Council.

The remainder of this section was occupied by a list of chemical formulæ for the most powerful explosives then known to science, and minute instructions for their preparation. At the bottom of the page which contained these, there was a little strip of parchment, fastened by one end to the binding of the other sheets, and covered with very small writing.

Olga's eyes, wandering down over the maze of figures which crowded the page, reached it before Serge's did. One quick glance told her that it was something very different to the rest. She laid one hand carelessly over it, and with the other softly caressed Serge's crisp, golden curls. As he looked round in response to the caress, their eyes met, and she said in her sweet, low, witching voice—

"Dearest, I have a favour to ask of you."

"Not a favour to ask, but a command to give, you mean. Speak, and you are obeyed. Have I not sworn obedience?" he replied, laying his hand upon her shoulder and drawing her lovely face closer to his as he spoke.

"No, it is only a favour," she said, with such a smile as Antony might have seen on the lips of Cleopatra. "I want you to leave me alone for a little time—for half an hour—and then come back and finish reading this with me. You know my brain is not as strong as yours, and I feel a little bewildered with all the wonderful things that there are in this legacy of my father's father.

"Before we go any further, I should like to read it all through again by myself, so as to understand it thoroughly. So suppose you go to your smoking-room for a little, and leave me to do so. I shall not take very long, and then we will go over the rest together."

"But we have only a couple more pages to read, sweet one,[33] and then I will go over it all again with you, and explain anything that you have not understood."

As he spoke, Serge's eyes never wavered for a moment from hers. Could he but have broken their spell, he might have seen that she was hiding something from him under her little, white hand and shapely arm. She brought her red, smiling lips still nearer to his as she almost whispered in reply—

"Well, it is only a girl's whim, after all, but still I am a girl. Come, now, I will give you a kiss for twenty minutes' solitude, and when you come back, and we have finished our task, you shall have as many more as you like."

The sweet, tempting lips came closer still, and the witching spell of her great dusky eyes grew stronger as she spoke. How was he to know what was hanging in the balance in that fateful moment? He was but a hot-blooded youth of twenty, and he

worshipped this lovely, girlish temptress, who had not yet seen seventeen summers, with an adoration that blinded him to all else but her and her intoxicating beauty.

He drew her yielding form to him until he could feel her heart beating against his, and as their lips met, the promised kiss came from hers to his. He returned it threefold, and then his arm slipped from her shoulder to her waist, and he lifted her like a child from her chair, and carried her, half laughing and half protesting, to the door, claimed and took another kiss before he released her, and then put her down and left her alone without another word.

“Alas, poor Serge!” she said, as the door closed behind him; “you are not the first man who has lost the empire of the world for a woman’s kiss. Before, I saw that you were my equal and helpmate, now you and all other men—yes, not even excepting he who seems so far above me now—shall be my slaves and do my bidding, so blindly that they shall not even know they are doing it.

“Yes, the weapons of war are worth much, but what are they in comparison with the souls of the men who will have to use them!”

In half an hour Serge came back to finish the reading of[34] the will with her. The little slip of paper had been removed so skilfully that it would have been impossible for him to have even guessed that it had ever been attached to the parchment, or that it was now lying hidden in the bosom of the girl who would have killed him without the slightest scruple to gain the unsuspected possession of it.



[35]

CHAPTER IV. A SON OF THE GODS.



ON the day but one following the reading of Paul Romanoff’s secret will, Olga and Serge set out for St. Petersburg, to convey his ashes to their last resting-place in the Cathedral of SS. Peter and Paul in the Fortress of Petropaulovski, where reposed the

dust of the Tyrants of Russia, from Peter the Great to Alexander II. of Russia, now only remembered as the chief characters in the dark tragedy of the days before the Revolution.

The intense love of the Russians for their country had survived the tremendous change that had passed over the face of society, and it was still the custom to bring the ashes of those who claimed noble descent and deposit them in one of their national churches, even when they had died in distant countries.

The station from which they started was a splendid structure of marble, glass, and aluminium steel, standing in the midst of a vast, abundantly-wooded garden, which occupied the region that had once been made hideous by the slums and sweating-dens of Southwark. The ground floor was occupied by waiting-rooms, dining-saloons, conservatories, and winter-gardens, for the convenience and enjoyment of travellers; and from these lifts rose to the upper storey, where the platforms and lines lay under an immense crystal arch.

Twelve lines ran out of the station, divided into three sets[36] of four each. Of these, the centre set was entirely devoted to continental traffic, and the lines of this system stretched without a break from London to Peking.

The cars ran suspended on a single rail upheld by light, graceful arches of a practically unbreakable alloy of aluminium, steel, and zinc, while about a fifth of their weight was borne by another single insulating rail of forged glass,—the rediscovery of the lost art of making which had opened up immense possibilities to the engineers of the twenty-first century.

Along this lower line the train ran, not on wheels, but on lubricated bearings, which glided over it with no more friction than that of a steel skate on ice. On the upper rail ran double-flanged wheels with ball-bearings, and this line also conducted the electric current from which the motive-power was derived.

The two inner lines of each set were devoted to long-distance, express traffic, and the two outer to intermediate transit, corresponding to the ordinary trains of the present day. Thus, for example, the train by which Olga and Serge were about to travel, stopped only at Brussels, Berlin, Königsberg, Moscow, Nijni Novgorod, Tomsk, Tobolsk, Irkutsk, and Peking, which was reached by a line running through the Salenga valley and across the great desert of Shamoo, while from Irkutsk another branch of the line ran north-eastward via Yakutsk to the East Cape, where the Behring Bridge united the systems of the Old World and the New.

The usual speed of the expresses was a hundred and fifty miles an hour, rising to two hundred on the long runs; and that of the ordinary trains, from a hundred to a hundred and fifty. Higher speeds could of course be attained on emergencies, but these had been found to be quite sufficient for all practical purposes.

The cars were not unlike the Pullmans of the present day, save that they were wider and roomier, and were built not of wood and iron, but of aluminium and forged glass. Their interiors were, of course, absolutely impervious to wind and dust, even at the highest speed of the train, although a[37] perfect system of ventilation kept their atmosphere perfectly fresh.

The long-distance trains were fitted up exactly as moving hotels, and the traveller, from London to Pekin or Montreal, was not under the slightest necessity of leaving the train, unless he chose to do so, from end to end of the journey.

One more advantage of railway travelling in the twenty-first century may be mentioned here. It was entirely free, both for passengers and baggage. Easy and rapid transit being considered an absolute necessity of a high state of civilisation, just as armies and navies had once been thought to be, every self-supporting person paid a small travelling tax, in return for which he or she was entitled to the freedom of all the lines in the area of the Federation.

In addition to this tax, the municipality of every city or town through which the lines passed, set apart a portion of their rent-tax for the maintenance of the railways, in return for the advantages they derived from them.

Under this reasonable condition of affairs, therefore, all that an intending traveller had to do was to signify the date of his departure and his destination to the superintendent of the nearest station, and send his heavier baggage on in advance by one of the trains devoted to the carriage of freight. A place was then allotted to him, and all he had to do was to go and take possession of it.

The Continental Station was comfortably full of passengers when Olga and Serge reached it, about fifteen minutes before the departure of the Eastern express; for people were leaving the Capital of the World in thousands just then, to spend Christmas and New Year with friends in the other cities of Europe, and especially to attend the great Winter Festival that was held every year in St. Petersburg in celebration of the anniversary of Russian freedom.

Ten minutes before the express started, they ascended in one of the lifts to the platform, and went to find their seats. As they walked along the train, Olga suddenly stopped and said, almost with a gasp—

[38]

“Look, Serge! There are two Aerians, and one of them is”—

“Who?” said Serge, almost roughly. “I didn’t know you had any acquaintances among the Masters of the World.”

The son of the Romanoffs hated the very name of the Aerians, so bitterly that even the mere suspicion that his idolised betrothed should have so much as spoken to one of them was enough to rouse his anger.

“No, I haven’t,” she replied quietly, ignoring the sudden change in his manner; “but both you and I have very good reason for wishing to make their distinguished acquaintance. I recognise one of these because he sat beside Alan Arnold, the President of the Council, in St. Paul’s, when they were foolish enough to relinquish the throne of the world in obedience to an old man’s whim.

“The taller of the two standing there by the pillar is the younger counterpart of the President, and if his looks don’t belie him, he can be no one but the son of Alan Arnold, and therefore the future ruler of Aeria, and the present or future possessor of the Great Secret. Do you see now why it is necessary that we should—well, I will say, make friends of those two handsome lads?”

Olga spoke rapidly and in Russian, a tongue then scarcely ever heard and very little understood even among educated people, who, whatever their nationality, made English their language of general intercourse. The words “handsome lads” had grated harshly upon Serge’s ears, but he saw the force of Olga’s question at once, and strove hard to stifle the waking demon of jealousy that had been roused more by her tone and the quick bright flush on her cheek than by her words, as he answered—

“Forgive me, darling, for speaking roughly! Their hundred years of peace have not tamed my Russian blood enough to let me look upon my enemies without anger. Of course, you are right; and if they are going by the express, as they seem to be, we should be friendly enough by the time we reach Königsberg.”

[39]

“I am glad you agree with me,” said Olga, “for the destinies of the world may turn on the events of the next few hours. Ah, the Fates are kind! Look! There is Alderman^[2] Heatherstone talking to them. I suppose he has come to see them off, for no doubt they have been the guests of the City during the Festival. Come, he will very soon make us known to each other.”

A couple of minutes later the Alderman, who had been an old friend of Paul Ivanitch, the famous sculptor, had cordially greeted them and introduced them to the two Aerians, whose names he gave as Alan Arnoldson, the son of the President of the late Supreme Council, and Alexis Masarov, a descendant of the Alexis Mazanoff who had played such a conspicuous part in the war of the Terror. They were just starting on the tour of the world, and were bound for St. Petersburg to witness the Winter Festival.

Olga had been more than justified in speaking of them as she had done. Both in face and form, they were the very ideal of youthful manhood. Both of them stood over six feet in the long, soft, white leather boots which rose above their knees, meeting their close-fitting, grey tunics of silk-embroidered cloth, confined at the waist by belts curiously fashioned of flat links of several different metals, and fastened in front by heavy buckles of gold studded with great, flashing gems.

From their broad shoulders hung travelling-cloaks of fine, blue cloth, lined with silver fur and kept in place across the breast by silver chains and clasps of a strange, blue metal, whose lustre seemed to come from within like that of a diamond or a sapphire.

On their heads they wore no other covering than their own thick, curling hair, which they wore somewhat in the picturesque style of the fourteenth century, and a plain, broad band of the gleaming blue metal, from which rose above the temples a pair of marvellously-chased, golden wings about four inches high—the insignia of the Empire of the Air, and the^[40] sign which distinguished the Aerians from all the other peoples of the earth.

As Olga shook hands with Alan, she looked up into his dark-blue eyes, with a glance such as he had never received from a woman before—a glance in which he seemed instinctively to read at once love and hate, frank admiration and equally undisguised defiance. Their eyes held each other for a moment of mutual fascination which neither could resist, and then the dark-fringed lids fell over hers, and a faint flush rose to her cheeks as she replied to his words of salutation—

“Surely the pleasure will rather be on our side, with travelling companions from the other world! For my own part, I seem to remind myself somewhat of one of the daughters of men whom the Sons of the Gods”—

She stopped short in the middle of her daring speech, and looked up at him again as much as to say—

“So much for the present. Let the Fates finish it!” and then, appearing to correct herself, she went on, with a half-saucy, half-deprecating smile on her dangerously-mobile lips—

“You know what I mean; not exactly that, but something of the sort.”

“More true, I fancy, of the daughter of men than of the supposed Sons of the Gods,” retorted Alan, with a laugh, half startled by her words, and wholly charmed by the indescribable fascination of the way in which she said them; “for the daughters of men were so fair that the Sons of the Gods lost heaven itself for their sakes.”

“Even so!” said Olga, looking him full in the eyes, and at that moment the signal sounded for them to take their places in the cars.

A couple of minutes after they had taken their seats, the train drew out of the station with an imperceptible, gliding motion, so smooth and frictionless that it seemed rather as though the people standing on the platform were sliding backwards than that the train was moving forward. The speed^[41] increased rapidly, but so evenly that, almost before they were well aware of it, the passengers were flying over the snow-covered landscape, under the bright, heatless sun and pale, steel-blue sky of a perfect winter’s morning, at a hundred miles an hour, the speed ever increasing as they sped onward.

The line followed the general direction of the present route to Dover, which was reached in about half an hour. Without pausing for a moment in its rapid flight, the express swept out from the land over the Channel Bridge, which spanned the Straits from Dover to Calais at a height of 200 feet above the water.

Travelling at a speed of three miles a minute, seven minutes sufficed for the express to leap, as it were, from land to land. As they swept along in mid-air over the waves, Olga pointed down to them and said to Alan, who was sitting in the armchair next her own—

“Imagine the time when people had to take a couple of hours getting across here in a little, dirty, smoky steamboat, mingling their sorrows and their sea-sickness in one common misery! I really think this Channel Bridge is worthy even of your admiration. Come now, you have not admired anything yet”—

“Pardon me,” said Alan, with a look and a laugh that set Serge’s teeth gritting against each other, and brought the ready blood to Olga’s cheeks; “on the contrary, I have been absorbed in admiration ever since we started.”

“But not apparently of our engineering triumphs,” replied Olga frankly, taking the compliment to herself, and seeming in no way displeased with it. “It would seem that the polite art of flattery is studied to some purpose in Aeria.”

“There you are quite wrong,” returned Alan, still speaking in the same half-jocular, half-serious vein. “Before all things, we Aerians are taught to tell the absolute truth under all circumstances, no matter whether it pleases or offends; so, you see, what is usually known as flattery could hardly be one of our arts, since, as often as not, it is a lie told in the guise of[42] truth, for the sake of serving some hidden and perhaps dishonest end.”

The blow so unconsciously delivered struck straight home, and the flush died from Olga’s cheek, leaving her for the moment so white that her companion anxiously asked if she was unwell.

“No,” she said, recovering her self-possession under the impulse of sudden anger at the weakness she had betrayed. “It is nothing. This is the first time for a year or so that I have travelled by one of these very fast trains, and the speed made me a little giddy just for the instant. I am quite well, really, so please go on.

“You know, that wonderful fairyland of yours is a subject of everlasting interest and curiosity to us poor outsiders who are denied a glimpse of its glories, and it is so very rarely that one of us enjoys the privilege that is mine just now, that I hope you will indulge my feminine curiosity as far as your good nature is able to temper your reserve.”

As she uttered her request, Alan’s smiling face suddenly became grave almost to sternness. The laughing light died out of his eyes, and she saw them darken in a fashion that at once convinced her that she had begun by making a serious mistake.

He looked up at her, with a shadow in his eyes and a slight frown on his brow. He spoke slowly and steadily, but with a manifest reluctance which he seemed to take little or no trouble to conceal.

“I am sorry that you have asked me to talk on what is a forbidden subject to every Aerial, save when he is speaking with one of his own nation. I see you have been looking at these two golden wings on the band round my head. I will tell you what they mean, and then you will understand why I cannot say all that I know you would like me to say.

“They are to us what the toga virilis was to the Romans of old, the insignia of manhood and responsibility. When a youth of Aeria reaches the age of twenty he is entitled to wear these wings as a sign that he is invested with all the rights and duties of a citizen of the nation which has conquered and commands the Empire of the Air.

[43]

“One of these duties is, that in all the more serious relations of life he shall remain apart from all the peoples of the world save his own, and shall say nothing that will do anything to lift the veil which it has pleased our forefathers in their wisdom to draw round the realm of Aeria. Before we assume the citizenship of which these wings are the symbol we never visit the outside world save to make air voyages, for the purpose of learning the physical facts of the earth’s shape and the geography of land and sea.

“Immediately after we have assumed it we do as Alexis and I are now doing—travel for a year or so through the different countries of the outside world, in order to get our knowledge of men and things as they exist beyond the limits of our own country.

“The fact that we do so,—under a pledge solemnly and publicly given, of never revealing anything which could lead even to a possibility of other peoples of the earth overtaking us in the progress which we have made in the arts and sciences,—is my excuse for refusing to tell you what your very natural curiosity has asked.”

Olga saw instantly that she had struck a false note, and was not slow to make good her mistake. She laid her hand upon his arm, with that pretty gesture which Serge knew so well, and watched now with much bitter feelings, and said, in a tone that betrayed no trace of the consuming passion within her—

“Forgive me! Of course, you will see that I did not know I was trenching on forbidden grounds. I can well understand why such secrets as yours must be, should be kept. You have been masters of the world for more than a century, and even now, although you have formally abdicated the throne of the world, it would be absurd to deny that you still hold the destinies of humanity in your hands.

“The secrets which guard so tremendous a power as that may well be religiously kept and held more sacred than anything else on earth. Still, you have mistaken me if you thought I asked for any of these. All I really wanted was, that^[44] you should tell me something that would give me just a glimpse of what human life is like in that enchanted land of yours”—

Alan laid his hands upon hers, which was still resting upon his arm, and interrupted her even more earnestly than before.

“Even that I cannot tell you. With us, the man who gives a pledge and breaks it, even in the spirit though not in the letter, is not considered worthy to live, and therefore I must be silent.”

Instead of answering with her lips, Olga turned her hand palm upwards, and clasped his with a pressure which he returned before he very well knew what he was doing;

and while the magic of her clasp was still stealing along his nerves, Serge broke in, with a harsh ring in his voice—

“But pardon me for interrupting what seems a very pleasant conversation with my— my sister, I should like to ask, with all due deference to the infinitely superior wisdom of the rulers of Aeria, whether it is not rather a risky thing for you to travel thus about the world, possessing secrets which any man or woman would almost be willing to die even to know for a few minutes, when, after all, you are but human even as the rest of humanity are?

“You, for instance, are only two among millions; how would you protect yourselves against the superior force of numbers? Supposing you were taken unawares under circumstances which make your superior knowledge unavailing. You know, human nature is the same yesterday, to-day, and to-morrow, despite the superficial varnish of civilisation.

“The passions of men are only curbed, not dead. There may be men on earth to-day who, to gain such knowledge as you possess, would even resort to the tortures used by the Inquisition in the sixteenth century. Suppose you found yourself in the power of such men as that, what then? Would you still preserve your secret intact, do you think?”

Alan heard him to the end without moving a muscle of his^[45] face, and without even withdrawing his hand from Olga’s clasp. But at the last sentence he snatched it suddenly away, half-turned in his seat, and faced him. Then, looking him straight in the eyes, he said in a tone as cold and measured as might have been used by a judge sentencing a criminal to death—

“We do not fear anything of the sort, simply because each one of us holds the power of life and death in his hands. If you laid a hand on me now in anger, or with an intent to do me harm, you would be struck dead before you could raise a finger in your own defence.

“Do you think that we, who are as far in advance of you as you are in advance of the men of a hundred years ago, would trust ourselves amongst those who might be our enemies were we not amply protected against you? Tell me, have you ever read a book, written nearly two hundred years ago in the Victorian Age, called *The Coming Race*?”

“Yes,” said Serge, thinking, as he spoke, of the possibilities contained in the secret will of Paul Romanoff, “I have read it, and so has Olga. What of it?”

“Well,” said Alan quietly, without moving his eyes from those of Serge. “I had better tell you at once that we have realised, to all intents and purposes, the dream that Lytton dreamt when he wrote that book. I can tell you so much without breaking the pledge of which I have spoken. All that the Vril-Ya did in his dream we have accomplished in reality, and more than that.

“Our empire is not bounded by the roofs of subterranean caverns, but only by the limits of the planet’s atmosphere. We can soar beyond the clouds and dive beneath the seas. We have realised what he called the Vril force as a sober, scientific fact; and if I thought that you, for instance, were my enemy, I could strike you dead without so much as laying a hand on you. And if a dozen like you tried to overcome me by superior brute force, they would all meet with the same fate.

“I’m afraid this sounds somewhat like boasting,” he continued[46] in a more gentle tone, and dropping his eyes to the floor of the car, “but the turn the conversation has taken obliged me to say what I have done. Suppose we give it another turn and change the subject. We have unintentionally got upon rather uncomfortable ground.”

Serge and Olga were not slow to take the pointed hint, and so the talk drifted into general and more harmless channels.



[47]

CHAPTER V.

A VISION FROM THE CLOUDS.



AT Königsberg, which was reached in nine hours after leaving London, that is to say, soon after seven o’clock in the evening, the Eastern express divided: five of the cars went northward to St. Petersburg, carrying those passengers who were going to participate in the Winter Festival, while the other five which made up the train went on to Moscow and the East.

During the twenty minutes' stop at Berlin, Olga had found an opportunity of having a few words in private with Serge, and had succeeded in persuading him, much against his will, of the necessity of postponing their marriage, and therefore their visit to Moscow, for the execution of a daring and suddenly-conceived plan which she had thought out, but which she had then no time to explain to him.

Serge, though very loath to postpone even for a day or two the consummation of his hopes and the hour which should make Olga irrevocably his, so far as human laws could bind her to him, was so far under the domination of her imperious will that, as soon as he saw that she had determined to have her own way, he yielded with the best grace he could.

Olga chided him gently and yet earnestly for his outbreak of temper towards Alan, and told him plainly that, where such tremendous issues were concerned as those which were involved in the struggle which sooner or later they must wage with the Aerians, no personal considerations whatever could be permitted[48] a moment's serious thought. If she could sacrifice her own feelings, and disguise her hatred of the tyrants of the world under the mask of friendliness, for the sake of the ends to which both their lives were devoted, surely he, if he were at all worthy of her love, could so far trust her as to restrain the unreasoning jealousy of which he had already been guilty.

Either, she told him, he must trust to her absolutely for the present, or he must take the management of affairs into his own hands; and, as she said in conclusion, he must find some influence stronger than hers in their dealings with him who would one day be the ruler of Aeria, and, therefore, the real master of the world, should it ever be possible to dispute the empire of Earth with the Aerians.

From the influence which she exercised over himself, Serge knew only too well that he could not hope to rival her in this regard where a man was concerned, and so he perforce agreed to her proposal, and for the present left the conduct of affairs in her hands.

A telephonic message was therefore sent from Königsberg to the friends who expected them at Vorobièvö, near Moscow, to tell them of the change in their plans; and when the train once more glided out over the frozen plains of the North, the four were once more seated together in the brilliantly-lighted car, which flashed like a meteor through the gathering darkness of the winter's night.

About half an hour after they had passed what had once been the jealously-guarded Russian frontier, a dazzling gleam of light suddenly blazed down from the black

darkness overhead, and Olga, who was sitting by one of the windows of the car, bent forward and said—

“Look there! What is that? There is a bright light shining down out of the clouds on the train.”

Alan saw the flash across the window, and, without even troubling to look up at its source, said—

“Oh, I suppose that’ll be the air-ship that was ordered to meet us at St. Petersburg. You know, we usually have one of[49] them in attendance, when we trust ourselves alone among our possible enemies of the outer world.”

The last sentence was spoken with a quiet irony, which brought home both to Olga and Serge the not very pleasant conviction that their previous conversation had by no means been forgotten. Serge, perhaps fearing to give utterance to his thoughts, remained silent, but Olga looked at Alan with a half-saucy smile, and said almost mockingly—

“Your Majesties of Aeria may well esteem yourselves impregnable, while you have such a bodyguard as that at your beck and call. I suppose that air-ship would not have the slightest difficulty in blowing this train, and all it contains, off the face of the earth at a moment’s notice, if it had orders to do so?”

“Not the slightest,” said Alan quietly. “But in proof of the fact that it has no such hostile intentions, you shall, if you please, take a voyage beyond the clouds in it the day after to-morrow, from St. Petersburg.”

“What!” said Olga, her cheeks flushing and her eyes lighting up at the very idea of such an experience. “Do you really mean to say that you would permit a daughter of the earth, as I am told you call the women who have not the good fortune to be born in Aeria, to go on board one of those wonderful air-ships of yours, and taste the forbidden delights of spurning the earth and sharing, even for an hour, your Empire of the Air?”

“Why not?” replied Alan, with a laugh. “What harm would be done by taking you for a trip beyond the clouds? We are not so selfish as all that; and if the novel experience would give you any pleasure, we have a perfect right to ask you to enjoy it. Will you come?”

“Surely there is scarcely any need for me to say ‘yes.’ Why, do you know, I believe I would give five years of my life for as many hours on board that air-ship of yours,” said

Olga; “and if you will do as you say, you will make me your debtor for ever. Indeed, how could a poor earth-dweller such as I am repay a favour like that.”

“Ah, if only you were an Aerial, I should not have much[50] difficulty in telling you how you could do that,” retorted Alan, with almost boyish candour. “As it is, I am afraid I must be satisfied for my reward with the pleasure of knowing that I have given you a pleasurable experience.”

“Your Majesty has put that so prettily, that it almost atones for the sense of hopeless inferiority which, I need hardly tell you, is just a trifle bitter to my feminine pride,” said Olga, in the same half-bantering tone she had used all along.

Before a reply had risen to Alan’s lips, the conversation was interrupted by the air-ship suddenly swooping down from the clouds to the level of the windows of the train, which was now flying along over a wide, treeless plain at a speed of fully two hundred miles an hour.

As the search-lights of the aerial vessel flashed along the windows of the cars, the blinds, which had been drawn down at nightfall, were sprung up again by the passengers, who were all eager to get a glimpse of one of the marvellous vessels which so rarely came within close view of the dwellers upon earth.

The air-ship, on which all eyes were now bent with such intense curiosity, was a beautifully-proportioned vessel, built chiefly of some unknown metal, which shone with a brilliant, pale-blue lustre. Her hull was about two hundred feet from stem to stern, not counting a long, ramlike projection which stretched some twenty-five feet in front of the stem, with its point level with the keel, or rather, with the three keels,—the centre one shallow and the two others very deep,—which were obviously shaped so as to enable the craft either to stand upright on land or to sail upon the water if desired.

From each of her sides spread out two great wings, not unlike palm-leaves in shape, measuring some hundred feet from point to point, and about twice the width of the vessel’s deck, which was, as nearly as could be judged, twenty feet amidships.

These wings were made of some white, lustrous material, which shone with a somewhat more metallic sheen than silk would have done, and were divided into a vast number of sections by transverse ribs. These sections vibrated and undulated rhythmically from front to rear with enormous[51] rapidity, and evidently not only sustained the vessel in the air, but also aided in her propulsion.

Three seemingly solid discs, which glittered brilliantly in the light from the train, marked the positions of the air-ship's propellers, of which one revolved on a shaft in a straight line with the centre of the deck, while the shafts of the other two were inclined outwards at a slight angle from the middle line. From the deck rose three slender, raking masts, apparently placed there for ornament rather than use, unless indeed they were employed for signalling purposes.

The whole deck was covered completely from end to end by a curved roof of glass, and formed a spacious chamber pervaded by a soft, diffused light, the origin of which was invisible, and which showed about half a dozen figures clad in the graceful costume of the Aerians, and all wearing the headdress with golden wings. From under the domed, crystal roof projected ten long, slender guns,—two over the bows, two over the stern, and three over each side, at equal intervals.

Such was the wonderful craft which swept down from the darkness of the wintry sky, in full view of the passengers in the cars, and lighted up the snowy landscape for three or four miles ahead and astern with the dazzling rays of her two search-lights.

Although, as has been said, the express was moving at quite two hundred miles an hour, the air-ship swept up alongside it with as much apparent ease as though it had been stationary. Amid the murmurs of irrepressible admiration which greeted it from the passengers, it glided smoothly nearer and nearer, until the side of one of its wings was within ten feet of the car windows.

Alan and Alexis stood up and saluted their comrades on the deck, then a few rapid, unintelligible signals made with the hand passed between them, a parting salute was waved from the air-ship to the express; and then, with a speed that seemed to rival that of the lightning-bolt, the cruiser of the air darted forward and upward, and in ten seconds was lost beyond the clouds.

"Well, now that you have seen one of our aerial fleet at[52] close quarters," said Alan, turning to Olga and Serge, "what do you think of her?"

"A miracle!" they both exclaimed in one breath; and then Olga went on, her voice trembling with an irresistible agitation—

"I can hardly believe that such a marvel is the creation of merely human genius. There is something appalling in the very idea of the awful power lying in the hands of those who can create and command such a vessel as that. You Aerians may well look down on us poor earth-dwellers, for truly you have made yourselves as gods."

She spoke earnestly, and for once with absolute honesty, for the vision of the air-ship had awed her completely for the time being. Alan appeared for the moment as a god in her eyes, until she saw his lips curve in a very human smile, and heard his voice say, without the slightest assumption of superiority in its tone—

“No, not as gods; but only as men who have developed under the most favourable circumstances possible, and who have known how to make the best of their advantages.”

“God or man,” said Olga in her soul, while her lips were smiling acknowledgment of his modesty, “by this time to-morrow you shall be my slave, and I will be mistress both of you and your air-ship!”



[53]

CHAPTER VI.

DEED AND DREAM.



WHEN Olga went to her room that night in St. Petersburg, instead of going to bed, she unpacked from her valise a series of articles which seemed strange possessions for a young girl of not quite seventeen to travel with on her wedding journey.

First came a tiny spirit furnace from which, by the aid of an arrangement something like the modern blow-pipe, an intense heat could be obtained. Then a delicate pair of scales, a glass pestle and mortar, and a couple of glass liquid-measures, and lastly, half a dozen little phials filled with variously-coloured liquids, and as many little packets of powders, that looked like herbs ground very finely.

When she had placed these out on the table, after having carefully locked the door of her room, and seen that the windows were completely shuttered and curtained, she drew from the bosom of her dress a gold chain, at the end of which was fastened, together with the key of the secret recess in the wall of the turret chamber of the house at Hampstead, a small bag of silk, out of which she took a little roll of

parchment,—the slip which she had abstracted from Paul Romanoff's secret will after she had persuaded Serge, with her false kisses, to leave her alone for a while.

She seated herself at the table, drew the electric reading-lamp which stood on it close to her, laid the slip down in front of her, keeping it unrolled by means of a couple of little[54] weights, and studied it intently for several minutes. Then she made a series of calculations on another sheet of paper, and compared the result carefully with some figures on the slip.

She made them three times over before she was satisfied that they were absolutely correct, and then, with all the care and deliberation of a chemical analyst performing a delicate and important experiment, she proceeded to weigh out tiny quantities of the powders, and to mix them very carefully in the little glass mortar. This done, she emptied the mixture into a little platinum crucible, which she placed on the furnace, at the same time applying a gentle heat.

Then she turned her attention to the phials, measuring off quantities of their contents with the most scrupulous exactitude, mixing them two and two, and adding this mixture to a third, and so on, in a certain order which was evidently prearranged, as she constantly referred to the slip of parchment and her own calculations as she was mixing them.

By the time she finished this part of her work, she had obtained from the various coloured liquids one perfectly colourless and odourless, of a specific gravity apparently considerably in excess of that of water, although, at the same time, it was extremely mobile and refractive. She held it up to the light, looking at it with her eyelids somewhat screwed up, and with a cruel smile on her pretty lips.

"So far, so good," she said in a voice little higher than a whisper. "The lives of fifty strong men in that couple of ounces of harmless looking fluid! If anyone could see me just now, I fancy they would take me rather for a witch or a poisoner of the fifteenth century than for a girl of the twenty-first.

"Well, my friend Alan, your mysterious power may kill more quickly, but not more surely than this; and this, too, will take a man out of the world so easily that not even he himself will know that he is going,—not even when he sinks into the sleep from which he will awake on the other side of the shadows.

[55]

"So much for the bodies of our enemies, and now for their souls! I don't want to kill wholesale, at least, not just yet; and as for you, my Alan, you are far too splendid, too

glorious a man to be killed, to say nothing of your being so much more useful alive. No, I have a very much pleasanter fate in store for you.”

Just then a little cloud as of incense smoke began to rise from the crucible in which were the mixed powders, and a faint, pleasant perfume began to diffuse itself. She stopped her soliloquy, measured off exactly half of the liquid, and patiently poured it, drop by drop, into the crucible, at the same time gradually increasing the heat.

The vapour gradually disappeared, and the perfume died away. When she had poured in the last drop, she began slowly stirring the mixture with a glass rod. It gradually assumed the consistency of thick syrup, and after stirring it for three minutes by her watch, which lay on the table beside her, she extinguished the electric lamp and waited.

In a few seconds a pale, orange-coloured flame appeared hovering over the crucible. As its ghostly light fell upon her anxious features, she caught sight of herself in a mirror let into the wall on the opposite side of the table. She started back in her chair with an irrepressible shudder. For the first time in her life she saw herself as she really was.

The weird, unearthly light of the flame changed the clear, pale olive of her skin into a sallow red, and cast what looked like a mist of vapour tinged with blood across the dark lustre of her dusky eyes. It seemed as though the light that she had called forth from the darkness had melted the beautiful mask which hid her inner self from the eyes of men, and revealed her naked soul incarnate in the evil shape that should have belonged to it.

Suddenly the flame vanished, she turned on the switch of the lamp, placed a platinum cover over the crucible with a pair of light, curved tongs, and, with a quick half-turn, screwed it hermetically down. Then she turned the heat of the furnace on to the full, rose from her chair, and stretched herself, with[56] her linked hands above her head, till her lithe, girlish form was drawn up to its full height in front of the mirror.

She looked dreamily from under her half-closed lids at the perfect picture presented by the reflection, and then her tightly-closed lips melted into a smile, and she said softly to herself—

“Ah, that is a different sort of picture. I wonder what Alan would have thought if he could have seen *that* one? I don’t think I should have taken my trip in the air-ship to-morrow if he had done. Well, I have seen myself as I am—what four generations of inherited hate and longing for revenge have made me.

“In the light of that horrible flame I might have sat for the portrait of the lost soul of Lucrezia Borgia. Ah, well, if mine is lost, it shall be lost for something worth the exchange. ‘Better to rule in Hell than serve in Heaven,’ as old Milton said, and after all—who knows?

“Bah! that is enough of dreaming, when the time for doing is so near. I must get some sleep to-night, or my eyes will have lost some of their brightness by to-morrow.”

So saying, she busied herself putting away her phials, and powders, and apparatus. The half of the colourless liquid she had left she carefully decanted into a tiny flask, over the stopper of which she screwed a silver cap that had a little ring on the top, and this she hung on the chain round her neck. She replaced the slip of parchment in its silken bag, and carefully burnt the paper on which she had made her calculations.

By this time the bottom of the crucible was glowing red hot. She noted the time that had elapsed since she had screwed the cap down, waited five minutes longer, and then extinguished the furnace, undressed, and got into bed, and in half an hour was sleeping as quietly as a little child. She had set the chime of her repeating watch to sound at six, and hung the watch close above her head.

Calm as her sleep was at first, it was by no means dreamless, and her dreams were well fitted to be those of a guilty soul slumbering after a work of death.

[57]

She saw herself standing with Alan on the glass-domed deck of the air-ship, beneath the light of a clear, white moon sailing high in the heavens, and a host of brilliant stars glittering out of the deep-blue depths beyond it. Far below them lay an unbroken cloud-sea of dazzling whiteness, which stretched away into the infinite distance on all sides, until it seemed to blend with the moonlight and melt into the sky.

Then the scene changed, and the air-ship swept downwards in a wide, spiral curve, and plunged through the noiseless billows of the shadowy sea. As she did so, a fearful chorus of sounds rose up from the earth below.

The moonlight and starlight were gone, and in their place the lurid glare of burning cities and blazing forests cast a fearful radiance up through the great eddying waves of smoke, and reflected itself on the under surface of the clouds; now the air-ship swept hither and thither with bewildering rapidity, like the incarnation of some fearful spirit of destruction. Alan had vanished, and she was giving orders rapidly, and men were working the long, slender guns in a grim silence that contrasted weirdly with the horrible din that rose from the earth.

She saw neither smoke nor flame from the guns, nor heard any sound as they were discharged, but every time she raised her hand, the motion was followed within a few seconds by a shaking of the atmosphere, a dull roar from the earth, and the outburst of vast, dazzling masses of flame, before which the blaze of the conflagration paled.

She looked down with fierce exultation upon the scene of carnage and destruction; and as she gazed upon it, the fires died away, the roar of the explosions began to sound like echoes in the distance, and when the landscape of her dreamland took definite shape again, the air-ship was hovering over a vast, oval valley, walled in by mighty mountain masses, surmounted by towering peaks, on some of which crests of everlasting snow and ice shone undissolved in the rays of the tropical sun.



As she gazed upon it, the Fires died away. [Page 57.](#)

The valley itself was of such incomparable and fairy-like beauty, that it seemed to belong rather to the realm of[58] imagination than to the world of reality. A great lake lay in the centre, its emerald shores lined with groves of palms and orange-trees, and fringed with verdant islets spangled with many coloured flowers.

On the northern shore of the lake lay a splendid city of marble palaces, surrounded by shady gardens, and divided from each other by broad, straight streets, smooth as

ivory and spotless as snow, and lined with double rows of wide-spreading trees, which cast a pleasant shade along their sides.

In the midst of a vast square, in the centre of the city, rose an immense building of marble of perfect whiteness, surmounted by a great golden dome, which in turn was crowned by the silver shape of a woman with great spreading wings, which blazed and scintillated in the sunlight as though they had been fashioned of sheets of crystal, pure and translucent as diamonds.

All over the valley, villas and palaces of marble were scattered in cool ravines and on shaded, wooded slopes; and as far as her eye could reach, vast expanses of garden land, emerald pastures, and golden corn fields stretched away over hill and vale, until the most remote were met by the cool, dark forests which clothed the middle slopes of the all-encircling mountains, and themselves gave place higher up to dark, frowning precipices, vast walls of living rock, rising thousands of feet sheer upwards, and ending in the mighty peaks which stood like eternal sentinels guarding this enchanted realm.

If she had had her will, she would have gazed for ever upon this delightful scene; but the spirit of the dream was not to be controlled, and it faded from her sight just as the picture of death and desolation had done. As it faded away, Alan, who had now come back to her side, laid his hand upon her shoulder, and, looking at her with mournful eyes, said wearily—

“That was your first and last glimpse of heaven. Now comes the judgment!”

As he spoke, the air-ship soared upwards again, and was instantly enveloped in a cloud of impenetrable darkness. She[59] sped on and on in utter silence through the gloom, which was so dense that it seemed to cast the rays of the ship’s electric lights back upon her as she floated amidst it. Presently the deathlike silence was broken by a low, weird sound, that seemed like a wail of universal agony rising up from the earth beneath.

Then, far ahead and high up in the sky, appeared a faint light, which grew and brightened until the darkness melted away before it; and Olga saw the air-ship floating near enough to the earth for her to see that all its vegetation was withered and yellow, and the beds of its streams almost dry, with only little, thin rivulets trickling sluggishly along them.

Millions of people seemed wandering listlessly and aimlessly about the streets of the cities and the parched fields of the open country, ever and anon stretching their hands

as though in appeal up to the dark, moonless sky, in which the fearful shape of light and fiery mist was growing every moment brighter and vaster.

It grew and grew until it arched half the horizon with its tremendous curve; and then out of the midst of it came a huge, dazzling globe of fire, from the rim of which shot forth great flames of every colour, some of which seemed to descend to the surface of the earth like long fiery tongues that licked up the seething lakes in wreathing clouds of steam, which hissed and roared as they rose like ascending cataracts.

She looked down between them at the earth. The myriads of figures were there still, but now they lay prone and lifeless on the ground, as though the last agony of mankind were past. The light of the blazing globe grew more and more dazzling, and the heat more and more intense. The speed of the air-ship slackened visibly, although the wings and propellers were working at their utmost speed, and it was falling rapidly, as though there was no longer any air to support it.

She gasped for breath in the choking, burning atmosphere of the deck chamber, and then a swift, vivid wave of light seemed to sweep through her brain, and she woke with a choking gasp of terror, with the chimes of her watch ringing[60] sweetly in her ears, telling her that the vision had been but a dream of a night that had passed.

Wide awake in an instant, she got out of bed and turned on the electric lamp. As the room had been perfectly warmed all night by the electric conduction-stoves, which were then in almost universal use, she only stopped to throw a fur-lined cloak round her shoulders before she went to remove the cap of the crucible.

She peered anxiously into the vessel, and saw about two fluid ounces of a dark, glittering liquid, from the surface of which the light of the lamp was reflected as though from a mirror. With hands that trembled slightly, in spite of the great effort she made to keep her nerves in check, she poured the precious fluid into one of the glass measures that she had used the night before.

Seen through the glass, its colour was a deep, brilliant blue, and, like the white liquid first prepared, shone as though with an inherent, light-giving power of its own. She held it up admiringly to the light, and said to herself, with the same cruel smile that had curved her lips when she had contemplated the other fluid—

“How beautiful it is! It might be made of sapphires dissolved in some potent essence. In reality, it is an elixir capable of dissolving the souls of men. Ah, my proud Masters of the World, we shall soon see how much your boasted powers avail you against this and a woman’s wit and hatred!

“And you, my splendid Alan, before to-morrow night you shall be at my feet! Two drops of this, and that proud, strong soul of yours shall melt away like a snowflake under warm rain, and you shall be my slave and do my bidding, and never know that you are not as free as you are now.

“The days have gone by when men sought the Elixir of Life, but Paul Romanoff sought and found the Elixir of Death,—death of the body or of the soul, as the possessor of it shall will; and he is gone, and I, alone of all the children of men, possess it!”^[61]

[61]

She set the measure down on the table, and took out of her valise a similar little flask to the one which held the white liquid. In this she carefully poured the contents of the measure, screwed the cap on as before, and hung it with the other on the chain round her neck. Then, woman-like, she turned to the mirror, threw back her cloak a little, and gazed at the reflection of the two flasks, which shone like two great gems upon her white skin.

“There is such a necklace as woman never wore before, since woman first delighted in gems,—a necklace that all the jewels in the world could not buy. How pretty they look!”

So saying, she turned away from the mirror and carefully put away all traces of the work she had been engaged in, then she threw off her cloak and turned the lamp out and got into bed again, to wait until the attendant called her at eight o’clock as she had directed.

She did not go to sleep again, but lay with wide-open eyes looking at the darkness, and conjuring out of it visions of love and war, and the world-wide empire which she believed to be now almost within her grasp. In all these visions, two figures stood out prominently—those of Serge and Alan, her lover that had been and the lover that was to be,—if only the elixir did its work as its discoverer had said it would.

As such thoughts as these passed through her brain, a new and perhaps a nobler conception of her mission of revenge took possession of her. In the past, Natasha had won the love of the man whose genius had made possible, nay, irresistible, the triumph of that revolution which had subverted the throne of her ancestors, and sent the last of the Tsars of Russia to die like a felon in chains amidst the snows of Siberia.

What more magnificent vengeance could she, the last surviving daughter of the Romanoffs, win than the enslavement of the man descended not only from Natasha and^[62] Richard Arnold, but also from that Alan Tremayne whose name he bore, and

who, as first President of the Anglo-Saxon Federation, had ensured the victory of the Western races over the Eastern?

The empire of freedom and peace, which Richard Arnold had won for Natasha's sake, this son of the line of Natas should convert, at her bidding, into an empire such as she longed to rule over,—an empire in which men should be her slaves and women her handmaidens. For her sake the wave of Destiny should flow back again; she would be the Semiramis of a new despotism.

What was the freedom or the happiness of the mass of mankind to her? If she could raise herself above them, and put her foot upon their necks, why should she not do so? By force the leaders of the Terror had overthrown the despotisms of the Old World; why should not she employ the self-same force to seat herself, with the man she loved in spite of all her hereditary hatred, upon the throne of the world, and reign with him in that glorious land whose beauties had been revealed to her in the vision which surely had been something more than a dream?

Thus thinking and dreaming, and illumining the darkness with her own visions of glories to come, she lay in a kind of ecstasy, until a knock at the door warned her that the time for dreaming had passed and the hour for action had arrived.

A brief half-hour sufficed for her toilet, and she entered the room of the hotel, in which Serge was awaiting her, dressed to perfection in her plain, clinging robe of royal purple, and self-composed as though she had passed the night in the most innocent and dreamless of slumbers. She submitted to his greeting kiss with as good a grace as possible, and yet with an inward shrinking which almost amounted to loathing, born of the visions which were still floating in her mind.

She shuddered almost invisibly as he released her from his embrace, and then the bright blood rose to her cheeks, and a sudden light shone in her eyes, as the thought possessed her, that not many hours would pass before a far nobler lover would[63] take her in his arms, and would press sweeter kisses upon her lips,—the lips which had sworn fealty and devotion to the enemies of his race.

Serge, with the true egotism of the lover, took the blush to himself, and said, with a laugh of boyish frankness—

“Travelling and Russian air seem to agree with your Majesty. Evidently you have slept well your first night on Russian soil. I was half afraid that what happened yesterday, and your conversation with that golden-winged braggart from Aeria, would have sufficiently disturbed you to give you a more or less sleepless night, but you look as fresh and as lovely as though you had slept in the most perfect peace at home.”

The anger that these unthinking words awoke in her soul, brought back the bright flush to Olga's cheeks and the light into her eyes, and again Serge mistook the sign, as indeed he might well have done; and so he entirely mistook the meaning of her words when she replied, with a laugh, of the true significance of which he had not the remotest conception—

“On the contrary, how was it possible that I could have anything but the sweetest sleep and the most pleasant dreams, after such a delightful journey and the making of such pleasant acquaintances? Do you not think the Fates have favoured us beyond our wildest expectations, in thus bringing our enemies so unconsciously across our path at the very outset of our campaign against them?

“But really, these Aerians are delightful fellows. No, don't frown at me like that, because you know as well as I do, that in that chivalrous good-nature of theirs lies our best hope of success.”

As she spoke she went up to him, and laid her two hands upon his shoulder, and went on looking up into his eyes with a seductive softness in hers.

“I am afraid I made you terribly jealous yesterday; but really, Serge, you must remember that in diplomacy, and diplomacy alone, lies our only chance of advantage in the circumstances which the kindly Fates appear to have specially created for our benefit.

[64]

“The time for you to act will come later on, and when it comes, I know you will acquit yourself like the true Romanoff that you are; but for the present—well, you know these Aerians are men, and where diplomacy alone is in the question, it is better that a woman should deal with them. You will trust me for the present,—won't you, Serge?”

For all answer, he took her face between his hands, put her head back, and kissed her, saying as he released her—

“Yes, darling; I will trust you not only now, but for ever. You are wiser than I am in these things. Do as you please; I will obey.”

As he spoke, the door opened, and an attendant came in with two little cups of coffee on a silver salver. He placed it on the table, told them that breakfast would be ready for them in the morning-room in ten minutes, and retired. As they sipped their coffee, Olga said to Serge—

“Now, we shall meet our enemies at breakfast, and I want you to be a great deal more cordial and friendly than you were yesterday. Our own feelings concern ourselves alone, but in our outward conduct we owe something to the sacred cause which we both have at heart. You can imagine how great a sacrifice I am making in my relations with those whom I have been taught to hate from my cradle.

“I can see as well as you do, perhaps better, that this future ruler of Aeria admires me in his own boyish way. If I can bring myself to appear complaisant, surely it is not too much to ask you to look upon it with indifference, or even with interest,—a brotherly interest, you know; for you must remember that he knows me only as your sister.

“Now, I want you to ask them to come and have breakfast with us at our table, and to exert yourself to appear agreeable to them, even as I shall; and above all things, promise me that you will fall in with any suggestions that I may make as regards our trip in this wonderful air-ship which we are to make to-morrow.

“There is no time now to explain to you what I mean, but I swear to you, by the blood that flows in both our veins, that[65] if I can only carry through, without any let or hindrance, the plans that I have already formed—that before forty-eight hours have passed that air-ship shall no longer be under Alan Arnoldson’s command.”

He looked at her for a moment with almost incredulous admiration. She returned his inquiring glance with a steady, unwavering gaze, which made suspicion impossible. All his life he had grown up to look upon her as sharing with him the one hope that was left of restoring the ancient fortunes of their family. More than this they had been lovers ever since either of them knew the meaning of love.

How then could he have dreamt that behind so fair an appearance lay as dark and treacherous a design as the brain of an ambitious woman had ever conceived? Intoxicated by her beauty and the memory of his lifelong love, he took a couple of steps towards her, took her unresisting into his arms again, and said passionately—

“Give me another kiss, darling, and on your lips I will swear to trust you always and do your bidding even to the death.”

She returned his kiss with a passion so admirably simulated that his resolve was thrice strengthened by it, and then she released herself gently from his embrace, saying—

“Even so, unto the death if needs be,—as I shall serve our sacred cause to the end, cost what it may! Come, it is time that we went down to breakfast.”



[66]

CHAPTER VII.
THE SPELL OF CIRCE



BREAKFAST passed off very pleasantly, and by the time it was over Serge was upon much better terms with the two Aerians than he had been on the previous day. He had taken Olga's warning and appeal to heart, and he had done so all the more easily for the reason that he felt somewhat ashamed of himself for the ill-temper and bad manners of which he had been guilty, and which their two new acquaintances had repaid with such dignified courtesy and good humour.

His frankly-expressed apology was accepted with such perfect good nature, unmixed with even a suspicion of condescension, that he felt at ease with them at once, and even began to regret that his destiny made it impossible for him to be their friend instead of their enemy.

The discussion of their plans for the day occupied the rest of the meal. They had a whole twenty-four hours before them, for the *Ithuriel* would not be back from San Francisco, where she was going when she passed the train, until ten o'clock on the following morning, so it was arranged that they would begin the day with a sleigh drive—a luxury which not even Aeria could afford,—then the two Aerians were to see the sights of the city under the guidance of Olga and Serge, and perform the chief of the duties that brought them to St. Petersburg.

After luncheon they were to have a couple of hours on the[67] ice in the park, into which the Yusupoff Gardens of the nineteenth century had been expanded, after which they would see the ice palaces illuminated at dusk, then dine, and finish the day at the opera. When the air-ship arrived, a rapid flight was to be taken across Europe over the Alps and back to Moscow, across Italy, Greece, and the Black Sea, which would enable Alan and Alexis to deposit their guests with their Moscow friends soon after nightfall.

The sleigh drive took the form of a race, on the plain stretching towards Lake Ladoga, between the two troikas driven by Serge and Olga, who had so managed matters that she had Alan for a companion, and who, not a little to Serge's disgust, won it, after a desperate struggle, by a head. The race was a revelation to the two Aerians, and when Alan handed Olga out of the sleigh after they had trotted quietly back to the city, the interest which she had excited in him during the railway journey had already begun to deepen into a sentiment much more pleasing and dangerous.

The rest of the morning was devoted to driving about the city, and to paying a visit to the ancient fortress of Peter and Paul, which alone of all the fortress prisons of Russia had been preserved intact as a fitting monument of fallen despotism and a warning to all future generations. Once at least in his life every man in Aeria visited this fortress, as good Moslems visit Mecca, and this was the duty which Alan and Alexis were now performing.

In one of the horrible dungeons deep down in the foundations of the fortress, under the waters of the Neva, they were shown a massive gold plate riveted on to the rough, damp, stone wall. Its surface was kept brightly polished, and it looked strangely incongruous with the gloom and squalor of the cell. On it stood an inscription in platinum letters let into the gold:

"In this cell Israel di Murska, afterwards known as Natas, the Master of the Terror, was imprisoned in the year 1881, previous to his exile to Siberia by order of Alexander Romanoff the last of the Tyrants of Russia."

[68]

With feelings wide asunder as love and hate, or gratitude and revenge, the descendant of Natas and the daughter of the Romanoffs stood in front of this memorial plate, and read the simple and yet pregnant words. Alan and Alexis both bent their heads as if in reverence for a moment, but Olga and Serge gazed at it with heads erect and eyes glowing with the fires of anger, in a silence that was broken by Alan saying—

"Liberty surely never had a stranger temple than this, and yet this dungeon is to us what the Tomb of the Prophet is to the Moslems. I wonder what the Last of the Tsars would have thought if he could have foreseen even a little part of all that sprang from the tragedy that was begun in this dismal cell?"

"He would have killed him," said Olga, carried away for the moment by an irrepressible burst of passion, "and then there would have been no Natas, no Terror, and no Terrorist air-fleet, and Alexander Romanoff would have died master of the world instead of a chained felon in Siberia! Your ancestor, Richard Arnold, would have

starved in his garret, or killed himself in despair, as many other geniuses did before him, and”—

“And the world would have remained the slave-market of tyrants and the shambles of murderous men. Let us thank God that Natas lived to do his work!” said Alan in a tone of solemn reverence, wondering not a little at Olga’s strange outburst, and yet not having the remotest idea of its true cause.

Neither Olga nor Serge could reply to this speech. They would have bitten their tongues through rather than say “Amen” to it, and anything else they dare not have said. After a moment more of somewhat constrained silence, Olga turned towards the door and said—

“Come! Let us go, the air of this place poisons me!”

When they got on the ice after lunch, Olga was not a little astonished to find that, perfect as she and Serge were in skating, the two Aerians were little inferior to them, despite the fact that they had just left their tropical home for the first time.

“How is this?” said Olga to Alan, as, hand in hand, they went sweeping over the ice in long, easy curves. “I suppose you manufacture your ice for skating purposes in Aeria?”

[69]

“No,” he said. “Some of our mountains rise above the snow-line, and in their upper valleys they have little lakes, so, when we want a skating surface, we just pump the water up and flood them and let it freeze. Besides this—I don’t think there is any harm in my telling you that we have a sort of wheel-skate which runs quite as easily as steel does on ice.”

“Ah,” said Olga, possessed by a sudden thought. “Then I suppose that is why the streets of your splendid city are so broad, and white, and smooth?”

Quietly as the words were spoken, Alan’s hand tightened upon hers as he heard them with a grip that almost made her cry out with pain. It was some moments before he recovered from his astonishment sufficiently to ask her the meaning of her unexpected and amazing question. She greeted his question with a saucy smile and a mocking, upward glance, and said quietly—

“Simply because I have seen them!”

It was a bow drawn at a venture. She had suddenly determined to test the truth of her vision and hazard a description from it of the unknown land.

“You have seen them?” cried Alan, now more amazed than ever. “But, pardon me, even at the risk of contradicting you I must tell you that that is impossible. No one not a born Aerial has set eyes on Aeria for more than a hundred years.”

“So you think perhaps,” she said in the same quiet, half-mocking tone. “Well now, listen and tell me whether this description is entirely incorrect. If it is correct you need say nothing, if it is not you can tell me so.”

And then she began, while he listened in a silence of utter stupefaction, and described the valley and city of Aeria as she had seen them in her dream-vision. When she had finished he was silent for several moments, and then said in a voice that told her that she had really seen it as though with the eyes of flesh—

“What are you? A sorceress, or—No, you cannot be an Aerial girl in disguise, for none ever leaves the country till she is married.”

[70]

“Then as I cannot be the latter,” said Olga, “you must, I suppose, consider me the former. Now I shall take my revenge for your reticence in the train yesterday, and tell you no more. We are quits to that extent at least, and now we will go back to my brother, if you please.”

With this Alan was forced to be content. Indeed, he could not have pursued the subject without breaking his oath, and so a few minutes later it came about that Olga and Serge were skating together in an unfrequented part of the lake, and here Olga took an opportunity that she might not have again of telling him as much as she thought fit for him to know of her plans for capturing the air-ship on the following day.

“I needn’t tell you,” said she, “that this air-ship is worth everything to us, and that therefore we must be ready to go to any extremities to get possession of it. It is the first step to the command of the world, for you heard Alan say to-day that she is the swiftest vessel in the whole Aerial fleet.”

“But to do that we must first overcome the crew,” said Serge, looking anxiously about to see if there was anyone within earshot. “How are we going to do that—two of us against ten or a dozen, armed with powers we know nothing about?”

“We must find means to drug them—to poison them, if necessary, during to-morrow’s voyage,” came the reply, in a whisper that made his heart stand still for the moment with utter horror.

“Good God! is that really necessary? It seems a horrible thing to do, when they are trusting us and taking us as their guests,” he said in a low, trembling tone.

“Yes,” she replied, with a well simulated shudder; “it is horrible, I know, but it is necessary. Remember that we have solemnly sworn war to the knife against this people, and that, armed as they are, all open assault is impossible; therefore they must be struck in secret, or not at all.

“Now listen. I have brought with me a flask which my grandfather gave me a day or two before he died. It contains enough of a tasteless, powerful narcotic to send twenty people to sleep so that nothing will wake them for several hours. I[71] will give you half of this to-night and keep half myself, and one of us must find an opportunity to get the crew to take it in their wine, or whatever they may drink, for they are sure to have one or two meals while we are on board.

“To-night I will send instructions in cypher to the Lossenskis in Vorobiëvŭ to tell them that as many as possible of the Friends must be ready for action by eight to-morrow night, and must wait, if necessary, night after night till we come. If all goes well we shall select the new crew of the *Ithuriel* from them before we see two more sunrises. In fact, by the time we return from our voyage we must have absolute control of the vessel.

“Such an opportunity as this will never offer itself again, and I, for my part, am determined to risk anything, not excepting life itself, to take the best advantage of it. It would be madness to allow any scruples to stand in our way when the Empire of the Air is almost within our grasp.”

“And none shall, so far as I am concerned,” replied Serge in a low, steady voice that showed that his horror at the deed they contemplated had succumbed, at least for the moment, to the tremendous temptation offered by the prospect of success.

“Spoken like a true Romanoff!” said Olga, looking up at him with a sweet smile of approval. “As the deed is so shall the reward be. Now we must get back to our friends. We will find a means to get an hour together before to-night to arrange matters further, and we will have Alan and Alexis to supper with us after the opera, and then I will begin my share of the work. Once the air-ship is ours, we can hide her in one of the ravines of the Caucasus, hold a council of war in the villa at Vorobiëvŭ, and set about the work of the Revolution in regular fashion.”

The rest of the day was spent in accordance with the plans already agreed on. Olga and Serge had tea together in their private room before going to the theatre, and put the finishing touches to their plans for the momentous venture of the following day;

and Alan and Alexis, all unsuspecting, accepted[72] their invitation to supper after their return from the opera-house.

The seemingly innocent and pleasant little supper, which passed off so merrily in the private sitting-room occupied by Olga and Serge, had but one incident which calls for description here, and even that was unnoticed not only by the two guests, but by Serge himself.

Just before midnight, Olga proposed that, in accordance with the ancient custom of Russia, they should drink a glass of punch, brewed in the Russian style; and as she volunteered to brew it herself, it is needless to say that the invitation was at once accepted.

The apparatus stood upon a little table in one corner of the room. For a single minute her back was turned to the three sitting at the table in the centre; her share in the conversation was not interrupted for an instant, and no one saw a couple of drops of sparkling, blue liquid fall into each of three of the glasses from the little flask that she held concealed in the palm of her hand, and when she turned round with the little silver tray on which the glasses stood, the flask was resting at the bottom of her dress-pocket.

She handed a glass to each of them, and then took her own up from the side-table where she had left it. She went to her place, and, holding her glass up, said simply—
“Here’s to that which each of us has nearest at heart!” and drank.

All followed suit, and as the clock chimed twelve a few minutes later, the two Aerians took their leave, and left Olga and Serge alone.

“You said you would begin your share of the work to-night,” said he, as soon as they were alone. “Have you done so?”

“If you do your work to-morrow as successfully as I have done mine to-night,” replied Olga, looking steadily into his eyes as she spoke, “the Empire of the Air will no longer be theirs.”

Serge returned her glance in silence. He wanted to speak, but some superior power seemed to have laid a spell upon his will, and as long as Olga’s burning eyes were fixed on his, his[73] tongue was paralysed, nay, more than this, his mind even refused to shape the sentences that he would have liked to speak. Olga held him mute before her for several minutes, and then she said quietly, still keeping her eyes fixed on his—

“Now speak, and tell me what you would do if I told you that I preferred Alan as a lover to you, and that I would rather a thousand times be his slave and plaything than your wife.”

“I should say that you are the mistress of my destiny, that I have no law but your will, and that it is for you to give me joy or pain, as seems good to you.”

Serge spoke the unnatural words in a calm, passionless tone, rather as though he were speaking in a sort of hypnotic trance than in full command of his senses. A strange, subtle influence had been stealing through his veins and over his nerves ever since he had drunk the liquor which Olga had prepared.

He seemed perfectly incapable of resisting any suggestion that might have been made to him. His will was paralysed, but even the consciousness of this fact was fading from his mind. All his passions were absolutely in abeyance. Even his love for Olga failed to inspire him with any jealous resentment of words which half an hour before would have goaded him to frenzy. He heard them as though they concerned someone else.

The ruin of his life's hopes, which they implied so distinctly, had no meaning for him; so far as his volition was concerned he was an automaton, ready to obey without question the dictates of her imperious will.

“That will do,” said Olga, in the tone of a mistress addressing a servant. “Now go to bed and sleep well, and remember the work that lies before you to-morrow.”

“I will,” said Serge, and without another word, without attempting to take his customary good-night kiss, he walked out of the room, leaving her to the enjoyment of her victory and the contemplation of triumphs that now seemed almost certain to her.

Punctual to its appointed time, the air-ship appeared in mid-air over the city a few minutes before ten the next[74] morning. It sank slowly and gracefully to within a hundred feet of the ground over the garden of the hotel in which the two Aerians and their new friends were staying.

Signals were rapidly exchanged as before between Alan and one of the crew standing on the afterpart of the deck. Then it sank down on to one of the snow-covered lawns of the garden, a door opened in the glass covering of the deck, a short, light, folding ladder with hand-rails dropped out of it to the ground, and Alan, springing up three or four of the steps, held out his hand to Olga, saying—

“Come along! we shall have a crowd round us in another minute.”

This was true, for the appearance of the air-ship had already attracted hundreds of people in the streets, and many of them had already made their way into the gardens of the hotel in order to get a closer view of her.

Olga, feeling not a little like a queen ascending a throne, ran lightly up the steps, followed by Serge and Alexis. The moment they got on to the deck the ladder was drawn up, the glass door slid noiselessly to, and Alan at once presented them to his friends on deck.

While the introductions were taking place, the wings of the air-ship began to vibrate and undulate with a wavy motion from forward aft, at first slowly, and then more and more swiftly, her propeller whirled round, and the wonderful craft rose without a jar or a tremor from the earth. Then the propellers began to revolve faster and faster, and she shot forward and upward over the trees amid the admiring murmurs of the crowds in the streets about the hotel. But little did those light-hearted sightseers dream, any more than did the captain and crew of the *Ithuriel*, that this aerial pleasure-cruise was destined to mark the beginning of a tragedy that would involve the whole of civilised humanity in a catastrophe so colossal that the like of it had never been seen or even dreamt of on earth before. From the wit of a woman and the weakness of a man were now to be evolved the elements of destruction that ere long should lay the world in ruins.

[75]

CHAPTER VIII.

THE NEW TERROR.



FIVE years had passed since the *Ithuriel* had vanished like a cloud from the sky, leaving, so far as the air-ship itself was concerned, no more trace than if she had soared into space beyond the sphere of the earth's attraction and departed to another planet.

All the rest of the winter of 2030-1, tidings had been sought most anxiously, but in vain, by the kindred and friends of those who had formed her crew during the ill-fated voyage on which she had disappeared into the unknown. The earth had been

ransacked east and west, north and south, by the aerial fleet in search of the missing *Ithuriel*, but without result.

She had been traced to St. Petersburg and Vorobiëvŏ, but there, like the phantom craft of the Flying Dutchman, she had melted into thin air so far as any result of the search could show. But when the snows thawed on the mountains of Norway, and the bodies of eight Aerians who had formed her crew on her last fatal voyage were discovered by a couple of foresters in a melting snowdrift on the very spot on which Vladimir Romanoff had been killed with his companions by order of the Supreme Council, a thrill both of horror and excitement ran through the whole civilised world.

That their death was intimately connected with the disappearance of the air-ship was instantly plain to everyone, and the only inference which could be drawn from such a[76] conclusion was that at last some power, silent, mysterious, and intangible, had come into existence prepared to dispute the empire of the world with the Aerians, and, more than this, had already struck them a deadly blow which it was utterly beyond their power to return.

The effects of this discovery were exactly what Olga had anticipated. From the first time since their ancestors had conquered the earth and made war impossible, the supreme authority of the Aerians was called into question. It was quite beyond their power to conceal the fact that their flagship had either deserted or been captured, incredible as either alternative seemed. The Central Council therefore wisely accepted the situation, and immediately after the discovery of the bodies the President published a full account of her last voyage, as far as was known, in the columns of *The European Review*, the leading newspaper of the day in the Old World.

The only clue to the fate of the air-ship seemed to lie in the fact that at St. Petersburg a youth and young girl with whom Alan and Alexis had made friends on their journey from London had gone on board the *Ithuriel* for a trip to the clouds. But this led to nothing. Who was to recognise the daughter of the Tsar and the last male scion of the House of Romanoff in Olga and Serge Ivanitch, who had never been known as anything but the orphan grandchildren of Paul Ivanitch, the sculptor.

More than this, even to entertain for a moment the supposition that this boy and girl—for they were known to be little more—could by any possible means have overcome the ten Aerians, armed as they were with their terrible death-power, and then have vanished into space with the air-ship would have been to shatter the supremacy of the Aerians at a blow.

Even as it was, the wildest and most dangerous rumours began to fly from lip to lip and nation to nation all round the world, and for the first time since the days of the Terror the “Earth Folk” began to think of the Aerians rather as men[77] like themselves than as the superior race which they had hitherto regarded them.

The President of Aeria at once issued a proclamation asking, in the interests of peace and public security, for the assistance of all the civilised peoples of the earth in his efforts to discover the lost air-ship, and also conditionally declaring a war of extermination on any Power or nation which either concealed the whereabouts of the *Ithuriel* or gave any assistance to those who might be in possession of her. This proclamation was published simultaneously in all the newspapers of the world, and produced a most profound sensation wherever it was read.

The terrible magic of the ominous word “war” roused at once the deathless spirit of combativeness that had lain dormant for all these years. It was impossible not to recognise the fact that this mysterious power, which had come unseen into existence and had snatched the finest vessel in the Aerial navy from the possession of the Council with such daring and skill that not a trace of her was to be found, could have but one object in view, and that was to dispute the Empire of the Air with the descendants of the Terrorists.

This could mean nothing else than the outbreak, sooner or later, of a strife that would be a veritable battle of the gods, a struggle which would shake the world and convulse human society throughout its whole extent. The general sense of peace and security in which men had lived for four generations was shattered at a stroke by the universal apprehension of the blow that all men felt to be inevitable, but which would be struck no man knew when or how.

A year passed, and nothing happened. The world went on its way in peace, the Aerial patrols circled the earth with a moving girdle of aerial cruisers, ready to give instantaneous warning of the first reappearance of the lost *Ithuriel*; but nothing was discovered. If she still existed, she was so skilfully concealed as to be practically beyond the reach of human search.

Then without the slightest warning, while Anglo-Saxondom[78] was in the midst of the hundred and thirtieth celebration of the Festival of Deliverance, the civilised world was started out of the sense of security into which it had once more begun to fall by the publication, in *The European Review*, of the following piece of intelligence:—

A MYSTERY OF THE SEA.

Disappearance of Three Transports.

It is our duty to chronicle the astounding and disquieting fact that the three transports, *Massilia*, *Ceres*, and *Astræa*, belonging respectively to the Eastern, Southern, and Western Services, have disappeared.

The first left New York for Southampton four days ago, and should have arrived yesterday. The Central Atlantic signalling station reported her "All well" at midday on Tuesday, and this is the last news that has been heard of her. The second was reported from Cape Verd Station on her voyage from Cape Town to Marseilles, and there all trace of her is lost, as she never reached the Canary Station. The third was last heard of from Station No. 2 in the Indian Ocean, which is situated at the intersection of the 80th meridian of east longitude with the 20th parallel of south latitude; she was on her way from Melbourne to Alexandria, and should have touched at Aden two days ago.

The disappearance of these three magnificent vessels, filled as they were with passengers and loaded with cargoes of enormous value both in money and material, can only be described as a calamity of world-wide importance. Unhappily, too, the mystery which surrounds their fate invests it with a sinister aspect which it is impossible to ignore.

That their loss is the result of accident or shipwreck it is almost impossible to believe. They represented the latest triumphs of modern shipbuilding. All were over forty thousand tons in measurement, and had engines capable of driving them at a speed of fifty nautical miles an hour through the water.

For fifty years no ocean transport has suffered shipwreck or even serious injury, so completely has modern engineering skill triumphed over the now conquered elements. Added to this, no storms of even ordinary violence have occurred along their routes. After passing the stations at which they were last reported, they vanished, and that is all that is known about them.

The President of Aeria has desired us to state that he has ordered his submarine squadrons stationed at Zanzibar, Ascension, and Fayal, to explore the ocean beds along the routes pursued by the transports. Until we receive news of the result of their investigation it will be well to refrain from further comment on this mysterious misfortune which has suddenly and unexpectedly fallen upon the world, and in doing so we shall only express the fervent desire of all civilised men and women when we express the hope that this calamity, grievous as it is, may not be the precursor of even greater misfortunes to come.

It would be almost impossible for us of the present day to form any adequate estimate of the thrill of horror and consternation which this brief and temperately-worded narration[79] of the mysterious loss of the three transports sent through the world of the twenty-first century. Not only was it the first event of the kind that had occurred within the memory of living men, but, saving the loss of the *Ithuriel*, it was the first dark cloud that had appeared in the clear heaven of peace and prosperity for more than a hundred and twenty years.

But terrible as was the state of excitement and anxiety into which it threw the nations of the world, it gave place to a still deeper horror and bewilderment when day after day passed and no tidings were received of the three submarine squadrons, consisting of three vessels each, which had been sent to inquire into the fate of the transports. They dived beneath the waves of the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic, and that was the last that was ever seen of them.

Month after month went by, every week bringing news of some fresh calamity at sea—of the disappearance of transport after transport along the great routes of ocean travel, of squadron after squadron of submarine cruisers which plunged into the abysses of the sea to discover and attack the mysterious enemy of mankind that lay hidden in the depths, and which never reappeared on the surface. Whether they were captured or destroyed it was impossible to say, simply because no member of their crews ever returned to tell the tale.

Whatever doubt there had been as to the existence or hostile nature of this ocean terror that was paralysing the trade of the world was speedily set at rest by a discovery made in the spring of the year 2032 by a party of divers who descended to repair a fault in one of the Atlantic cables about two hundred miles west of Ireland.

There, lying in the Atlantic ooze, they found the shattered fragments of the *Sirius*, a transport which had disappeared about a month before. The great hull of the splendid vessel had been torn asunder by some explosive of tremendous power, and, more than this, her hold had been rifled of all its treasure and the most valuable portions of its cargo. After this there no longer remained any doubt that the depths of[80] the ocean were the hunting-ground of some foe of society, one at least of whose objects was plunder.

The President and Council of Aeria found themselves at last confronted and baffled by an enemy who could neither be seen nor reached in his hiding-place, wherever it might be, beneath the surface of the waters. Thousands of lives had been sacrificed, and treasure in millions had been lost by the end of the first year of what men had now come to call the New Terror.

New fleets of submarine cruisers were built and held in readiness in all the great ports of the world, and these scoured the ocean depths in all directions with no further result than the swift and silent annihilation of vessel after vessel by some power which struck irresistibly out of the darkness and then vanished the moment that the blow had been delivered.

As yet, however, no enemy appeared on land or in the air, nor were any tidings heard of the lost *Ithuriel*, or her captain and lieutenant. The Aerians had replaced her with ten almost identical vessels and had raised the strength of their navy to two hundred and fifty vessels, one hundred of which were kept in readiness in Aeria, while the other hundred and fifty were distributed in small squadrons at twenty-four stations, half of which were in the Western hemisphere and half in the Eastern.

The submarine warfare had now practically ceased. Nearly two hundred vessels belonging to Aeria, Britain, and America, had been captured or destroyed by an enemy which at the period at which this portion of the narrative opens was as supreme throughout the realm of the waters as the Aerians were in the air. To the menace of the air-ships this hidden foe replied by severing all the oceanic cables and paralysing the communication of the world save overland and through the air.

Thus, at the end of six years after the capture of the *Ithuriel* by Olga Romanoff more than half the work of those who had brought peace on earth after the Armageddon of 1904 had been undone. All over the world, not even excepting in Aeria, men lived in a state of constant anxiety and apprehension,[81] not knowing where or how their invisible enemy would strike them next.

The Masters of the World were supreme no longer, for a new power had arisen which, within the limits of the seas, had proved itself stronger than they were.

Communication between continent and continent had almost ceased, save where the Aerial air-ships were employed. In six short years the peace of the world had been destroyed and the stability of society shaken.

Among the nations of Anglo-Saxondom the change had manifested itself by a swift decadence into the worst forms of unbridled democracy. Men's minds were unhinged, and the most extravagant opinions found acceptance.

Parliaments had already been made annual and were fast sinking into machines for registering the ever-changing opinions of rival factions and their leaders. Sovereigns and presidents were little better than popular puppets existing on sufferance. In short, all that Paul Romanoff had prophesied was coming to pass more rapidly than even he had expected so far as the area of the Anglo-Saxon Federation was concerned.

In the Moslem Empire affairs were different, but no less threatening. The Sultan Khalid the Magnificent, as he was justly styled by his admirers, saw clearly that the time must come when this mysterious enemy would emerge from the waters and attempt the conquest of the land, and for three years past he had been manufacturing weapons and forming armies against the day of battle which he considered inevitable, and which he longed for rather than dreaded.

Thus, while Anglo-Saxondom was lapsing into the anarchy of unrestrained democracy, the Moslem monarch was preparing to take advantage of the issue of events which, skilfully turned to account, might one day make him master of the world.

Such was the condition of affairs throughout the world on the 1st of May 2036, and then the long-expected came in strange and terrible shape. At midnight a blaze of light was seen far up in the sky over the city of Aeria. A moment later^[82] something that must have been a small block of metal fell from a tremendous height in the square in the centre of the city, and was shivered to fragments by the force of its fall.

On the splintered pavement where it fell was found a little roll of parchment addressed to the President. It was taken to him, and he opened it and read these words:—

To Alan Arnold, President of Aeria.

If you want your son Alan and his friend Alexis, go and look for them on an island which you will find near the intersection of the 40th parallel of south latitude and the 120th meridian of west longitude in the South Pacific. They have served my turn, and I have done with them. Perhaps they will be able to tell you how I have conquered the Empire of the Sea. Before long I shall have wrested the Empire of the Air from you as well.

Olga Romanoff.



[83]

CHAPTER IX.

THE FLIGHT OF THE “REVENGE.”



ASTOUNDING, almost stupefying, as were the tidings conveyed by this letter, which had dropped like a veritable bolt from the blue, the challenge contained in the last sentence and the ominous name with which it was signed were matters of infinitely greater and more instant importance.

Alan Arnold was the responsible President of Aeria first and a father afterwards. He lost not a moment in speculating upon the strange fate of his son and first-born. The safety not only of Aeria, but of the world, demanded his first attention, and he gave it.

Crushing the missive in his hand he took two swift strides to a telephone in the wall of the room in which he had received the message from the skies and delivered several rapid orders through it. If they had been the words of a demi-god instead of those of a man their effects could scarcely have been more instantaneous or marvellous.

On a hundred mountain-peaks all round the great valley of Aeria enormous lights blazed out simultaneously, flinging long streams of radiance, dazzling and intense, for miles into the sky towards all points of the compass, and at the same moment fifty air-ships soared up from their stations all round the mountains, flashing their search-lights ahead and astern in all directions.



Flinging long Streams of Radiance for Miles into the Sky. [Page 83.](#)

[84]

It was a scene of unearthly wonder and magnificence, a scene such as could only have been made possible by the triumphant genius of a race of men, heirs of all the best that earth could give them, who had turned the favour of circumstance to the utmost advantage.

Three minutes sufficed for the aerial cruisers to clear the mountains, and as they did so the wide-sweeping rays of fifty search-lights, assisted by the blazing orbs which crowned every mountain-peak, illuminated the darkness for many miles outside the valley. In the midst of the sea of light thus projected through the semi-darkness of the starlit heavens the flying shape of an air-ship was detected speeding away to the south-eastward.

Instantly the prows of the whole squadron were turned towards her, and the first aerial race in the history of the world began. The pursuing air-ships spread themselves out in a huge semicircle, at the extremities of which were the two swiftest vessels in the fleet, almost exact counterparts of the lost *Ithuriel*. One of these bore the same name as the stolen flag-ship, and the other had been named the *Ariel*, after the first vessel

built by Richard Arnold, the conqueror of the air, a hundred and thirty-two years before.

These two vessels carried ten guns each, and were capable of a maximum speed of five hundred miles an hour, the highest velocity that it had so far been found possible to attain. The others were somewhat smaller craft, mounting eight guns each, and capable of a speed of about four hundred miles an hour. The chase, either because she could not travel faster or for some hidden reason, allowed the pursuing squadron to gain upon her until she was only some five miles ahead of its two foremost vessels, which were travelling at the highest speed attainable by the whole flotilla.

She showed no lights, and so in order to keep her in view it was necessary for her pursuers to keep their search-lights constantly sweeping the skies ahead of them, lest they should lose sight of her in the semi-darkness.

This placed the Aerial fleet at a serious disadvantage, which[85] very soon became apparent, for before the pursuit had lasted an hour the chase opened fire with her stern guns and shell after shell charged with some terrific explosive began bursting along the line of the pursuing squadron, producing fearful concussions in the atmosphere, and causing the pursuers to rock and toss in the shaken air like ships on a stormy sea.

The *Ithuriel* and the *Ariel*, at the two extremities of the semicircle, replied with a rapid converging fire from their bow guns in the hope of reaching the now invisible chase. All the projectiles were, of course, time-shells, but the speed at which the vessels were travelling not only made the aim hopeless, but caused such an in-rush of air into the muzzles of the guns that the projectiles, checked in their course through the barrels, flew wild and exploded at random, often in dangerous proximity to the vessels themselves.

Hence, after about a dozen shots had been fired, the commanders of the two vessels found themselves compelled to cease firing, and to trust to speed alone to overtake the enemy. On the other hand, this disadvantage to them was all in favour of the chase, which was able to work her two stern guns without the slightest impediment. Before long she got the range of her pursuers, and at last a shell burst fairly under one of the smaller vessels. A brilliant flash of light, blue as the lightning-bolt, illuminated her for an instant, and in that instant her companions saw her stop and shiver like a stricken bird in mid-air, and then plunge downwards like a stone to the earth.

Olga Romanoff, standing on the deck of what had once been the *Ithuriel*, flag-ship of the Aerial fleet, and now renamed the *Revenge*, saw this catastrophe, as the others

had done, through her night-glasses. She lowered them from her eyes, and said to a dark-eyed, black-haired young fellow, who was commanding the gun that had done the execution—

“Bravo, Boris Lossenski! Did you sight that gun?”

Boris drew himself up and saluted, saying—

“Yes, Majesty, I did.”

“Then for that you shall be a Prince henceforth, and if you[86] can bring another down you shall command an air-ship of your own when this fight is over.”

Boris saluted again, and ordered the gun to be reloaded. Before it could be discharged a shell from the port gun, which had been fired as Olga spoke, struck another of the Aerial vessels square on the fore-quarter. The flash of the exploding projectile was almost instantaneously followed by the outburst of a vast dazzling mass of flame which illumined for the instant the whole scene of the aerial battle.

The air-ship with all its cargo of explosives blew up like one huge shell, and the frightful concussion of the atmosphere induced by the explosion hurled the two vessels that were close on either side of her like feathers into space, turning them completely over and flinging them to the earth six thousand feet below. A few moments later they struck the ground simultaneously, two great spouts of flame shot up from the spots where they struck, and when the darkness closed over them again four of the pursuing squadron had been annihilated.

“Better still, Levin Ostroff!” cried Olga, as she saw the awful effects of this last shot.

“For that you too shall be a Prince of the Empire and command an air-ship on our next expedition. Now, Boris, let us see if you can beat that!”

“Yes, Majesty,” said Boris again, knitting his brows and clenching his teeth in anger at his rival’s superior success. He glanced along the line of the pursuers and saw four of the Aerial squadron flying close together. He brought the gun to bear upon the two inner ones, took careful aim, and despatched the projectile on its errand of destruction. The moment he had released it he said to the two men who were working under him—

“Load again, quickly!”

The command was instantly obeyed, and scarcely had the explosion of the first blazed out than a second shell was sent after it. The very firmament seemed split in twain by

the frightful results of the two well-aimed shots, each of which[87] had found its mark on the two inner vessels with fatal accuracy.

Great sheets of flame leapt out in all directions from the focus of the explosion, and in the midst of their dazzling radiance those on board the *Revenge* saw the two outside air-ships of the four roll over and dive head foremost into the dark abyss below them. They struck the earth as the others had done, and vanished into annihilation in the midst of the momentary mist of fire.

This last catastrophe made it plain to the commanders of the *Ithuriel* and the *Ariel* that to continue the chase under such conditions meant the destruction in detail of all the smaller ships of the squadron. Those on board the *Revenge* saw signals rapidly flash from one end of the line, and instantaneously answered from the other end.

“Ah!” said Olga. “My Lords of the Air seem to have had enough of it for the present. Look, the small fry are falling to the rear; our reception has been a little too hot for them. I wonder what they are going to do now. Cease firing, and let us watch them. You two gunners have done gloriously and earned quite enough laurels for your first battle.”

It soon became evident that the Aerians had decided to send their smaller craft back. From the speed of the *Revenge*, and the terrible accuracy and destructiveness of her guns, the commanders of the squadron were now convinced that she was either the lost *Ithuriel*, or some vessel even superior to her, built upon the same plan.

This being so, to have continued the pursuit under such conditions with the smaller craft would simply have been to court destruction for them in detail. It was impossible for them to use their guns effectively at the speed at which they were travelling, while, as had been so terribly proved, the chase could use hers with perfect ease.

The flying fight could thus only result under present conditions in the ignominious defeat of the squadron by the single vessel as long as she was able to keep ahead. The only hope of success lay, therefore, in a trial of speed and[88] manœuvring skill between her and the *Ithuriel* and *Ariel*, so orders were flashed to the smaller vessels to return to Aeria with the mournful tidings of the destruction of eight of their number.

As they vanished into the darkness behind, Olga divined instantly the tactics that were to be adopted. She saw the converging search-lights of the two remaining air-ships begin to glow brighter and brighter in the rear of the *Revenge*, proving that they had increased their speed.

“So, it is going to be a race, is it!” she said, half to herself. “Well, we will see if we can lead them into the trap. How fast are we going, Boris?”

He went to the engine-room, and returned saying—

“Four hundred miles an hour, Majesty.”

“Make it five,” replied Olga.

He saluted, and transmitted the order to the engineer. The lights of the pursuers immediately began to recede again, then they seemed to stop.

“That will do!” said Olga. “They have reached the limit of their speed. Keep to the southward, and see that they come no nearer.”

The three air-ships were, in fact, now travelling at their utmost speed. If anything, the advantage was slightly in favour of the *Revenge*, thanks to the high efficiency of the motive-power which had been applied to her in accordance with the directions left by Olga’s father, and transmitted in the will of Paul Romanoff.

So all the rest of the night and on into the next day pursuers and pursued sped on with fearful velocity through the air. They passed over Africa and out above the ocean, and still on and on they swept until the Southern Sea was crossed and the mighty ice-barrier that fences in the South Pole gleamed out white upon the horizon.

This was passed, and still they rushed on over the dreary wastes of Antarctica. The pole was crossed along the 40th meridian, and then they swept northward until the smoke-cloud that crowned the crest of Mount Erebus rose above the snow-clouds[89] that hid the earth. The *Revenge* headed straight towards this and swept over it, followed at a distance of about ten miles by her pursuers.

Then with a mighty upward sweep she leapt two thousand feet higher still, came to equilibrium, and discharged a shell downwards on to the ice. The explosion was answered by the rising of a flotilla of air-ships, which seemed to have sprung out of the bowels of the earth.

Thirty vessels as large as herself rose simultaneously through the clouds and spread themselves out in a wide circle round the two Aerial vessels, which thus found themselves surrounded by an overwhelming force and dominated by the *Revenge* floating far above them with her ten guns pointed down upon them.

To an observer so placed as to be able to command a view of the situation it would have seemed that nothing short of the surrender or annihilation of the *Ithuriel* and the *Ariel* could have been the outcome of it.

So evidently thought Olga and those in command of the Russian aerial fleet, for, although for one brief instant the two Aerial vessels lay at their mercy, they failed to take advantage of it, and in losing this one precious moment they reckoned without the superior skill and perfect control of their air-ships possessed by those of whom they thought to make an easy prey.

What really happened took place with such stupefying suddenness that they were taken completely off their guard. The *Ithuriel* and the *Ariel* lay end on to each other in the midst of the circle of their enemies. Each mounted ten guns, and of these every one was available. The crews of both vessels, trained by constant practice to the highest point of efficiency, knew exactly what to do without so much as an order being given.

Automatically the twenty guns were trained in the twinkling of an eye, each on a Russian vessel, and discharged simultaneously. A moment later the two vessels sank like stones through the thick clouds below them; and while the heavens[90] above were shaken with the combined explosions of the twenty projectiles, each of which had found its mark with unerring accuracy, they had regained their equilibrium a thousand feet from the surface of the ice, and darted away full speed northward.

To such a fearful pitch of efficiency had their guns and projectiles been brought that, while the aim was unerring if once a fair sight was obtained, nothing shaped by human hands could withstand the impact of their shells without destruction. Twenty out of the thirty vessels of the Russian fleet collapsed, and, as it were, shrivelled up under the frightful energy of the Aerial projectiles. Twenty masses of flame blazed out over the grey surface of the cloud-sea, and in another moment the fragments of the vessels it had taken so many months of labour and such wondrous skill to construct were lying scattered far and wide over the snow and ice of the Antarctic desert.

The awful suddenness with which this destruction had been accomplished deprived Olga and her subordinates of all power of thought for the moment. They heard the roar of the explosions, and saw a mist of flame burst out round them as though all the fires of Mount Erebus had broken loose at once, and then came the silence of speechless horror and stupefaction. It was more like the work of omnipotent fiends than of men. The bolts of heaven themselves could have done nothing like it.

Then the moment of the shock passed, and those who survived remembered what they ought never to have forgotten—that, armed as they were with weapons which under favourable circumstances were absolutely irresistible, the first shot meant victory for those who fired it, and destruction for their enemies. Odds of mere

numbers went for nothing, for each air-ship was equal to ten others provided she could send her ten projectiles home first, and this is just what had happened.

All this had passed in a twentieth of the time that it has taken to describe it, and by the time Olga and her subordinates grasped the extent of the calamity that had overtaken[91] them the two Aerial vessels, darting through the air at five hundred miles an hour, had swept far out of range of their guns, and were moreover so hidden by the cloud-sea, that they had no idea which course they had taken.

Olga stamped her foot upon the deck, and, in a paroxysm of unrestrained passion, literally screamed with rage as she ordered the *Revenge* to sink below the clouds. Less than two minutes sufficed for the remains of the fleet, that had been thirty-one strong five minutes before and now only numbered eleven vessels, to sink through the clouds.

A rapid glance round showed them the *Ithuriel* and the *Ariel*, tiny specks far out over the waste of snow and ice, speeding away to the northward. To give chase was out of the question, for scarcely had they sighted them than they vanished as completely as though they had melted into the atmosphere; and so Olga signalled for her remaining vessels to proceed to their secret haven in the snowy solitudes of the South, while the *Ithuriel* and her consort sped onward on their homeward voyage, to carry the news of the terrible vengeance that they had taken for the destruction of the eight air-ships which had been annihilated by the guns of the *Revenge*.

Twenty hours sufficed for the two Aerial vessels to pass over a quarter of the earth's circumference, and carry their tidings of vengeance and victory to Aeria, and shortly after noon on the day but one after Olga had dropped her challenge from the skies, a meeting of the Ruling Council was held at the President's house in order to consider the startling and pregnant events which had taken place, and to determine the plan of the war which, after a hundred and thirty years of unquestioned supremacy, they were now called upon to wage not only for the mastery of the world, but for the very lives and liberties of the citizens of Aeria.

It had of course been impossible to conceal from the inhabitants of the valley the gravity of the startling events which had taken place in such rapid succession, nor did the President and Council consider any such concealment desirable. There were no demagogues and no politics in Aeria, and[92] therefore there was no need for any State secrets save those which contained the essentials of aerial navigation.

There was also no fear of panic in a community which contained no ignorant or criminal classes, and so, while the Council was sitting, the strange tidings were

promulgated throughout the length and breadth of the valley. Marvellous and disquieting as they were they yet gave rise to very few external signs of excitement. They were gravely, earnestly, and even anxiously discussed, for they brought with them a prophecy of calamities to come, the probability of whose realisation was too plain to be ignored.

But ever since the days of the Terror each generation of Aerians had been carefully trained to recognise the fact that the progress of science and the restlessness of human invention in the world outside their borders must, sooner or later, produce some challenge to their supremacy and some attempt to dispute with them the Empire of the Air. Now, after four generations—in spite of all the elaborate precautions that had been taken, the stringent laws that had been enacted and more than once mercilessly enforced—the crisis had come.

It was now impossible to doubt that by some means, which so far seemed almost superhuman, the flag-ship of their fleet had been stolen, and the son of the President kidnapped with his greatest friend. More than this, the news brought back by the *Ithuriel* and the *Ariel* proved beyond all doubt that means had been found to build a large fleet of aerial warships without even arousing the suspicions of the Council. And, worst and most sinister sign of all, there was also the fact, proved by Olga's letter to the President, that the moving spirit in this defiant revolt against the supremacy of Aeria was one who bore the ill-omened and still hated name of Romanoff.

As has been said, there was no panic that night in Aeria, but still many a man and woman anxiously asked, either aloud or in his or her own soul, whether in the mysterious revolution of human affairs it might not be about to come to pass that she who had wrought this apparent miracle might not yet be able to avenge the terrible fate of her ancestor, the Last of[93] the Tsars. Then, with this thought came a universal revulsion of horror at the prospect of such a crime against humanity and a deep resolve to exact the penalty for it to the uttermost.

If war was to be brought once more upon the earth, those who brought it would find Aeria worthy of its splendid traditions and ready, if necessary, to reconquer the earth as the founders of its empire had done in the Armageddon of 1904. Fierce as that mighty struggle had been, its horrors would pale before those of a conflict in which conquest would mean extermination, for if Aeria was forced once more to draw the sword it would not be sheathed until there was peace again on earth, even if that peace were to be but the silence of universal desolation.



[94]

CHAPTER X.
STRANGE TIDINGS TO AERIA.



THE sitting of the Council lasted until nightfall, and just as the western mountains were throwing their huge shadows over the lovely valley, two more air-ships passed between two of the southward peaks and alighted in the great square in the centre of the city. They were the two vessels which had been sent to the island indicated in Olga's letter to bring back the long-lost Alan and Alexis.

It would be vain to attempt to describe the feelings with which the President and the father of Alexis went, as they thought, to receive their sons, but the air-ships had returned without them, and in their stead they brought a written message which conveyed tidings no less strange and startling than those brought from Antarctica by the *Ithuriel* and her consort.

It was a letter from Alan to his father, and as soon as he received it from the captain of one of the air-ships, who had found it nailed to a tree on the island, he took his friend into his library, and there the two fathers read it together.

After briefly but circumstantially recounting the capture of the flag-ship by Olga by means of her subtle drugs, and showing how, by using the power they gave her, she had kept them in mental slavery for years, forcing them to employ their skill and knowledge in aiding her to build her aerial and submarine fleets out of the spoils of the destroyed ocean transports, from which[95] the latter had taken an incalculable amount of treasure, Alan's letter concluded thus:—

I will now tell you the reason why Alexis and myself have not waited for the air-ship which we knew you would send for us as soon as you received the message which Olga Romanoff told us she would despatch to you. We consider that by our weakness and folly—or, in truth, I should rather say mine, for it was I who invited these treacherous guests on board the *Ithuriel*—we have not only brought endless

calamities upon the world, but we have also forfeited our right to the citizenship of Aeria.

What the judgment of the Council would be upon us I don't know, but we are resolved that, whatever it might have been, you and Alexis's father shall be spared the sorrow of pronouncing sentence upon your own sons. Some day perhaps we may win at least the right to plead our cause before you. At present we have none, and until we have won it you shall not see us again unless you capture us by force.

We were sent here in the *Narwhal*, the swiftest and most powerful vessel of the Russian submarine fleet. Only a few days ago an accident revealed to Alexis for the first time during our long mental slavery the means which this woman, who is as beautiful as an angel and as merciless as a fiend, had used to keep us in subjection. We took the utmost care to give her no suspicion of his discovery, and although we drank no more of her poison we acted exactly as though we were still under its influence.

In what could only have been mockery she gave us back our belts and coronets, bidding us wear them "when we returned to our kingdom," as she put it. We shall never wear the winged circlets again till we have regained the right to do so, but the belts and a couple of brace of magazine pistols which we took before we left her stronghold in Antarctica stood us in good stead.

We have killed the crew of the *Narwhal*, and taken possession of her. She is far swifter and more powerful than any vessel in our submarine navy, for she can be driven at a hundred and fifty miles an hour through the water, and can destroy anything that floats in or on the sea with a blow of her ram, and, more than this, she carries a torpedo battery which has an effective range of two miles, and can strike and destroy anything within that distance without giving the slightest warning of her presence.

There are fifty vessels of this type in the Russian fleet, but the *Narwhal* is at least thirty miles an hour faster than any of them. An attack will probably be made by the Russians on our station at Kerguelen Island within a week by submarine vessels and a small squadron of air-ships, and there we shall begin our operations against the enemy. If you have any reply to make to this letter we will wait for it at sea off Kerguelen, and then begin the campaign we have planned. We shall never rest until we have either destroyed the Russian fleet in detail or have died in the attempt to do so.

If we ever return it will be to restore to you the supremacy of the sea, and then, and not till then, we will ask you to pardon our fault and will willingly submit to such further

conditions as you may see fit to impose upon us before you give us back—if ever you do—the rights which we have lost.

With all love and duty to yourself, and loving remembrances to the dear ones in Aeria, your son

Alan.

[96]

At the foot of the letter was a postscript signed by Alexis, indorsing all that Alan had said, save with regard to his sole responsibility for the calamity that had ensued from the admission of Olga and Serge on board the *Ithuriel*.

The two fathers discussed the strange, and, to them, most affecting communication for nearly an hour in private, and then another meeting of the Council was called to consider it and pronounce authoritatively upon it. The President read the letter aloud in a voice which betrayed no trace of the deep emotion that moved his inmost being, and then left the Council chamber with Maurice Masarov, so that their presence might not embarrass their colleagues.

The simple, manly straightforwardness of Alan's letter appealed far more eloquently to the Council than excuses or prayers for forgiveness would have done. It was plain, too, that after the first indiscretion of taking the strangers on board the air-ship, no moral responsibility or blame could be laid on Alan and Alexis for what they had done under the influence of a drug which had paralysed their moral sense.

The Council, therefore, not only accepted the conditions of the letter, but without a dissentient voice, agreed to confer the first and second commands of the Aerial submarine fleets and stations for the time being upon Alan and Alexis, with permission to call in the aid of the nearest aerial squadron when necessary. This decision was despatched forthwith by an air-ship to Kerguelen, and within an hour all Aeria was talking of nothing else than the strange fate of the two youths who for five years had been mourned as dead.

Later on that evening, when the twin snow-clad peaks which towered high above the city of Aeria had lost the pink afterglow of the departed sunlight, and were beginning to gleam with a whiter radiance in the level beams of the newly-risen moon, a girl was standing on the spacious terrace of a marble villa which stood on the summit of a rounded eminence a couple of miles from the western verge of the city.

She had just crossed the threshold of womanhood. The next sun that would rise would be that of her twentieth birthday.[97] Yet for two years she had worn the silver circle

and crystal wings, for in Aeria a girl became of legal age at eighteen, though she took no share in the civil life of the community until she was married, an event which, as a rule, took place not long after she was invested with the symbol of citizenship.

It was an exceedingly rare event for an Aerial girl to reach the eve of her twentieth year unmarried, for the sexes in the Central-African paradise were very evenly balanced, and, as was natural in a very high state of civilisation, where families seldom exceeded three or four children, celibacy in either sex was looked upon as a public misfortune and a private reproach.

But Alma Tremayne, the girl who was standing on the terrace of her father's house on this most eventful evening, had become an exception to the rule through circumstances so sad and strange that her loneliness was an honour rather than a reproach. There were many of the wearers of the golden wings who had sought long and ardently to win her from the allegiance which forbade her to look with favouring eyes upon any of them.

She was beautiful in a land where all women were fair, a land where, under the most favourable conditions that could be conceived, a race of almost more than human strength and beauty had been evolved, and she came of a family scarcely second in honour even to that of the President, for she was the direct descendant in the fifth generation of Alan Tremayne, first President of the Anglo-Saxon Federation, through his son Cyril born two years after the daughter who had married the first-born son of Natasha and Richard Arnold.

More than five years before she and Alan had plighted their boy-and-girl troth on the eve of his departure on the fateful voyage from which he had never returned, and of which no tidings had reached Aeria until a few hours before. To the simple vow which her girlish lips had then spoken she had remained steadfast even when, as the years went by and still no tidings came of her lost lover, she, in common with her own kindred, had begun to mourn him as dead.

It is true that she was in love rather with a memory than[98] with a man, yet with some natures such a love as this is stronger than any other, more ideal and more lasting, and exempt from the danger of growing cold in fruition. So strong was the hold that this ideal love had taken upon her being that the idea of even accepting the love and homage of any other man appeared as sacrilegious to her as the embrace of an earthly lover would have seemed to a nun of the Middle Ages.

And so, with a single companion in her solitary state, she stood aside and watched with patient, unregretful eyes the wedded happiness of her more fortunate friends.

This companion was Isma Arnold, Alan's sister, who had a double reason for doing as Alma had done.

Not only had she resolved never to marry while her brother's fate remained uncertain, but she, too, had also made her choice among the youths of Aeria, and in such matters an Aerian girl seldom chose twice. So she waited for Alexis as Alma did for Alan, hoping even against her convictions, and keeping his memory undefiled in the sacred shrine of her maiden soul.

No artist could have dreamed of a fairer picture than Alma standing there on the terrace overlooking the stately city and the dark shining lake at her feet. She was clad in soft, clinging garments of whitest linen and finest silk of shimmering, pearly grey, edged with a dainty embroidery of gold and silver thread.

Her dress, confined at the waist with a girdle of interlinked azurine and gold, clothed without concealing the beauties of her perfect form, and her hair, crowned by her crystal-winged coronet, flowed unrestrained, after the custom of the maidens of Aeria, over her shoulders in long and lustrous waves of dusky brown. There was a shadow in the great deep grey eyes which looked up as though in mute appeal to the starlight, the shadow of a sorrow which can never come to a woman more than once.

All these years she had loved in cheerful patience and perfect faith the man for whose memory she had lived in maiden widowhood—and now, who could measure the depth of the darkness, darker than the shadow of death itself, that had fallen across her life, severing the past from the present with a chasm that seemed impassable, and leaving the future but a barren,[99] loveless waste to be trodden by her in weariness and loneliness until the end!

All these years she had loved an ideal man, one of her own splendid race, the very chosen of the earth, as pure in his unblemished manhood as she was in the stainless maidenhood that she had held so sacred for his sake even while she thought him dead—and, lo! the years had passed, and he had come back to life, but how? Hers was not the false innocence of ignorance. She knew the evil and the good, and because she knew both shrank from contamination with the horror born of knowledge.

She had seen both Olga's letter and Alan's, and those two terrible sentences, "They have served my turn, and I have done with them," and "She is as beautiful as an angel and as merciless as a fiend," kept ringing their fatal changes through her brain in pitiless succession, forcing all the revolting possibilities of their meaning into her tortured soul till her reason seemed to reel under their insupportable stress.

Mocking voices spoke to her out of the night, and told her of the unholy love that such a woman would, in the plenitude of her unnatural power, have for such a man; how she would subdue him, and make him not only her lover but her slave; how she would humble his splendid manhood, and play with him until her evil fancy was sated, and then cast him aside—as she had done—like a toy of which she had tired.

Better a thousand times that he had died as his murdered comrades had died—in the northern snowdrift into which this Syren of the Skies had cast them, to sleep the sleep that knew neither dreams nor waking! Better for him and her that he had gone before her into the shadows, and had remained her ideal love until, hand in hand, they could begin their lives anew upon a higher plane of existence.

As these thoughts passed and repassed through her mind with pitiless persistence, her lovely face grew rigid and white under the starlight, and, but for the nervous twining and untwining of her fingers as her hands clasped and unclasped behind her, her motionless form might have been carved out of stone. For the first time since peace had been proclaimed on[100] earth, a hundred and thirty-two years ago, the flames of war had burst forth again, and for the first time in the story of her race the snake had entered the now no longer enchanted Eden of Aeria.

It was hers to suffer the first real agony of soul that any woman of her people had passed through since Natasha, in the palm-grove down yonder by the lake, had told Richard Arnold of her love on the night that he had received the Master's command to take her to another man to be his wife.

There were no tears in the fixed, wide-open eyes that stared almost sightlessly up to the skies, in which the stars were now paling in the growing light of the moon. The torment of her torturing thoughts was too great for that.

She was growing blind and dizzy under the merciless stress of them, when—it might have been just in time to save her from the madness that seemed the only outcome of her misery—the sweet, silvery tones of a girl's voice floated through the still, scented air uttering her name—

“Alma!”

The sound mercifully recalled her wandering senses in an instant. It was the voice of her friend, of the sister of her now doubly-lost lover, and it reproved the selfishness of her great sorrow by reminding her that she was not suffering alone. As the sound of her name reached her ear the rigidity of her form relaxed, the light came back to her eyes, and turning her head she looked in the direction whence it came.

There was a soft whirring of wings in the still air of the tropic night, and out of the half-darkness floated a shape that looked like a realisation of one of the Old-World fairy-tales. It was a vessel some twenty-five feet long by five wide, built of white, polished metal, and shaped something like an old Norse galley, with its high, arching prow fashioned like the breast and neck of a swan.

From the sides projected a pair of wide, rapidly-undulating wings, and in the open space between these stood on the floor of the boat the figure of a girl whose loose, golden hair floated out behind her with the rapid motion of her fairy craft.

[101]

There was no need for words of greeting between the two girl friends. Alma knew the kindly errand on which Isma had come, and as she stepped out she went towards her with hands outstretched in silent welcome.

As their hands met, and the two girls stood face to face, motionless for a moment, they made an exquisite contrast of opposite types of womanly beauty—Alma tall and stately, with a proudly-carried head, clear, pale skin, grey eyes, and perfectly regular features, and Isma, a year younger and a good inch shorter, slender of form yet strong and lithe of limb, with golden, silky hair and sunny-blue eyes, fresh, rosy skin, and mobile features which scarcely ever seemed to wear the same expression for a couple of minutes together—as sweet a daughter of delight as ever man could look upon with eyes of love and longing.

But she was grave enough now, for her friend's sorrow was hers too, and its shadow lay with equal darkness upon her. The ready tears welled up under her dark lashes as she looked upon Alma's white, drawn face and dry, burning eyes, and her low, sweet voice was broken by a sob as, passing her arm round her waist, she drew her towards the boat and said—

“Come, dear, this sorrow belongs to me as well as you and we must help each other to bear it. I have brought my new boat so that we can take a flight round the valley and talk about it quietly. If two heads are better than one, so are two hearts.”

Alma's only reply to the invitation was a sad, sweet smile, and a gentle caress, but the welcome, loving sympathy had come when it was most sorely needed, and so she got into the aerial boat with Isma, and a few moments later the beautiful craft was bearing them at an easy speed southward down the valley.

[102]

CHAPTER XI.

THE SNAKE IN EDEN.



NO more perfect place could have been imagined for an exchange of confidences and sympathy between two girls situated as Alma and Isma were than the oval, daintily-cushioned interior of the *Cygna*, as Isma had called her swan-prowed craft.

Skirting the mountains, at a distance of about five hundred yards from them, and at a height of about as many feet from the summits of the undulating foothills below, the *Cygna* sped quietly along at a speed of some twenty-five miles an hour. The temperature of the tropic night was so soft and warm, and the air was so dry that it was not even necessary for them to make use of the light wraps that lay in the stern of the boat.

Isma reclined in the after part of the broad, low seat which ran round the inside, with one hand resting lightly upon a little silver lever which could be used for working the rudder-fan, in addition to the tiller-ropes, which she held in her hands while standing up. Alma sat almost upright amidships, with one hand clasped on the rail of polished satin-wood which ran round the well of the boat, her head turned away from Isma and her eyes fixed upon two dim points of light far away to the southward, which marked the position of the two moonlit, snowy peaks which guarded the southern confines of the valley.

For several minutes they proceeded thus in silence, which neither seemed inclined to break. At length Isma looked up[103] at a planet that was shining redly over the northern mountains, and, possessed by a sudden inspiration, said—

“Look, Alma, there is Mars returning to our skies!”

“Yes,” said Alma, turning round and gazing from beneath her slightly-frowning brows at the ruddy planet; “it is a fitting time for him to come back now that, after all these years of peace and happiness, human wickedness and ambition have brought the curse of war back again on earth.”

“Yes,” said Isma. “If there were anything in what the old astrologers used to say we could look upon his rising as an omen. And yet we have very little reason surely for taking as an emblem of war a world in which wars have been unheard of for thousands of years.”

"I wonder when that time will come on earth?" said Alma bitterly. "If ever it does! We terrestrials seem to be too hopelessly wicked and foolish for such wisdom as that.

"Mankind will never have a fairer opportunity of working out its redemption than it had after the Terror, and yet here, after four generations of peaceful happiness and prosperity, the wickedness of one woman is able to set the world ablaze again. Our forefathers were wise, but they would have been wiser still if they had stamped that vile brood out utterly. Their evil blood has been the one drop of venom that has poisoned the whole world's cup of happiness!"

As Alma spoke these last words her grey eyes grew dark with sudden passion under her straight-drawn brows. Her breast heaved with a sudden wave of emotion, and the sentences came quickly and fiercely from the lips which Isma had never heard speak in anger before.

"Yes," she replied, rather sadly than angrily, "perhaps it would have been better for the world if they had done so, or, at anyrate, if they had shut them up for life, as they did the criminals and the insane in the middle of the last century. But we must remember, even in our own sorrow and anger, that this Olga Romanoff is in her way not altogether unlike our own Angel was in hers."

"Surely you're speaking sacrilege now!" interrupted Alma.[104] "How can the evil be like the good under any circumstances?"

"No, I am not," said Isma, with a smile. "Remember how Natasha was trained up by the Master in undying hate of Russian tyranny, and how she inherited the legacy of revenge from her mother and him. No doubt this Olga has done the same, and she has been taught to look upon us as the Terrorists looked upon the Tsar and his family.

"We are the descendants of those who flung her ancestor from his throne, extinguished his dynasty, and sent him to die in Siberia. I would kill her with my own hand if I could, and believe that I was ridding the world of a curse, but surely we two daughters of Aeria are wise enough to be just even to such an enemy as she is."

"But she has done worse than kill us," Alma almost hissed between her clenched teeth. "If she had a thousand lives and we took them one by one they would not expiate her crime against us, or equal the hopeless misery that she has brought upon us.

"What is mere death, the swift transition from one stage of existence to another, compared with the hopeless death-in-life to which her wanton wickedness has condemned you and me, or to the calamities which she has brought upon the world?"

“It is nothing, I grant you,” said Isma. “But still I do not agree with you about that hopeless death-in-life, as you call it. Our present sorrow is great and heavy enough, God knows, but for me at least it is not hopeless, nor will it be for you when the first stress of the storm is over.”

“What do you mean?” cried Alma, almost as fiercely as before, and leaning forward and looking through the dusk into her face as though she hardly credited her ears. “Do you mean to say that either you or I could ever”—

“Yes,” said Isma, interrupting her, and speaking now with eager animation. “Yes, I mean just what you were going to say. And some day, I believe, you will think as I do.”

Alma shook her head in mournful incredulity, and Isma noticing the gesture went on—
[105]

“Yes, you will! The reason that you do not agree with me now is that yours is a deeper and stronger nature than mine. You are like the sea, and I am like the lake. Your grief and anger struck you dumb at first.

“You were in a stupor when I found you on the terrace, and now the depths of your nature are broken up and the storm is raging, and until it is over you will see nothing but your own sorrow and anger.

“But with me the storm broke out at once, and I ran to my room and threw myself upon my bed and sobbed and wailed until my mother thought I was going mad. You have not wept yet, and it will be well for you when you do. Your nature is prouder than mine, and it will take longer to melt, but it must melt some time, for we are both women, after all, and then you will see hope through your tears, as I did.”

Alma shook her head again, and said in a low, sad, steady voice—

“I can never see hope until I can see Alan as he was when he left me, and you know that is impossible.”

“You will never see him again as he was,” replied Isma gently. “But that is no reason why you should not see him better than he was.”

“Better?” exclaimed Alma, with an involuntary note of scorn in her voice, which brought a quick flush to Isma’s cheek, and a flash into her eyes for her brother’s sake. “Better! How can that be?”

“Just as the man who has fallen and risen again of his own native strength, is better and stronger than the man who has never been tempted,” replied Isma almost hotly.

“Remember the lessons we have learnt from the people of Mars since we learnt to communicate with them. You know how they have gone through civilisation after civilisation until they have refined everything out of human nature that makes it human except their animal existence and their intellectual faculties.

“They have no passions and they make no mistakes. What we call love they call sexual suitability, the mechanical arrangement[106] into which they have refined our ruling passion. Do you remember how almost impossible Vassilis, after he had perfected the code of signals, found it to make even their brightest and most advanced intellects understand the meaning of jealousy?”

The skilfully-aimed shot struck home instantly. A bright wave of colour swept from Alma’s throat up to her brow. Her eyes shone like two pale fires in the dusk, and her hand grasped the rail on which it was resting till the bones and sinews stood out distinct in it. She seemed to gasp for breath a moment before she found her voice, but when she spoke her tone seemed to ring and vibrate like a bell in the sudden strength of her unloosed passion.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, you innocent-looking little Isma! You are wiser than I am after all. I did not know the meaning of that word till Olga’s letter fell from the sky, but I know it now. My God, how I hate that woman!”

“She is not a woman,” replied Isma, speaking in the unconscious pride of her pure descent. “She is a baseborn animal, for she has used her beauty for the vilest ends, yet I am glad to hear you say that you hate her for Alan’s sake, as I do, and—and for Alexis’s. While you can hate you can love, and some day you will love Alan—the real Alan, not your ideal lover—all the better because you have hated Olga for his sake.”

“What?” almost wailed Alma, in the intensity of her anger and misery. “After he has held her in his arms—after his lips have kissed hers—after”—

“Yes, even after that. When your first bitterness has passed, as mine has, you will be more just, and remember the influence under which he did so—if he did. Do you hold yourself responsible for what you think or do in your dreams, or do you not believe what Alan said in his letter about the drug? You know too much about chemistry not to know that such horrible poisons have existed for centuries.”

“Yes, yes, I know that, and I know that he has no share in the moral guilt; but how can I ever forget he has been what[107] those cruel words of Olga’s told us she had made of him?” replied Alma, her face growing cold and hard again as she spoke.

“Alma,” said Isma, with gentle dignity, yet with a note of keen reproach in her voice, “surely you are forgetting that you are speaking of my brother as well as of your lover. No, I am not angry, for I am too sad myself not to understand your sorrow. But I want you to remember that I who have lost both a lover and a brother am asking you to be patient and to hope with me.

“We have never seen Alan and Alexis as they are. We only remember them as two handsome boys who had never seen or known evil. When we meet them again, as I firmly believe we shall, they will be men who have passed through the fire; for if they do not pass through it and come out stronger and better than they were, rest assured we shall never meet on earth again.

“Alan would no more come to you now than you would go to him. When he believes himself worthy of you he will come for you as Alexis will come for me, and then”—

She stopped short in her eloquent pleading, for Alma, at last melted and overcome by her sweet unselfishness and loving logic, had felt the springs of her own woman's nature unloosed, and with a low, wailing cry had sunk down upon the cushions towards her, and was sobbing out her sorrow on her lap. Isma said nothing more, for her end was achieved. She laid her left hand caressingly on Alma's hair, and with her right she pulled the steering-lever back and swung the *Cygna* round until her prow pointed towards home again.

When they reached the villa they found the President's private yacht resting on the terrace, for Alan's father and mother had come over after the Council meeting to discuss with Alma's parents the more intimate family aspect of the strange events which had cleared up in such terrible fashion the mystery which had so long shrouded the fate of the sons of the two chief families in Aeria.

So revolting was the idea of their mental servitude to such^[108] an enemy of the human race as they could not but believe Olga Romanoff to be, and so frightful were the consequences that must infallibly befall humanity in consequence of it, that their parents would rather have known them dead than living under such degrading circumstances. To the Aerians, far advanced as they were beyond the standards of the present day, both in religion and philosophy, the conception of death was one which included no terrors and no more regret than was natural and common to all humanity at parting with a kinsman or a friend.

As they were destined to prove, when face to face with a crisis unparalleled in the history of humanity, they regarded death merely as a natural and necessary transition

from one state of existence to another, which would be higher or lower according to the preponderance of good or evil done in this life.

If, therefore, the parents and kinsmen of those who were now exiles and wanderers upon the ocean wastes could have chosen, they would infinitely rather have known that Alan and Alexis had shared the fate of their companions in the Norwegian snowdrift than they would have learnt that for six years they had been the slaves and playthings of a woman who, as they guessed from Alan's letter, combined the ambition of a Semiramis with the vices of a Messalina, and who had used the skill and knowledge which they had acquired and inherited as Princes of the Air with the avowed purpose of subverting the dominion of Aeria, undoing all that their ancestors had done, and bringing back the evil era of strife, bloodshed, and political slavery.

So, too, with Alma. As she had told Isma, she would a thousand times rather have seen her lover dead than degraded to such base uses. Although she, like everyone else in Aeria, admitted that the strange circumstances absolved both Alan and Alexis from all moral blame and responsibility, she, in common with her own father and mother, and perhaps, also, with others not less intimately concerned, found it impossible to forget or ignore the taint of such an association, and to look upon it as a stain that might never be washed away.

[109]

Indeed, the only member of the family council who openly proclaimed her belief that the two exiles would, if ever they returned, come back to Aeria better and stronger men than those who had known no evil was Isma, who repeated, with all the winning eloquence at her command, all the arguments that she had used to Alma during their cruise together. Whether Alma and the others would ever come round to her view could of course only be proved by time, but it is nevertheless certain that when the family council at last separated the hearts of its members were less sore than they would have been had Alan and Alexis not possessed such an advocate as the girl who had so good a double reason for pleading their causes.



[110]

CHAPTER XII.

THE BATTLE OF KERGUELEN.



THE Council of Aeria possessed, as has already been said, four-and-twenty stations, scattered over the oceans of the world, which it used as depôts for the submarine fleets, by means of which, acting in co-operation with its aerial squadrons, it had made any attempt at naval warfare hopeless until the disasters described at the beginning of this book proved that an enemy, in this respect at least, more powerful than itself, had successfully challenged its empire of the sea.

Of these stations the most important in the Southern hemisphere was that on Kerguelen Island, or Desolation Land, situated at the intersection of the 49th parallel of south latitude with the 69th meridian of east longitude. This lonely fragment of land in the midst of the ocean, barren of surface, and swept by the almost constant storms of long winters, had been chosen, first, because of its situation on the southern limits of the Indian Ocean, equidistant between Africa and Australia, and, secondarily, because of its numerous and sheltered deep-water harbours, so admirably adapted for vessels which were perfectly independent of storm.

Added to this, the island contained large supplies of coal, from which the motive-power of both the submarine vessels and the air-ships was now derived by direct conversion of its solar energy into electrical force through the secret processes known only to the President and two members of the Council.

[111]

So far the Russians had not ventured to make any attack upon this stronghold, so strongly was it defended, not only by its submarine squadrons and systems of mines, guarding the entrances to all the harbours, but also by the large force of air-ships which had been stationed there since the new naval warfare had broken out.

The warning which Alan had conveyed in his letter to his father was based on the knowledge that a general attack was soon to be made upon it both by air and sea, with the object of crippling the power of the Aerians in the Southern Ocean. No time had been lost in acting upon this warning. The aerial squadron was increased to forty, with the *Ariel* as flagship, and twenty new submarine vessels, the largest and best possessed by the Aerians, had been despatched from Port Natal to reinforce the fleet

of thirty-five already at Kerguelen Island. With these must of course be counted the *Narwhal*, under the command of Alan and Alexis.

The strength of the attacking force could only be guessed at, as even Alan did not know it, but it was not expected that, however strong a force the Russians might bring up by sea, they would be able, after the disaster of Antarctica, to muster more than a dozen air-ships.

The Aerial headquarters was at Christmas Harbour, on the northern shore of the island. This is an admirably-sheltered inlet running westward into the land between Cape François and Arch Point, and its upper and narrower half forms an oval basin nearly a mile long by a quarter of a mile broad, walled in by high perpendicular basaltic cliffs, and containing a depth of water varying from two to sixteen fathoms, as compared with twenty-five to thirty fathoms in its outer half.

North of the harbour, Table Mount rises to a height of thirteen hundred feet, and to the south is a huge mass of basalt over eleven hundred feet high. On both of these elevations were mounted batteries of guns capable of throwing projectiles of great size and enormous explosive energy to a distance of several miles. There were altogether twelve of these batteries placed on various heights about the island, and the guns[112] composing them were mounted on swivels, which enabled them to be trained so as to throw the projectile either into the sea or high up into the air.

Soon after daybreak on the fourth day after Alan's letter had been received the outlook on Cape François, a bold mass of basalt to the north of the outer bay, telephoned "*Narwhal* in sight" to the settlement at the head of the harbour. Immediately on this message being received the commander of the station, named Max Earnstein, a man of about thirty-four, and the most daring and skilful submarine navigator and engineer in the service of the Council, went on board his own vessel, the *Cachalot*, and set out to welcome the long-lost son of the President and convey to him the commission which had been sent out by air-ship from Aeria.

The *Cachalot*, which may as well be described here as elsewhere as a type of the submarine warship of the time, was a double-pointed cylinder, built of plates of nickelised aluminium steel, not riveted, but electrically fused at the joints, so that they formed a continuous mass equally impervious all over, and presenting no seams or overlaps.

The cylinder was a hundred and fifty feet from point to point, with a midship's diameter of forty feet. The forward end was armed with a sheathing of azurine, the metal peculiar to the mines of Aeria, which would cut and pierce steel as a diamond

cuts glass. This sheathing formed a ram, which was by no means the least formidable portion of the warship's armament.

The upper part of the cylinder was flattened so as to form an oval deck forty feet long by fifteen wide. A centre section of this deck, three feet wide, could be opened by means of a lateral slide which allowed of the elevation of a gun twenty-five feet long, which could be used either for discharging torpedoes by water or for throwing projectiles through the air.

It could be aimed and fired from below the deck without the artillerists even seeing the objects aimed at, save in an arrangement of mirrors, so adjusted that when the object appeared in [113] the centre of the lowest of them, the gun could be fired with the certainty of the projectile reaching its mark. Four underwater torpedo tubes, two ahead and two astern, completed the armament of the submarine warship.

When under water the deck could be hermetically closed, and sliding plates could be drawn over the opening of the torpedo tubes, so that from stem to stern of the cylinder there were no excrescences to impede the progress of the vessel through the water with the sole exception of a dome of thick forged glass just forward of the deck, under which stood the helmsman, who gave place to the commander of the vessel when she went into action. Her powerful four-bladed screw, driven by engines almost precisely similar to those of the air-ships, gave her a maximum speed of a hundred miles an hour.

The *Cachalot* ran at twenty-five miles an hour down the harbour, and as soon as he got abreast of Cape François Captain Ernstein, who was standing on deck, saw a small red flag apparently rising from the waves about a mile to seaward. A similar flag was soon flying from a movable flagstaff on the *Cachalot*, and a few minutes later she was lying alongside the *Narwhal*.

This vessel was a very leviathan of the deep, and as she lay three parts submerged in the water Captain Ernstein calculated that she could hardly be less than two hundred feet in length and forty-five in diameter amidships. She appeared to be built on very much the same plan as the *Cachalot* and of the same materials, saving only, of course, the ram of azurine, which was replaced by one of nickel steel.

As the *Cachalot* got alongside, a slide was drawn back in the deck of the *Narwhal* and the head and shoulders of a man dressed in close-fitting seal-fur appeared. It was Alan, little changed in physical appearance since the fatal day that he invited Olga Romanoff on board the *Ithuriel*, save that he had grown a moustache and beard, which he wore trimmed somewhat in the Elizabethan style, and that the frank, open

expression of the boy had given place to a grave, almost sad, sternness, which marked the man who had lived and suffered.

[114]

Max Ernstein recognised him at once and saluted as though greeting a superior officer, for, although all the Aerians were friends and comrades, the etiquette of rank and discipline was scrupulously observed amongst them when on active service.

“What do you salute me for?” said Alan gravely, as he reached the deck and came to the side on which the *Cachalot* lay. “Do you not see that I am no longer wearing the golden wings? Are you the officer in command of the station?”

“Yes, Admiral Arnold,” returned the other, in the same formal tone and at the same time presenting the letter from the Council. “I suppose you have forgotten me. I am Max Ernstein, in command of the naval fleet at Kerguelen. That letter will explain why I saluted and why I have come to hand over my command to you.”

Before he replied Alan ran his eye rapidly over the letter. As he did so the pale bronze of his face flushed crimson for a moment, and he turned his head away from Ernstein, brushed his hand quickly across his eyes, and then read the letter again more deliberately. Then he turned and said in a voice that he vainly strove to keep steady—

“This is more than I have deserved or could expect, but obedience is the first duty, so I accept the command. Come on board, Ernstein; of course I recognised you, but until I knew how I stood with the Council I looked upon myself as an outlaw, and therefore no friend or comrade for you.”

The captain of the *Cachalot* had a gangway-plank brought up and passed from one vessel to the other, and in another moment he was standing beside Alan on the deck of the *Narwhal*, and their hands were joined in a firm clasp.

“That’s the first honest hand that I have grasped for six years, except Alexis’,” said Alan, as he returned the clasp with a grip that showed his physical forces had been by no means impaired by his long mental servitude. “Come down into the cabin, we shall find him there.”

He led the way below, and as soon as Alexis had been told the unexpected good news, which seemed to affect him even more deeply than it had Alan, the three sat down at the table[115] in the saloon of the *Narwhal*, a plain but comfortably furnished room, about twenty-five feet long by fifteen broad and ten high, to discuss a plan of operations in view of the expected attack on the station.

Alan at once assumed the authority with which he had been invested by the Council, and made minute inquiries into the nature and extent of the defending force at his disposal.

"I think that ought to be quite sufficient, not only to defeat, but pretty well destroy any force that the Russians can bring against us," said Alan, as soon as Ernstein had finished his description. "We have much more to fear from the air-ships than from the submarine boats, because the *Narwhal* would give a very good account of them, even by herself. Have any more vessels of the type of the *Ithuriel* been built since the old *Ithuriel* was lost?"

"Yes," replied Ernstein; "but only ten, I am sorry to say. One of them is here, as I told you just now, but we have forty of the others, and I don't suppose the Russians can bring more than a dozen against us."

"What do you mean?" said Alan. "They have fifty, every one of them as fast and as powerful as the old *Ithuriel*. I ought to know," he continued grimly, "for they were every one of them built under my own eyes."

"I beg your pardon," said Ernstein. "I ought to have told you before now that we have already won our first victory, and that though we lost eight vessels we destroyed twenty of the Russians'." And then he went on to give Alan and Alexis a rapid description of the pursuit of the *Revenge*, and the havoc wrought at the end of it by the *Ithuriel* and the *Ariel*.

"That is glorious news!" said Alan. "But they have thirty ships at their disposal still, and I expect they will bring at least twenty of these against us, and they are all swifter than ours saving only the *Ariel*. Of course my command ends with the shore, but I think it will be as well if the captain of the *Ariel* were to come on board the *Narwhal* so that we could arrange our plans of defence together—I for the sea, and he for the air."

[116]

"But why not come ashore and see him?" said Ernstein. "He and all of us will be delighted to see you on the island."

"No," said Alan, shaking his head. "Alexis and I have promised each other never to leave the *Narwhal* until the Russian sea power is crippled. The day that we set foot on dry land again will be the day that we give back the supremacy of the sea to the Council, so if we two Admirals of the Sea and Air are to meet, the commander of the *Ariel* must come here."

“Very well,” said Ernstein. “I understand you. Write a note and I will send the *Cachalot* back with it. She will bring him back in under half an hour, for he was up at the settlement when I left.”

Alan wrote the letter forthwith, and the *Cachalot* departed, returning, as her captain had said, in less than half an hour, with Edward Forrest, the commander of the *Ariel*. He was a lean, wiry, active man of about forty-five, of mixed English, Scotch, and Aerial descent, with short, crisp, curly black hair and smooth-shaven face, rather sharp, regular features, and a pair of keen grey eyes which seemed to look into the very brain of the person he was talking to—a man of prompt decisions and few words, and one of the most able aerial navigators that Aeria could boast of.

He held the rank of admiral, and was responsible for the station of Kerguelen, and the command of the southern seas. He greeted Alan and Alexis courteously, but a trifle stiffly, as though he thought that their indiscretion had been somewhat lightly dealt with by the Council. This, however, was no business of his, for the first law of Aeria was that the decisions of the President and Council were not open to criticism by any private or official citizen whatever his rank or experience.

Therefore, after reading, as a matter of form, the commission sent to Alan and Alexis, he addressed himself at once to the business of the moment, and before they had been discussing the plan of defence for many minutes he was forced to admit to himself that the President’s son, young as he was, was more than his master both in aerial and naval tactics.

[117]

For the greater part of the morning plan after plan was suggested, thrashed out, and either accepted or thrown aside, and when he took his leave he shook hands with both Alan and Alexis far more cordially than he had done in greeting, and said with brief, blunt candour—

“This is not the first time that a woman has used a man to upset the peace of the world, and I tell you honestly that I once thought you had both turned traitors. I don’t think so now, and I am heartily glad you are back. If you could only have returned three years ago a lot of trouble might have been saved, but I must confess that you have both learnt more in five years than I have in twenty. I will follow your instructions to the letter.”

“What is done is done,” said Alan, smiling, and yet with a grave dignity that showed Admiral Forrest that, despite all that had happened, he was standing in the presence of his master. “The work in hand now is to regain what we have lost, and if every man

does his duty we shall do so. I think everything is arranged now, and as we have no time to lose I will say good-morning.”

He held out his hand as he spoke, and Admiral Forrest took his dismissal and his leave at the same time.

Captain Ernstein took six men out of the *Cachalot* and placed them at the disposal of Alan and Alexis, for the working of the *Narwhal*, and then took his leave to execute his part of the plan of defence.

It was a bitterly cold day, for the southern winter had already set in in all its severity. The sea to the north of the island was comparatively smooth, but swept every now and then with violent gusts of wind from the southward. The sky was entirely covered by thick masses of cold grey cloud, every now and then torn up into great rolling masses by the sudden blasts of icy wind from the pole, which drove fierce storms of hard frozen snow across the bare and desolate island.

But the roughness of the elements was a matter of small concern to the crews of the air-ships and the submarine[118] cruisers, for both were independent alike of sea and storm. The former could literally ride upon the wings of the fiercest gale that ever blew. Their interiors were warm and wind-proof, and their machinery was powerful enough to drive them four and five times as fast as the air-currents in which they floated, while the latter had only to sink a few feet below the level of the waves to find perfect calm.

The days, in short, were past when men had been at the mercy of the elements, and so the atmospheric conditions which would have made a modern naval attack upon a rocky and exposed coast almost impossible were not even taken into account in preparing to meet the threatened assault on Kerguelen Island.

No one knew when or how the first assault would be delivered. All that was known was that, unless Olga and her advisers had completely altered their plans, the attack would take place either that day or the next, and consequently ceaseless vigilance was necessary on sea and land and in the air.

In accordance with the plan arranged on board the *Narwhal*, ten air-ships rose above the clouds to an altitude of five thousand feet, and from each of these an electric thread hung down to as many signal-stations on the island, all of which were connected with the headquarters at the top of Christmas Harbour.

Twenty cruisers patrolled the coast at a distance of a mile from the land, and two miles outside these the *Narwhal* ran to and fro along the northern shore. All the more important inlets which had sufficient depth of water for submarine attack were

guarded with mines and chains of torpedoes, so disposed that no vessel could possibly enter without firing them, and so giving warning of the locality of the attack.

The afternoon passed without any alarm, and at nightfall the clouds sent down a blinding storm of snow, which, added to the intense darkness, made vision impossible both on land and sea, although high above the clouds the ten air-ships floated in a calm, clear atmosphere, under the brilliant constellations of the southern hemisphere.

[119]

No attack seemed possible without warning, either by sea or above the clouds, for the hostile air-ships could not approach without being seen from a great distance through the clear, starlit sky, and without their lights, which would instantly betray their presence, it was impossible for the submarine vessels even to find the coast.

Hour after hour passed, and still no hostile sign rewarded the vigilance of the defenders. No one of the present day could have guessed that all the preparations had been made for such a battle as had never been fought before on sea or land, or in the air.

Nothing was visible but the snow-covered earth and the storm-swept sea, for the sentinel ships, floating far above the clouds, were beyond the reach of vision. And yet, if the combined fleets of the modern world had attacked Kerguelen that night, not a ship would have escaped to tell the tale of annihilation, so terrible were the engines of destruction which waited but the signal of battle to strike their swift and irresistible blows.

It was about half-past six o'clock the next morning when Alexis, who was on watch in the conning-tower of the *Narwhal*, saw a faint beam of light illuminating the water a long way ahead. He instantly signalled to Alan—"Enemy in sight. Back. I am going to ram."

Alan, unwilling to leave the new crew, who were not yet perfectly acquainted with the working of the machinery, had taken command of the engine-room alternately with Alexis, who was now taking his four hours' watch in the conning-tower, and to whom the fortune of war had given the honour of striking the first blow. The *Narwhal* backed rapidly, and as she did so Alexis turned a small wheel in the side of the conning-tower, and the whole chamber sank into the hull of the vessel.

As soon as it stopped he pulled a lever and a heavy steel sheet slid over the opening where the glass dome had been. In front of him as he stood at the steering-wheel was

a long, very slender needle hung with extreme delicacy on a pivot, up which an electric current constantly passed.

[120]

This needle was terrestrially insulated by a magnet which always swung opposite to the magnetic pole, and when acted upon only by the steel of the vessel's fabric, swung indifferently as long as there was no other vessel within a thousand yards of the *Narwhal*. But the moment one came within that distance the needle pointed towards it with unerring accuracy, as it was doing at the present moment.

Alexis allowed the vessel to back until he saw the needle begin to waver. Then he knew that the thousand-yard limit had been reached, and signalled—

“Full speed ahead.”

The next moment the engines were reversed and the *Narwhal* bore down on her invisible prey. The needle became rigid again. Alexis kept it pointing dead ahead as the *Narwhal* gathered way and rushed silently but with irresistible force upon her victim.

She passed over the thousand yards in forty seconds. Then came a dull, rending crash, a slight shiver of the mighty fabric, and then she swept on her way as though she had passed through a couple of inches of planking instead of the steel hull of a submarine warship more than two-thirds her own size.

And so in silence and darkness, without the discharge of a gun or the flash of a shot or an audible cry of human pain, the work of death and destruction began and ended. In the passing of an instant a warship had been destroyed which could have annihilated a fleet of modern battleships in detail without once appearing above the surface of the water.

The moment that the shock told Alexis that the ram of the *Narwhal* had done its work, he signalled “Stop,” and as the vessel slowed down he watched the momentous fluctuations of the needle in front of him. It oscillated for an instant and then became still again, pointing to another victim hidden away somewhere under the dark waters. He brought the vessel round until it pointed ahead again, and then once more the leviathan plunged forward at full speed on her errand of destruction.

[121]

Thirty seconds later a rasping tearing sound, told him that he had ripped the side out of a second Russian vessel; and again he stopped, and again the fatal tell-tale needle

pointed to a mark on which he hurled his irresistible ram. So the work went on, and vessel after vessel was torn to pieces and sunk in the midst of the darkness and silence of the wintry sea, without even a warning having been given either to the consorts of the destroyed vessels or to those nearer in shore, all of which were, of course, outside the range of the needle's indication. But for this fact Alexis would have been unable to do his work, for he would not have known whether he was ramming friend or foe.

When the ram had found its mark for the twelfth time, the needle oscillated vaguely to and fro, showing that within a thousand-yards radius at least there were no more victims to be found. Then the *Narwhal* rose to the surface of the water, and Alexis resumed his watch as the vessel patrolled the coast again at a speed of fifty miles an hour.

Alan now came and relieved Alexis from his watch. As he entered the conning-tower he said—

“How many is that you’ve settled? A dozen, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Alexis, “but I can hardly think they can have been anything but scouts, and so we shall have the main fleet to tackle yet.”

“Do you think any of them have got through?” said Alan. “You know they may have approached from east and west as well, and if so they are lying inside of us.”

“No,” replied Alexis, “I don’t think they would do that. You see we have the advantage of them in this way. They can’t see ten yards in front of them unless there is bright sunshine on the water, or unless they turn their lights on to the full, in which case they would betray their presence at once.

“Then they don’t know what has become of the *Narwhal*, and probably think that she has been attacked by an overwhelming force, or blown up by some lucky torpedo. They daren’t go inshore in force for fear of springing a mine, and[122] so you may depend upon it the twelve we have destroyed were scouts, prowling about very slowly and waiting for daylight to examine the coast and find a way into Christmas Harbour.

“They must have been in single line, and we had the luck to catch one of the end ones first, and so we sank the lot in the order in which they were floating. I don’t think we can do anything more till daylight except run up and down the coast and keep a sharp look-out to seaward and on the needle.”

“I suppose you’re right,” said Alan. “You’d better go and get an hour’s sleep if you can.”

“There won’t be much sleep for any of us till to-night,” said Alexis quickly, pointing to the clouds over the island. “Look! the row has begun in the air already.”

Alan glanced up and saw a series of intensely bright flashes stream downwards through the clouds, which at the same moment were rent and rolled up into vast shadowy billows by some tremendous concussion of the atmosphere above them. There could be only one explanation of this. The attack on the island had begun from the air, and the flashes were those of the first shots of the aerial bombardment.



The Clouds were rent and rolled up into vast shadowy Billows. [Page 122](#).

What had really happened was this.

A fleet of fifty submarine warships, under the command of Michael Lossenski, the eldest son of Orloff Lossenski, who was now Olga Romanoff's chief adviser in the conduct of the war that she had commenced with the Aerians, had reached the northern coast of Kerguelen Island about four o'clock in the morning in order to co-operate with an aerial squadron of fifteen vessels led by the *Revenge*, under the command, nominally, of Lossenski's second son Boris, but really of Olga herself.

As Alexis had surmised, the twelve vessels destroyed by the *Narwhal* were scouts sent out to, if possible, feel their way to the entrance of Christmas Harbour, which was known to be the headquarters of the station.

These were to have returned to the fleet with all the intelligence they could get as to bearings and soundings, and the[123] position of mines and the defending fleet. Then at daybreak, that is to say about eight o'clock, the whole squadron was to have advanced to the entrance to the harbour, ramming any of the defenders who barred their way, and then, after sending a swarm of torpedoes into the mouth of the bay to explode the mines and blow up any submarine defences that might exist, to have made a rush for the inner bay at the same time that the air-ships engaged the land defences.

The naval portion of the programme was completely frustrated by the destruction of the scouts, while the aerial attack was foiled by the look-outs stationed above the clouds. Soon after seven it became light enough at their altitude for the powerful glasses of their commanders to make out the fifteen Russian air-ships coming up from the southward at a distance of about twenty miles.

A few minutes later they were themselves discovered by the Russians, and Olga, to her intense chagrin, saw at a glance that all hope of a surprise was gone. By some means or other the Aerians had received intelligence of the attack, and were ready for it.

The terrible experience taught by the disaster of Antarctica warned her and her lieutenants that any approach, now that they were seen, must be made with the utmost caution, for they had no precise knowledge as to the range of the Aerial guns. All they knew was that it was very great, and that where one of their projectiles found its mark destruction followed instantly.

Added to this, there was another difficulty. The dense masses of cloud completely hid both sea and land from their view, and made accurate shooting at the land defences impossible. Consequently there was nothing for it but to fight the battle out in the

upper regions of the air, against a force of whose actual strength they were ignorant. They dare not attempt to surround the ten air-ships, which hung stationary over the island, for this meant bringing all their guns into play, while they could only use half of their own.

While they were debating on a plan of operations, two new^[124] factors in the coming struggle were swiftly and unexpectedly brought into play. As soon as the news of their arrival had been telegraphed to headquarters, the *Ariel* took the air and passed under the clouds to the rear of the Russian squadron. Ten miles behind them, she swept round sharply, and with her wings inclined to the utmost, and her engines working at the fullest capacity, she took a mighty upward swoop, passed through the clouds like a flash of light, and before the Russians knew what had happened, she was floating three thousand feet above them, out of reach of their guns, and hurling projectile after projectile into their midst. Three of their ships, struck almost simultaneously, were torn into a thousand fragments, and vanished through the clouds.

It was the glare and shock of this explosion that Alexis had seen from the conning-tower of the *Narwhal*. The remaining Russian ships instantly scattered and sank through the clouds to seek a refuge from the foe whose deadly blows they were completely unable to return.

But the moment they appeared on the under-side of the cloud-sea, all the guns of the land batteries opened fire in all directions with time-shells, and so rapid were the discharges, and so terrible the energy of the explosives, that the whole firmament above the island seemed ablaze with them, while the concussions of the nether atmosphere were so tremendous and continuous, that it would have been madness for the Russian air-ships to have approached within the zone of fire with which the Aerians had covered and encircled their positions.

The clouds were torn and broken up into vast whirling masses, which completely obscured the view of the Russians, and rendered anything like accurate shooting in the direction of the island impossible. Worse than this, the range of the great land guns, fired at an elevation of forty-five degrees, was so enormous that they were forced by the incessantly exploding projectiles, which were hurled up into the air in all directions, to retire to a distance which, beyond the most random shooting, the results of which were spent upon the rocks of the island and the sea, rendered their own guns useless.

[125]

Rise up through the clouds they dare not, for they knew the *Ariel* was still there, and that the first ship that showed herself would be an almost helpless mark for one of the ten guns which, for the time being, commanded the heavens. There seemed nothing for it but an ignominious retreat, for, as Boris Lossenski said to Olga when, furious with rage and mortification, she reproached him with a lack both of skill and courage, an attack upon a volcano in full eruption would have been child's play to an assault at close quarters on Kerguelen Island.

Their one hope of success had lain in a surprise, and that, by some unaccountable means, had been made impossible. They had reckoned only on the air-ships and the submarine defences, and even these they had expected to take unawares. The terrible power of the battery guns, which were able to spread their seas of fire through the air and to shake the very firmament itself with their projectiles, had been a revelation to them.

They could not train their own guns without seeing their mark, and neither flame nor smoke betrayed the position of the batteries, while on the other hand the artillerists on the island had simply to surround the station with a zone of fire and a continuous series of atmospheric convulsions through which no air-ship could have passed without the risk of overturning or completely collapsing.

So Olga was at last convinced that her choice lay between abandonment of the attack or running the gauntlet of fire in the almost forlorn hope of engaging the land batteries and an aerial fleet of unknown strength at close quarters.

Baffled and defeated, and yet convinced that to continue the unequal contest under its present conditions would be merely to court still more disastrous defeat, and even probable destruction, Olga at last allowed Lossenski to give the signal for retreat, and the Russian squadron withdrew to a position twelve miles northward of the island. Its departure was seen both from the air and the land, and the cannonade immediately stopped.

[126]

Meanwhile Alan had run the *Narwhal* into the mouth of Christmas Harbour flying his red flag. He was met by the *Cachalot*, and, after telling Captain Ernstein what he had done, and learning of the repulse of the Russians in the aerial battle, he directed forty of the submarine vessels to follow him out to sea to look for the Russian flotilla.

All the craft were furnished with tell-tale needles similar to the one on board the *Narwhal*, for it is impossible to see a sufficient distance under water to effectively

attack an enemy as agile as the submarine warships were, and this fact had led to the universal employment of the needles.

As it was now quite light, the whole Aerial squadron, with the exception of five vessels whose duty it was to act as scouts under water, proceeded seaward on the surface of the waves, keeping a sharp look-out for the remains of the Russian fleet, which they soon discovered lying about five miles off the island. They could make out thirty-five of the long, black, half-submerged hulls lying together like a school of whales with the waves breaking over them as over sunken rocks.

Alan immediately signalled from his conning-tower in the manual sign-language, used by the Aerials to communicate between their air-ships, to his consorts, and ordered them to scatter and form a wide circle round the Russian squadron at a distance of a mile, and a depth of two fathoms, but on no account to approach within a thousand yards of them. When they had reached their positions they were to rise to the surface and each was to discharge a couple of torpedoes towards the centre of the circle. After that they were to retire and leave the rest to him.

The moment the order had been passed through the fleet, everyone of the vessels disappeared and proceeded to her station. The *Narwhal* sank at the same time until nothing but the glass dome of her conning-tower remained above the water.

By carefully noting the course steered by the compass, and accurately measuring the distance travelled by the number of revolutions of the propeller, each captain was able to place his craft in the desired position.

[127]

So perfectly, indeed, was the manœuvre performed that when the vessels rose to the surface they formed a circle two miles in diameter, in the centre of which lay, within a space of about two hundred yards square, the Russian flotilla, the commanders of which, afraid to advance nearer to the shore without the intelligence which they still awaited from their scouts, and confounded by the awful spectacle presented by the aerial battle, of the issue of which they were utterly ignorant, were waiting in bewilderment and indecision the issue of the events which had taken such a marvellous and unexpected turn.

The manœuvre ordered by Alan had been executed so promptly and secretly that the Russians were not even aware that they were surrounded until torpedo after torpedo, coming in from all points of the compass, began exploding in their midst, hurling vast masses of water and foam up into the air, tearing their plates and crippling their

propellers, and disabling half their number before they had time to recover from the confusion into which the sudden attack had thrown them.

To communicate signals from one vessel to another under such circumstances was impossible, and so united action was out of the question. All that the captains of the vessels could see was that there were enemies upon all sides of them. The explosion of the eighty torpedoes had churned the water up into a mass of seething foam, in the midst of which fifteen vessels were lying crippled and helpless on the surface, while six more had been sent to the bottom.

This was bad enough, but while the captains of those which had escaped were recovering from the stupefaction into which this sudden disaster had thrown them Alan saw his chance, and as soon as the last torpedo had exploded headed the *Narwhal* full speed into the midst of them. Then followed a scene which would have beggared all description.

The great ship, moving at a speed of nearly three miles a minute, tore her way through the half-crippled squadron, hurling everything she struck to the bottom of the sea. Every[128] Russian vessel that was able to do so after the first assault sank out of the way of the terrible ram of the *Narwhal* and headed off at full speed into the open sea.

But for those that were partially or wholly disabled there was no escape. Alan standing in his conning-tower, his teeth clenched and his blue eyes almost black with the fierce passion of battle and revenge, whirled his steering-wheel this way and that, and as the steel monster swung round in rapid curves in obedience to the rudder, he hurled her again and again upon his practically helpless victims, piercing them through and through as though their plates had been cardboard instead of steel.

When the last one had gone down he left the conning-tower, hoisted his flagstaff, and flew a signal to his consorts to return to harbour. What had become of the Russian vessels that had escaped he neither knew nor, for the present, cared.

The victory of the Aerians both at sea and in the air was complete, and he was certain that the Russians had received such a lesson as would convince them that Kerguelen Island was impregnable to any assault that they could make upon it, unless they were able to take its defenders by surprise—a contingency which was justly considered impossible.



CHAPTER XIII.

THE SYREN'S STRONGHOLD.



AS soon as the first pitched battle in the world-war was over, a lengthy and detailed report of the attack on Kerguelen and its repulse was drawn up by Alan, Captain Ernstein, and Admiral Forrest for presentation to the Council. To this report Alan added a supplement, which is here reproduced in his own words.

“From what I know of the designs of Olga Romanoff and her advisers I am convinced that the defeats which have been inflicted upon them will merely have the effect of checking, and not putting a stop to, their operations against the peace and freedom of the world.

“I have seen and heard enough during the last five years to feel satisfied that there exists a very widespread conspiracy, the object of which is the restoration of the Romanoff dynasty, in the person of Olga, the breaking up of the Anglo-Saxon Federation, and the inauguration of an era of personal despotism and popular slavery.

“As far as we have been able to learn, this conspiracy embraces practically all the descendants of those families who lost their rank, official position, or property during the reconstitution of Russia after the fall of the Romanoffs. These people have, of course, everything to gain and not much to lose by the destruction of the present order of things, and Olga has promised them, no doubt quite sincerely, that in the event[130] of her triumph they shall be restored to all that their ancestors lost.

“As a matter of fact, the greater part of Russia will be divided amongst them should she ever accomplish her designs. The old order of things, as it existed before the days of Alexander II., is to be completely reinstated. The lower orders of the people are to be reduced once more to serfdom, and the trading classes to a condition very little better.

“If they resist they are to be terrorised into submission by the air-ships, and all who raise their voices for freedom are to be banished to Siberia, which is once more to be the prison-land of the Russian Empire. A large standing army is to be kept constantly

on the war-footing, while the sea navy and the aerial fleet are to be kept up to such a strength as to be able to hold the rest of the Continent in practical subjection.

“In short, Olga aspires to nothing less than the throne of an empire which shall stretch from the Yellow Sea to the Atlantic Ocean. I am afraid, too, that there can be no doubt but that this conspiracy is not only favoured, but actually assisted, by large numbers of people throughout the Federation area.

“In fact, during the latter part of our stay at Mount Terror, the stronghold was visited by men of all nations, who, of course, came and went away in the submarine vessels, and who openly promised to do everything they could to further what they called the cause of the New Revolution in their own countries, on the understanding that the old evils of capitalism and private ownership of land by which their ancestors had grown wealthy are to be restored.

“This will, I trust, be enough to show you that the triumph of Olga Romanoff means nothing less than the complete undoing of all the work that was done in the days of the Terror.

“We have proved so far that Kerguelen, and, therefore, Aeria, is impregnable to attack save by surprise, which will now, of course, be impossible. But, on the other hand, the force at the disposal of Olga and her allies is still so strong that[131] all our present resources will have to be kept constantly employed to protect ourselves, and this leaves the world at the mercy of any Power which can obtain the assistance of the Russians’ aerial navy, which still numbers twenty-seven vessels, all equal to our best ships.

“In addition to these they possess a submarine navy of at least forty vessels, all of which are swifter and more powerful than ours, with the exception of the *Narwhal*. I therefore suggest that the whole of the resources at the command of the Council shall at once be devoted to the building of at least fifty air-ships of the *Ithuriel* type, and the same number of submarine battleships like the *Narwhal*, complete plans of which I enclose.

“Until this additional force is at our command, I think it would be useless to attempt the destruction of the Russian stronghold in Antarctica, and until this is destroyed there can be no hope of peace. This stronghold, which I will now attempt to describe for the information of the Council, is one of the most marvellous places on earth.

“It lies in and about Mount Terror and the Parry Mountains, which run from it towards the pole behind the ice-barrier of Antarctica. Nearly ten years ago a Russian explorer named Kishenov reached the ice-barrier and made the discoveries which have

enabled the Russian revolutionists to create their stronghold. In addition to his ship, he took with him three aerostats, which were chiefly constructed during his voyage, and also a small submarine vessel, which he took out in sections and put together at sea.

“He skirted the coast of Victoria Land, and was stopped by the ice in latitude 78°, as all other Antarctic explorers by sea have been since the voyage of Sir James Ross. The season was a singularly fine and open one, and two days after his arrival he inflated one of his aerostats and crossed the great barrier, to make a thorough exploration of the unknown land. Kishenov was the first man, not an Aerial, who had ever seen what there was on the other side of the Antarctic ice-wall.

“But he discovered far more than our explorers did, for[132] while he was in the neighbourhood of Mount Terror an earthquake, accompanying a violent eruption of Mount Erebus, made a huge fissure in the south side of Mount Terror. After waiting three days to make sure that the earthquake had subsided, he and two of his officers entered the crevice, which they found to be over two hundred feet wide at the level of the land ice.

“Furnished with storage batteries and electric lights, they penetrated into the interior of the mountain and found that it was pierced in all directions with great galleries and enormous chambers, hollowed out by volcanic forces during the period of Mount Terror’s activity. Four days were spent altogether in exploring this subterranean region, the existence of which was kept a profound secret by Kishenov and his officers.

“Not the least strange and, as it has proved, one of the most valuable portions of his discovery was the finding of a subterranean lake in the heart of Mount Terror, the temperature of which was kept far above the freezing point by the heat which the interior of the mountain derived from the neighbouring fires of Mount Erebus. Finding the lake to be salt water, he concluded that it must have some connection with the open sea, and so the next day he and the same two officers entered the submarine boat and penetrated underneath the ice-barrier.

“After a search of five hours, the search-lights of the boat revealed a huge tunnel leading south-west into the land, that is to say, direct for Mount Terror. They followed this tunnel up for a distance of nearly five miles, and then struck the end. They now rose, and finally found themselves floating on the surface of the lake in the interior of the mountain.

“One of Kishenov’s officers, a man named Louis Khemski, was a member of the Russian Revolutionary Society, whose existence only became known five years ago.

After the capture of the *Ithuriel* the heads of this society met, and to them this man communicated the secret of Mount Terror. Kishenov and the other officer refused to join the revolutionists, and were assassinated.

[133]

“Khemski was at once taken on board the *Ithuriel*, now renamed the *Revenge*, and guided her to the fissure leading into Mount Terror. Its outer portion was of course filled and covered with ice and snow, but as soon as Khemski had found its position by his landmarks, a couple of shells speedily reopened it, and it was here that the *Revenge* lay hidden while you were ransacking the world for her.

“Olga inherited from her grandfather, the father of the Vladimir Romanoff who was executed for disobeying the order of the Council, all the plans and directions necessary for the building both of air-ships and submarine vessels, and as soon as this perfect stronghold and hiding-place was discovered, her accomplices in the conspiracy for the restoration of the Russian monarchy at once devoted their fortunes to the supply of money and materials. The *Revenge* made one more voyage to Russia, and by travelling at full speed at a great elevation managed to make it unobserved.

“The services of the cleverest engineers and most skilful craftsmen among the revolutionists were secured. Transports were chartered and sent out to Antarctica loaded with materials. On the shores of the subterranean lake the first squadron of submarine vessels was built, and then began the system of ocean terrorism which soon paralysed the trade of the world.

“Piracy was carried on with utter ruthlessness. Transports were sunk by the vessels, and then plundered by divers of the treasure which they carried, and which was employed to purchase new materials and to repay those who had furnished the first funds.

“Alexis and myself were kept by Olga, as I said in my first letter, under the influence of a drug which completely paralysed our volitional power, and were compelled to reveal all we knew concerning our own air-ships, submarine vessels, guns, and explosives. And in this manner was created and equipped the force which will be employed to dispute with us the empire of the world unless we are able to extirpate it utterly.”

While the despatch to the Council was being drawn up,[134] the *Narwhal* had been lying in the inner basin of Christmas Harbour, renewing her store of motive power from the generating station ashore. As soon as the engineer in charge reported that her power-reservoirs were full, and Alan had delivered the despatch for conveyance to Aeria by air-ship, Alexis, who had been apparently buried in a brown study for the last

two hours or so, asked Alan to come with him into his private cabin, and as soon as the two friends were alone together he said to him—

“Look here, old man! While you fellows have been drawing up that despatch, and talking about the impossibility of attacking the stronghold at Mount Terror, I’ve been doing some thinking, and I’ve come to the conclusion that as far as an under-sea attack is concerned, it isn’t quite so hopeless as you’ve made out.”

“I shall be only too delighted to hear you prove us wrong,” replied Alan, his eyes brightening at the prospect, for he knew Alexis too well not to be sure that he would not have spoken in this way unless he had pretty solid reasons for doing so. “Say on, my friend; I am all attention.”

“Get out to sea, then, as fast as ever you can,” said Alexis, “for there’s not an hour to be lost if you adopt my plan, and if you don’t we can just come back.”

“Very well,” said Alan. “What’s the course?”

“Clear the islands and head away southward as hard as you can go,” replied Alexis briefly.

The excitement of the battle in which he had played such a terrible part had left Alan in just the frame of mind to listen to the project of a desperate adventure, such as he instinctively knew was now in his friend’s mind. Without hesitating further he went into the saloon, summoned the crew of the *Narwhal*, and said to them—

“Alexis and I have decided upon an enterprise which will end either in very great injury to our enemies or our own destruction. You have seen enough to-day to know that in the warfare we are engaged in there are only two choices: victory or destruction. We don’t want to take anyone against[135] his will to what may be certain death. Those who care to go ashore may do so.”

Not a man moved. An athletic sailor named George Cosmo, who held the post of chief engineer, saluted, and said briefly—

“We shall all go, sir. What are the orders?”

“Get out of the harbour as fast as you can, and as soon as you are clear of the islands sink two fathoms, steer a straight course due south-east, and put her through the water as hard as she’ll go,” replied Alan.

Cosmo saluted again, and left the room with his comrades to execute the order.

“Now, my friend,” said Alan, turning to Alexis as soon as they were alone again, “what is your plan?”

“Simply this,” replied Alexis. “Mount Terror, or at any rate the mouth of the submarine tunnel, is in round numbers three thousand geographical miles from here. Our speed is thirty miles an hour faster than that of Olga’s squadron. That means that even if they go back at once and at full speed we shall be there four or five hours before them.

“They, I think, have had quite enough fighting for to-day, and I don’t believe they’ll attack the island again—first, because they know that they can’t take our sea defences by surprise, and, second, because they think the *Narwhal* will remain on guard.

“Either they will go off on a raiding expedition somewhere else with the air-ships—in which case we can’t follow them, for we don’t know where they’re going—or they will return to Mount Terror at an easy speed of fifty or sixty miles an hour. They will never dream that you and I will venture to attack the stronghold single-handed, and, therefore, that is just what I propose to do.”

“That will be odds of about forty to one against the *Narwhal*,” replied Alan, somewhat gravely. “Unless we can destroy it completely before they get back. But go on. Let’s hear the rest. I don’t think you can propose anything too desperate for me now that I have really tasted the blood of the enemy.”

[136]

“Well, what I propose is not to destroy the stronghold, simply because it would be impossible to do that by sea. I merely propose to get quietly into the tunnel, go to that narrow part about two miles from the entrance, fix a dozen torpedoes with time-fuses up against the roof of the tunnel, and then clear out into the open water.

“When those twelve torpedoes go off if they don’t bring a few thousand tons of rock down into the tunnel and block it pretty securely I’ll grant I know very little about explosives.”

“Good so far, very good!” said Alan. “I confess I envy you that idea. What next?”

“Well, after that,” replied Alexis. “You see we shall have shut in the vessels that are inside and shut out those that are outside. The ones inside will be no use for some time, for it will take the divers a good many days to open the tunnel again, even if they ever do.

“As for those outside, we can lie in wait for them if they return, and trust to the *Narwhal*’s speed and strength to sink as many of them as we can, or else, if they don’t put in an appearance, we can come home with the consciousness that we have done about all the damage in our power. Now, what do you think?”

Alan was silent for a few moments, weighing the pros and cons of the desperate venture—for desperate it was, in spite of the incomparable speed and strength of the splendid vessel he commanded.

It was easy enough, always supposing that it could be accomplished without interruption; but to be caught in the tunnel, as was quite possible, between a force inside and one outside meant almost certain destruction, for if the *Narwhal* was not rammed and sunk in a space too narrow for her to turn she would be certain to be blown up by the torpedoes which would be launched against her.

In the end, the very character of the desperate venture, combined with the magnitude of the injury it would do to the enemy, overcame the scruples of his prudence. He put his[137] hand on Alexis’ shoulder, and giving him a gentle shake, said with a laugh—

“Bravo, old philosopher! You’ve done more with your thinking than we have with our talking and writing. We’ll do it, if there isn’t a square foot of the *Narwhal* left when the business is over.”

“I knew you’d say that,” said Alexis. “Now let’s have some dinner and go to sleep, for we shall want it.”

It was then very nearly midday, and the *Narwhal* had cleared the islands, and, with her prow pointed direct for the north-eastern extremity of Wilkes’s Land, was rushing at full speed through the water about twelve feet below the surface of the sea. For twenty hours she sped silently and swiftly and unseen on her way, swept round the ice-barrier that fences the northern promontory of Victoria Land and into the bay dominated by the fiery crest of Mount Erebus.



[138]

CHAPTER XIV. FROM THE SEA TO THE AIR.



TWENTY-FOUR hours after she had reached Mount Terror the *Narwhal* came into the inner basin of Christmas Harbour, running easily along the surface, with the red flag flying at her flagstaff. The news spread rapidly through the little settlement, the dwellers in which had been wondering greatly at her sudden disappearance, and there was quite a crowd on the jetty as she ran alongside. Max Ernstein was among it, and as the battleship came to a standstill he saw to his amazement Alan spring ashore and come towards him with outstretched hands.

“Why, what does this mean?” he said, as he grasped his hand. “I thought you told me you were never going to leave the *Narwhal* until”—

“Until we had done what we have done,” said Alan with a laugh, as he returned his hand-clasp with a grip that made the bones crack. “We have destroyed a good half of what remained of the Russian sea navy, and, what’s more, we’ve blown up the entrance to their submarine dockyard, and completely crippled them as far as building or equipping new vessels is concerned until they can find a new harbour.”

“Magnificent!” exclaimed Ernstein. “Glorious! You’ll be wearing the golden wings again in forty-eight hours.”

“If I am,” said Alan, flushing with pleasure at the thought, “the credit will be due to Alexis, and not to me. It was his[139] idea entirely. But never mind that now. We’ve suffered rather badly, and only just escaped with our lives. Five out of six of the *Narwhal*’s crew are disabled, and I want you to get them out and send them away to Aeria as soon as possible. Meanwhile Alexis and I will write our despatch to the Council.”

His instructions were obeyed at once, and the invalids were transferred to the *Vega*, the air-ship that was to convey them to Aeria, and in her luxurious state-rooms their hurts were attended to by the best skill on the island while the despatch was being drawn up.

It was brief, plain, almost formal in language, and confined entirely to statement of bare fact, and in little more than an hour after the arrival of the *Narwhal* at Christmas Harbour the *Vega* had risen into the air, and was speeding on her way towards Aeria.

Meanwhile the news of the daring venture and brilliant exploits of Alan and Alexis and their comrades spread like wildfire through the island, and everyone who was not

engaged on duties that could not be left came to the settlement to see and congratulate the two heroes of the hour, whose strange and romantic fate, so well known to every Aerian, had thus suddenly been glorified by the triumph of the genius and daring which had proved capable of wresting victory from defeat and glory from misfortune.

Although some were more demonstrative, none were heartier or more sincere in their congratulations than Edward Forrest, the admiral of the station, and, unknown to Alan and Alexis, he and Ernstein had sent a joint despatch by the *Vega*, strongly urging both the justice and the policy of at once restoring to the full rights of citizenship the two men who had proved themselves possessed of such extraordinary ability.

If the battle for the empire of the world was to be fought over again, the command of the forces of Aeria could not be entrusted to any hands so able and so daring as those of the President's son and his friend and companion in misfortune and victory. The triumphs at Kerguelen and Antarctica had really been due to them alone. They had given warning of [140] the attack on the station, and it was due to the skill and boldness of their strategy that it had been foiled with such disaster to the enemy.

This of itself was much, but it had not satisfied either their ambition or their devotion, for, after it had been accomplished, they had carried the war almost single-handed in the Russian stronghold, and there, under circumstances of unparalleled danger to themselves, they had struck a blow which could not fail to cripple the sea-power of the enemy, and so influence to an incalculable extent the ultimate issue of the war which, ere long, might be raging over the whole world.

That night, while the almost constant storms of the southern winter were sweeping over the barren surface of Desolation Land, a feast was held in the central hall of the headquarters at Christmas Harbour in honour of the double victory and the return of the two chief heroes of it from their long captivity. The next day was spent in a rigorous inspection of all the defences of the island and the machinery and ammunition of the air-ships and submarine vessels. At six o'clock in the evening, twenty-six hours after she had started, the *Vega* returned from Aeria, bringing the reply of the Council to the despatches which she had taken.

The Council has heard with great satisfaction of the repulse of the attack on the station at Kerguelen and of the distinguished services rendered by Alan Arnold and Alexis Mazarov, both at Kerguelen and Mount Terror.

In recognition of the great skill and devotion they have displayed, the Council invites them to assume the command of the air-ship *Ithuriel*, and to make use of that vessel

to execute such plans and purposes as in their discretion will best serve the interests of the State of Aeria for a period of one year from the present date. They will be supplied with motive power and all stores and materials of war at any of the oceanic stations.

The Council accepts the recommendation contained in the supplement to the first despatch, and has given orders for the immediate building of a hundred air-ships of the *Ithuriel* class and the same number of submarine battleships of the *Narwhal* type. These are expected to be ready for service at the end of the year, by which time the Council hopes to be able to call upon Alan Arnold and Alexis Mazarov to assume the duties of admiral and vice-admiral of the aerial navies, and at the same time to restore to them full privileges of citizenship in Aeria.

The admiral and officers of Kerguelen will give all assistance in the carrying out of these directions, and will make and transmit all necessary reports in[141] connection with them. No further hostilities are to be undertaken for the present by the aerial or sea forces, but they will maintain a strict watch against all possible surprises on the part of the enemy, and be ready to repel any assault which may be made. This order does not apply to the air-ship *Ithuriel*.

Given in the Council Hall of Aeria on the Eleventh day of May in the hundred and thirty-second year of the Deliverance.

Alan Arnold, President.

Francis Tremayne, Vice-President.

To Edward Forrest,

Admiral in Command at the Station of Kerguelen.

Such was the reply of the Council to the news of the daring foray made by the *Narwhal* upon the stronghold of Mount Terror, and the suggestions of Admiral Forrest and Captain Ernstein. Although it did not precisely adopt the latter, which, indeed, the Council was well justified in looking upon as inspired rather by enthusiasm than the judicial spirit proper to the occasion, it was even more satisfactory both to Alan and Alexis than an immediate recall would have been.

True, they had done great and brilliant service in the first few days of their return to freedom. They had virtually crippled the Russian sea-power by the blows which they had so skilfully, so swiftly, and so daringly struck, but neither of them felt that this was a sufficient achievement to warrant their full restoration to all that they had lost through the fatal error that they had made on board the old *Ithuriel*.

Both, indeed, longed ardently for just such further opportunity of devoting themselves to the service of their race and country as this order offered them. In command of the new *Ithuriel*, one of the swiftest and most formidable aerial warships in existence, there was no telling the damage that they might do to the enemy or what service they might render to their friends.

They knew that, as regarded the Russian force, the odds against them were about twenty-four to one, and they also knew that Olga and her lieutenants would lose no time in increasing their navy to the utmost extent in their power in preparation for the war of extermination that was now inevitable.

They had a year before them during which they would have^[142] an absolutely free hand, and all the supplies that the resources of Aeria could give them. True, it was a year of exile and probation, but they gladly welcomed the test of fidelity and devotion which it offered, and which, worthily passed through, would mean restoration of all they had lost, and a return to their friends and kindred in their beloved valley of Aeria armed with powers and responsibilities which would make them practically the arbiters of the destinies of their people, and perhaps of the whole human race.

But the *Vega* had brought something more to the two friends and exiles than the reply of the Council to their despatches, for immediately he landed her captain handed to Alan a small sealed packet addressed to him in the handwriting of his sister Isma. When he opened it, as he did at the first opportunity that found him alone, he found that it contained two letters and two chromatic photographs.

The letters were from his parents and sister. His father's was, as may well be imagined, very different from the cold and formal despatch that he had signed as President of the Council. It was full of tender and loving sympathy for him in the strange fate that had overtaken him, and, while it entirely absolved them of all moral blame for the loss of the flagship and the lives of his companions, it exhorted him earnestly to apply himself without useless regrets to the work of the year of probation which the Council had seen fit to impose upon him, and it ended with an assurance that the happiest day that had been known in Aeria within the memory of its citizens would be that on which the golden wings would be replaced on their foreheads in the Council Hall of the city.

To this letter was added another, written by Alan's mother, and written as only a mother can write to her son. Strong and well tried as he was, there were tears in Alan's eyes when he had finished reading these two letters, but they did not remain there long after he had begun the one from his sister.

Isma, proud beyond measure of the exploits of her brother and the man she still looked upon as her lover, and absolutely assured that when the time came both would return covered[143] with honour, wrote in the highest spirits. As it was an invariable rule of life among the Aerians to be perfectly frank with one another, and to take every precaution to avoid those misunderstandings which in a less perfect state of society had produced so much personal and social suffering, she told him in plain yet tender language exactly what had passed between her and Alma on the night that his first letter had been received.

Yet she said nothing that in any way committed either Alma or himself to a renewal of the troth which had been broken by the designs of Olga Romanoff, and though she sent her remembrances to Alexis, she sent them as though to a friend, tacitly giving both to understand that no words of love must pass between the two exiles and their former sweethearts until they met again upon equal terms.

But there was another message not contained in the letter, or written in any words, which said more than all that she had written, and this was conveyed by the photographs, which she sent without a word of allusion to them. As Alan looked upon them the six years of mental slavery and degrading servitude to the daughter of the enemies of his race passed away for the moment, and he saw himself standing with Alma in one of the groves of Aeria plighting his boyish troth on the night before he started on his fatal voyage in the *Ithuriel*.

The face that looked at him with such marvellous lifelikeness, with all its perfection of form and exquisite colouring, reproduced with the most absolute fidelity, was the same face that had been upturned to his to receive his kisses on that never-to-be-forgotten night. And yet, in another sense, it was not the same.

That had been the sunny, smiling face of a girl to whom sorrow and evil were as absolutely unknown as they would be to an angel in heaven, but this was the face of a woman who had lived and thought and suffered.

And when he remembered that whatever of sorrow or suffering she had known had been on his account, the last lingering traces of the vile spells of the evilly beautiful Syren of the[144] Skies, who had so fatally bewitched him, vanished from his soul, and the old love revived within him pure and strong, and intensified tenfold by the knowledge of the great reparation that he owed to the girl upon whose life he had brought the only shadow it had ever known.

He knew that their hands would never meet again until all that had been lost was regained, at whatever cost of labour or devotion that might be necessary on his part,

but he also knew that in all these years no other man had been found worthy to fill the place that he had once occupied, and which he was resolved to win back or die in the attempt, and this knowledge made him look forward to the mighty struggle which lay before him with an eagerness that augured well for its issue.

He had gone into his own cabin on board the *Ithuriel*, which was being rapidly prepared for her roving commission, to read his letters in solitude. He put Alma's photograph on the table, and sat before it with his eyes fixed upon it until every line of form and tint of colour was indelibly impressed anew upon his memory.

Then he kissed it as reverently as a devotee of old might have kissed a sacred relic, and then he attached the oval miniature to a chain of alternate links of azurine and gold, and hung it round his neck inside his tunic, registering a mental vow that if death came before he once more wore the golden wings, it should find it lying nearest his heart.

"This," he said, speaking to himself, as he took Isma's photograph up from the table, and looked fondly upon the radiantly lovely face that looked out from its frame, "is evidently not intended for me. Isma doesn't say who it's for, but I fancy that there is some one on board the *Ithuriel* who has a very much better right to it than I have. I wonder if Alexis is in his room?"

So saying, he left his cabin and found his friend still deep in the perusal of two lengthy letters from his father and mother.

"So you have had letters from home as well, old man? I[145] hope they've been as pleasant reading as mine have," he said, going to the couch on which Alexis was sitting, and holding one hand behind his back.

"Yes, they're from my father and mother, and so they can scarcely be anything else, so far as what they do say. It's what they don't say that gives me the only cause to find fault with them. But still that, I suppose, would be expecting too much under the circumstances."

He ended with something very like a sigh, and Alan replied as gravely as he could—

"And what might that be, my knight of the rueful countenance? Don't you think the Council have treated us splendidly, and given us a glorious opportunity of winning back all that the daughter of the Tsar has robbed us of?"

"Of course, I do," replied Alexis, looking up at him with a flush on his cheeks. "But for all that there is one thing still, something that I am not ashamed to say I value above everything else that I have lost or can regain."

“And that is—?”

“Well, to put it plainly,” replied Alexis, the flush deepening as he spoke, “these two letters don’t contain one single word about Isma. Now you know what I mean. Of course, I am ready to do everything that the Council may call upon us to do, and the moment that I know I have won back the right to wear the golden wings will be the proudest of my life, but it will be far from the happiest if I only go back to Aeria to find Isma another man’s wife, and what else can I think when they don’t so much as mention her name?”

“Be of good cheer, my friend,” replied Alan with a laugh, putting one hand on his shoulder, and taking the other from behind his back. “You will never find that, I can promise you. I am the bringer of good tidings. There, take those and feast your eyes and your heart on them in solitude as I have just been doing on something else.”

So saying he put Isma’s letter and photograph into Alexis’ hand, and without another word left him to gather courage and comfort from them as he had himself done.

[146]

CHAPTER XV.

OLGA IN COUNCIL.



THE remains of the Russian submarine squadron, numbering now only seventeen vessels, headed out northward into the open sea, after leaving their disabled consorts to their fate. In the brief space occupied by her first rush they had recognised the *Narwhal* both by her size and speed, and one of the captains avowed that he had recognised Alan Arnold, Olga’s late captive, standing under the glass dome of the conning-tower, steering the great vessel upon her devastating course.

Twenty miles out from the island they rose to the surface and made out the aerial fleet some five miles to the southward, hovering at an elevation of about a thousand feet, and evidently on the look-out for them. Michael Lossenski, who had escaped the ram of the *Narwhal*, ran up his flagstaff, and flew a signal which soon brought the air-ships bearing down upon them. The *Revenge* sank down to the surface of the water, and took Lossenski off his ship in order that he might report himself.

Olga and his father received the first news of the defeat of their naval forces with cold displeasure; but when Michael told them that more than half the fleet had been destroyed by the *Narwhal*, and that it was believed that Alan was in command of her, Olga's anger blazed out into fury, and she cried passionately—

“You fools and cowards to have fled like that from one ship and one man! Could not seventeen of you have overcome[147] that one vessel? Had you no rams, no torpedoes, that you fled before this single foe?”

He took the bitter rebuke in silence. He knew that he had failed both in duty and courage, and that a reply would only make matters worse. Olga looked at him for a moment, with eyes burning with scorn and anger. Then she rose from her seat, and, pointing to the door of the saloon, said—

“Go! You have disgraced yourself and us. Take your ships back to Mount Terror, and await our further commands.”

With bowed head and face flushed with shame, the disgraced man walked in silence out of the saloon and left Olga alone with his father. As soon as he had gone Olga began striding up and down the saloon, her hands clenched and her eyes, black with passion, glittering fiercely under her straight-drawn brows.

Orloff Lossenski knew her too well not to let her anger take its course uninterrupted, so he sat and watched her, and waited for her to speak first. At last she stopped in front of him, and said in a low fierce voice, that was almost hoarse with the strength of her passion—

“So! you were right, my friend. I was a fool, an idiot, to let those two escape. I ought to have killed them, as you advised. They were of no further use to us, and we could have done without them. Yes, truly I was a fool, such a fool as love makes of every woman!”

“Not of every woman, Majesty,” replied Lossenski in a low soothing tone, that was not without a trace of irony. “If I may say it without disrespect, your ancestress, the great Catherine, knew how to combine love and wisdom. When she wearied of a lover, or had no further use for a man, she never left him the power of revenging his dismissal.”

“Yes, yes,” she replied. “I know that; but I did not weary of this man, this king among men, for whose love I would have sold my soul. I only wearied of my own attempts to win it. You know what I mean, Lossenski, and you can understand me, for you have confessed that he was well worthy of the sacrifice.

“You know that when he seemed my lover he was only my[148] slave—that I could not compel the man to love me, but only the passive machine that I had made of him, and

you know, too, that the moment I had let him regain his freedom of will he would have loathed and cursed me, as no doubt he is doing now.

“Why did I not kill him? How could I, when I loved him better than my own life, and all my dreams of empire? Why, I could not even kill the other one because he was Alan’s friend, and because he would have hated me still more for doing so.

“But, after all,” she continued, speaking somewhat more calmly, “it is not setting them free that has done the mischief. It is the treason or the miracle that enabled them to capture the *Narwhal*. I would give a good deal to know how that was done. They cannot have done it themselves, for I had given them enough of the drug to deprive them of all will-power for at least twenty-four hours, and I told that traitor, Turgenieff, who must have betrayed the attack on Kerguelen, to give them more when he landed them on the island.”

“But is your Majesty sure that they took the drug?” said Lossenski, interrupting her for the first time. “Did you give it with your own hand, or see them take it with your own eyes?”

“No!” said Olga, with a start. “I did not. I sent it to them by my maid, Anna, but she swore that she put it in their wine, and when they had finished their last meal the decanter was empty.”

“That was a grave mistake, Majesty,” said Lossenski, in a tone of respectful reproof, “and one which may yet cost you the empire of the world. It is such trifles as that which destroy the grandest schemes.”

“I know! I know!” said Olga impatiently. “You may think me a fool and a weakling, but I could not bring myself to see or speak to Alan again after I had at last resolved to give up the hopeless task of winning him, and send him away.

“But for that mistake the *Narwhal* would still have been ours, and we should have taken Kerguelen unawares. He could have told his people nothing else that would have harmed us, for the more he tells them about Mount Terror the more impossible they will see any attack upon it to be. No, no, it was[149] all that one fatal mistake! But there, it tortures me to talk about it! Tell me, my old friend and counsellor, what we are to do to repair the damage?”

Exhausted by her fierce and sudden outburst of passion, and the bitterness of her regret, Olga threw herself into a chair and sat waiting for Lossenski to speak. He remained silent for several moments, buried in thought, and then he began speaking in the low, deliberate tone of a man who has weighty counsels to impart.

“We cannot deny, Majesty, that we have been worsted in our two first encounters with these Aerians, but we must learn wisdom and patience from defeat. It seems plain to me that the Aerians are too strong for us as we are.

“When we attacked them we forgot that, while we are children in warfare, they are perfect masters of it. They have preserved the traditions of their fathers, and for four generations they have been trained in the use of the weapons which we have only just learnt to use. Therefore my advice is that we do not attack them again for the present.”

“But,” interrupted Olga, “in any case, they will attack us, and we shall still have to fight.”

“Not of necessity, your Highness,” replied Lossenski. “You see they have not pursued us, and the reason for this is that they know that both our air-ships and our submarine vessels are swifter and more powerful than theirs, with two or three exceptions.

“They will not attack us till they can do so on equal terms, and we must take care that they never do that. You have plenty of treasure and plenty of men at your command. Let us retire to our stronghold again and devote ourselves to increasing our strength both by sea and in the air, until we have made ourselves invulnerable.

“And remember, too, Majesty,” he continued with an added meaning in his tone, “Aeria is not the world. There are vast possibilities before you in other directions. I am convinced now that we have made a mistake in attacking the Aerians first. Russia is ripe for revolt, and great quantities of arms[150] have already been manufactured. The tribes of Western Asia need only a leader to take the field, and the Sultan Khalid could put an army millions strong into the field within a few months.

“On the other hand, Anglo-Saxondom is a babel of conflicting opinions, and the mob rules throughout its length and breadth. Where everyone is master there can be no leaders, and those who are without leaders are the natural prey of the strong hand.

“They are wealthy and weak, and divided among themselves. The Aerians have given them over to their own devices. Why should you not, when we have repaired the damage we have suffered, take your aerial squadron to Moscow, proclaim the new revolution, and crown yourself Tsarina in the Kremlin?”

In speaking thus Orloff Lossenski was really only putting into formal shape the project which it had all along been the aim of Olga and her adherents to carry out. There was nothing new in the suggestion save the proposition that the revolution should be proclaimed in Russia, and that Olga should crown herself Tsarina before, instead of after, the attempted subjugation of Aeria.

Up to the present it had been believed that nothing could possibly be done until the power of the Aerians was either crushed or crippled, but the battle of Kerguelen had clearly shown that this was a task far beyond their present resources. Even the mastery of the sea was now no longer theirs, thanks to the two fatal mistakes which Olga had made, first in setting Alan and Alexis free, and second in sending them away from Mount Terror in the swiftest and most powerful vessel in their sea-navy.

Why she had been guilty of this last imprudence she could not even explain to herself. It was one of those mistakes, made in pure thoughtlessness, which again and again have marred the greatest schemes of conquest. Another vessel would have done just as well, save that she would not have performed the errand quite so quickly; but the *Narwhal* happened to be in readiness at the moment, and as Peter Turgenieff, her commander,[151] was one of Olga's most trusted sea-captains, she had given him the order to convey Alan and Alexis to the island, and so the fatal error had been committed.

It must, however, be remembered that when she made it, it was impossible for her to foresee its disastrous outcome. She implicitly believed that the two Aerians were completely under the influence of the will-poison, and so utterly unable to think or act independently, or to form and execute the daring design which they had so successfully accomplished.

But now that the mistake had been made, Orloff Lossenski saw that the course he suggested to his mistress offered the only hope of counteracting it. His advice pointed out the shortest road to the attainment of the designs of Olga and her followers; and he gave it in all sincerity, for he was absolutely devoted to Olga's person and fortune, and the realisation of her ambition was the dearest dream of his own life.

It meant, too, the restoration of his own order to all its ancient rights and privileges with the added wealth and dignity that would be won by conquest. It meant the establishment of a Russian empire far greater and more powerful than that of the last of the Tsars, for its power would extend from the Pacific coast of Asia to the Atlantic coast of Europe.

Olga heard him with flushed cheeks and shining eyes, and, when he had done speaking, she rose to her feet again and faced him, looking every inch a queen, in the ripe beauty of her perfect womanhood, and said, in tones from which every trace of her former anger and sorrow had vanished—

“Well spoken, Orloff Lossenski! That is worthy counsel for you to give and for me to hear. I will follow it, for it is wise as well as bold, and the day that I crown myself in the

Kremlin you shall be the first noble in Russia. But, stop—what of the Sultan? Surely he and his armies will have to be reckoned with?”

“True,” said Lossenski. “But if he will not listen to reason, cannot your air-ships destroy his armies like swarms of locusts, lay his cities in ruins, and sweep him and his dynasty from the face of the earth?”

[152]

“Yes, that is true again,” replied Olga. “Provided that the Aerians did not come to his aid.”

“They would not do that, I think,” he replied.

“But to make that impossible why should you not make an alliance with him and offer to help him with your air-ships and submarine navy to the conquest of the world, on the condition of the restoration of the Russian Empire and the division of the world between you? Remember that as long as you kept the command of your navies of the air and the sea you could always keep him to the terms when once made.”

As the old man ceased speaking Olga laid her hand upon his shoulder, and said in a low, clear, steady voice that spoke of a great resolution finally taken—

“My friend, you are the wisest of counsellors, and when I regain my throne you shall be the first Minister of the Empire. I will pardon your son for his failure to-day for the sake of his father’s wisdom, and we will say no more about disaster and defeat. We will look forward only to victory and the empire that it will bring us!”

But when the defeated squadrons arrived at Mount Terror Olga was rudely awakened from her dreams of empire by the tidings of the disaster that had occurred during her absence.

The damage inflicted by the *Narwhal* was speedily proved to be irreparable. For a distance of nearly a mile the roof of the tunnel had sunk bodily down, blocking it for ever. Millions of tons of rock and earth had fallen into the submarine channel, and all hope of clearing it again was out of the question.

The explosion of the twelve torpedoes had not only brought down all the rocks in their vicinity, but it had so shaken the earth in both directions that a general subsidence had taken place, forming a barrier which was so vast and massive that its removal, even if possible, would have taken many months of labour; and so there was no avoiding the dismal conclusion that their submarine dockyard was useless, and, for the present at least, their sea-power crippled.

The effects of the explosion in the interior of the mountain,[153] though bad enough, were much less serious. Nearly seventy men, or more than half the total garrison that had been left behind, had been either killed or maimed for life. The six submarine warships that had been lying in the lake were, of course, useless now that their way to the sea was barred, and five of the twelve air-ships which had been lying in the vast cavern whose floor formed the shores of the subterranean lake were so seriously injured that considerable repairs would be necessary for them.

The whole of the lower level of the vast system of chambers and galleries which pierced the interior of the mountain in all directions had been flooded by the volumes of water projected from the lake by the explosion. Workshops, laboratories, and building-slips had been wrecked or thrown into complete confusion, and the appearance of the whole of the level was that of a place which had been swept by a tornado.

As soon as the amount of the damage done had been estimated, Olga called a council of war, composed of twelve of her most skilled and trusted adherents, in a chamber which was led up to by a path sloping steeply up from the shores of the lake. This chamber was an almost perfect oval, about sixty feet long by twenty wide, and about thirty high.

Neither its temperature nor its internal appointments would have given any idea of the fact that it was situated at the uttermost end of the earth, and buried under the eternal snows of Antarctica. The rough rock walls had been smoothed and hung with silken hangings, against which statues of the purest marble gleamed white, and pictures, some of vast size and exquisite execution, brought the scenes of sunnier lands to the eyes of the occupants.

Electric light-globes hung in festoons all around, shedding a mild diffused lustre over the luxurious furniture of the chamber. The floor of lava, smoothed and polished, was covered with priceless carpets into whose thick pile the foot sank noiseless, as though into soft, shallow snow.

Treasures, both of art and luxury, which had been plundered from ocean transports that had fallen victims to the rams[154] of the submarine cruisers were scattered about in lavish profusion that was almost barbaric in its excess. Behind the hangings of the walls ran an elaborate system of pipes which circulated fresh air drawn from the exterior of the mountain, and, heated by passing through electric furnaces, at once warmed and ventilated this council-chamber of the extraordinary woman who, in virtue of her strange conquest of the air, had come to be known among her followers as the Syren of the Skies.

Human art and science had completely conquered both the ruggedness of Nature and the inclemency of the elements, and had transformed these gloomy caverns, excavated by the volcanic fires of former ages out of the heart of Mount Terror, into warm, well-lighted, and airy abodes, capable of sheltering several hundred human beings from the rigours even of the Antarctic winter.

This subterranean retreat and stronghold was roughly divided into two levels, on the lower of which were situated the chambers and galleries which served for the performance of all the work necessary for the building of the air-ships and submarine vessels, while the upper was devoted to store-rooms and dwelling-places for the followers and assistants of the Queen of this strange realm.

No other region could have presented such a marvellous contrast to the sunlit and flower-scented paradise which was the home of their mortal enemies, the race with which they had dared to dispute the empire of the world. The powers of darkness and of light could hardly have been better typified than were these two contending forces by the different characters of their respective strongholds.

When the Council of War, summoned at Olga's bidding by Orloff Lossenski, had assembled in the Central Chamber, a pair of heavy purple velvet curtains parted, and the Syren entered from the gallery, which had been hewn through the solid rock and which communicated with her private suite of apartments. The members of the Council rose as she entered and greeted her as subjects were wont to greet their sovereigns in the days before the Terror.

[155]

She acknowledged their reverence with a royal condescension, and took her seat on a raised divan at the inner end of the chamber. Beckoning Lossenski to her side, she exchanged a few words with him in an undertone, and then called upon Andrei Levin, the Secretary of the Council, to enumerate the nature and extent of the losses they had sustained in their brief but disastrous first attempt to cope with the mighty race which had dominated the world for nearly a century and a half.

When Levin had finished, it was found that, in addition to the irreparable damage done to the submarine dockyard, no less than thirty-five submarine cruisers had been destroyed or rendered useless, while twenty-three air-ships had been annihilated by the projectiles of the Aerians. This left an available fighting force of twenty-eight submarine and twenty-four aerial warships fit for service.

It had been calculated that it would take at least a month of hard work to get the subterranean arsenal into such working order as would enable them to repair their

losses, and after this at least twelve months would have to elapse before they had brought their fighting force up to the strength it had possessed but five short days before.

In addition to their losses in ships and war materials, more than a hundred of Olga's chosen and most devoted followers had lost their lives in the terrible warfare which knew no sparing of life, and it would be necessary to draft more men from Russia to replace them before the work could be carried on upon an adequate scale.

Olga listened to the catalogue of disasters with frowning brows and eyes gleaming with hardly-suppressed fury. When it was over, she rose and spoke in a voice whose wonderful music and witchery seemed to charm all sense of misfortune for the time being out of the hearts of her listeners. A born queen of men, she knew when to wither with her scorn or to charm with her sweetness, and she was well aware that this hour of defeat and disaster was no time for reproaches or rebuke.

[156]

So her voice was low and sweet, and almost pleading, as she reviewed the situation, which, for the moment, seemed so dark, and appealed to her followers, through those who commanded them, not to yield before a sudden and temporary misfortune, but to learn from defeat the lessons of victory. She reminded them of all that their ancestors and hers had lost at the hands of the Terrorists, the forefathers of the hated and arrogant Aerians, and she painted in glowing colours the glory and the boundless wealth that would be the reward of victory.

Heavy as their losses had been, there was no reason why they should not repair them. She reminded them how, five years before, they had possessed but a single air-ship, and were only a weak and scattered body of revolutionaries. Now they possessed, even after all they had lost, an aerial fleet superior to all the vessels of the Aerial navies save two, and submarine cruisers swifter and more powerful than any that floated, save only the stolen *Narwhal*. More than this, they were now supported by a vast organisation numbering thousands of devoted men and women, any one of whom would give his or her life for the cause for which they were fighting.

She only spoke for a quarter of an hour or so, but every word went home, and when she concluded with an appeal to their loyalty and devotion, the twelve members of the Council rose with one accord to their feet, and there and then spontaneously renewed the oaths of fealty to her person and dynasty which they had taken when they enlisted in her service. Every man of them was a scion of some once noble Russian house, and her cause was theirs in virtue of personal interest as well as that sentiment of blind,

unreasoning loyalty which even four generations of freedom had failed to eradicate from the Russian blood.

Olga thanked them with a tremor in her voice which, whether it was real or not, spoke to them with far greater eloquence than words, and then she bade Lossenski lay before the Council the plans which she had already discussed with[157] him for the future conduct of the vast enterprise which had opened so inauspiciously.

Lossenski rose at once, and for over two hours unfolded a vast and subtly-conceived scheme, which has been very briefly outlined in a previous chapter, and the results of the working out of which will become apparent in due course.

At the end of the discussion which followed it was decided that a transport should be purchased as soon as possible in a Russian port and sent out to Antarctica with fresh supplies of men and materials.

A flotilla of twelve marine cruisers was told off to convoy her on her voyage, and protect her from possible attack in case the Aerians should suspect or discover the purpose to which she was devoted.

As no more submarine vessels could be built in Antarctica—for the fearful cold of the outside waters made such work totally impossible—all efforts were to be concentrated upon the increase of the aerial navy, and a hundred air-ships, in addition to those already in existence, was fixed upon as the minimum strength that it would be safe to depend upon, when the hour for the final struggle came.

No force was to be wasted, if possible, upon minor attacks or isolated engagements, for the Russians, like the Aerians, had learnt that, under the conditions of the new warfare, skirmishes only meant destruction in detail and loss of strength entirely disproportionate to the advantage gained.

Thus virtually the same decisions were arrived at in Aeria and Antarctica. Both sides resolved to husband their resources and increase their strength, and then to risk everything upon the issue of one mighty conflict, a veritable struggle of the gods, in which both equally recognised that the defeated would be annihilated and the victors would remain undisputed masters of the world.

Finally, it was decided that Orloff Lossenski should depart at once with a formal offer of alliance to the Sultan of the Moslem Empire, and that a day later Olga should follow with[158] a squadron of twenty air-ships and give him the alternative of alliance or immediate war.

If, as was confidently expected, he chose alliance, five submarine cruisers were to be given to him, so that he might use them as models for the construction of a fleet which should be powerful enough to sweep the Aerial warships from the seas, and which would be supplied with the secret motive power at a station to be established at Larnaka under Russian control.

Then, when all was in readiness for the world-war, Olga was to be proclaimed Tsarina in Moscow, and the standard of absolute monarchy once more reared over the re-erected throne of the House of Romanoff. Anglo-Saxondom was to be invaded and conquered, and Aeria itself attacked and either subdued or depopulated and laid waste.



[159]

CHAPTER XVI.

KHALID THE MAGNIFICENT.



A FEW minutes before midnight on the fifteenth of May, in the year 2036, Khalid the Magnificent, lord and master of the greatest and most splendid realm that had ever been ruled over by a single man since the world began, stood alone on the spacious terrace of his palace in Alexandria, gazing up at the myriads of stars that shone in the cloudless firmament above him, and dreaming one of those dreams of world-wide empire which had haunted the soul of such men as he from the days of Rameses the Great until his own.

He was a man of thirty-four, tall, swarthy, and athletic, with the proud aquiline features of the Arab, the dark, alternately flashing and melting eyes of the Circassian, and the strong, reposeful dignity of the Turk—a man whom women looked upon with love and men with respect that was often akin to dread.

The lord of seven hundred million subjects who, even in those days, so strong was still the faith and loyalty of the Moslem, looked upon him only as something less than

Allah and the Prophet whose sacred blood flowed in his veins, his soaring ambition was not content even with the splendid inheritance that he had received from his ancestors.

In his being were closely blended those elements of religious enthusiasm and worldly ambition which had made the men of the Golden Age of Islam such irresistible conquerors and such[160] mighty rulers of men. He had pondered over the past history of his faith and his people from the times of the Prophet down to his own, until he had come to believe himself the man chosen by Destiny to subjugate the world, and to compel all men, from pole to pole, and east to west, to accept the rule and faith of Islam, and to confess the unity of God and the apostleship of Mohammed.

He saw in the vast area of the Anglo-Saxon Federation, which now, in name at least, dominated Europe, America, and Australasia, only a collection of democratic and ill-governed States in which the mob ruled by blind counting of heads, and in which religion had been refined into a mere philosophy of life and morals, the last word of which seemed to him to be: Make the best of to-day, lest to-morrow should never come.

In his own breast the flame of the fierce, uncompromising faith of Islam burnt, undimmed by the mists of the centuries that had passed since the first Moslem armies had emerged from the deserts of Arabia to conquer the greater part of the Roman world.

Why should he not send forth his armies, as the Khalifs of old had done, to plant the banner of the Crescent over the subjugated realms of Christendom, and rule, the greatest of the Commanders of the Faithful, sovereign lord of a Moslem world?

It was a splendid destiny, but there was a power in the world, located in one tiny spot of earth, and yet, so far as he knew, universal and irresistible, before which the armies which he had called into existence would be as helpless as a swarm of locusts before a forest fire.

This power possessed the empire of the air, and therefore of the earth. In the days of the Terror it had led the Anglo-Saxon race to the conquest of the world. Would it sit idly now behind the bulwarks of Aeria and watch his armies conquering the domains of Anglo-Saxondom?

Was it not far more likely that those terrible air-ships would be sent forth to hurl their destroying lightnings from the skies and overwhelm his armies and his cities in irretrievable[161] ruin? These Aerians had ruled the world for a hundred and twenty-five years, and yet had committed no act of aggression upon the rightful liberties of

any nation. How, therefore, could he believe that they would hold their mighty hand while he carried fire and sword through the habitations of their blood and kindred?

If he gave the word for war, within forty-eight hours after he had spoken more than ten millions of men, armed with weapons of fearful precision and destructive power, would stand ready to do his bidding and to carry the banner of the Crescent to the uttermost ends of the earth; but of what use would be their numbers, their valour, or their devotion with a squadron of aerial cruisers wheeling above them and hurling death and destruction upon them from the inaccessible heights of the sky?

He remembered how his ancestor Mohammed Reshad had been stopped in his career of conquest, and how his victorious armies had been decimated and thrown into confusion by a flotilla of air-ships and war-balloons which a dozen cruisers of the present Aerial navy would have swept from the skies in a few minutes. Intolerable as the thought was to his haughty soul, the truth remained that, in the midst of all his power and splendour, he was as helpless as a child before the real masters of the world. He had armies and fleets, but he could not make war without their permission or the assurance of their neutrality, save with the certainty of disaster and defeat.

What would he not give for a squadron of these aerial battleships? Half his empire, willingly, and yet he knew that even an attempt to build a single air-ship would be the signal for his own death and the end of the dominion of his dynasty.

He had no knowledge of the momentous events which had just been taking place on the other side of the world. He still believed implicitly in the unquestioned supremacy of the Aerials throughout the domain of the skies, although he was well aware that some mysterious power had successfully disputed^[162] with them the command of the seas, and he remembered the stern threat of immediate war and annihilation that the President of Aeria had promulgated against any who should even help in the concealment of the air-ship that had been lost six years before, and, so far as the world at large was concerned, had never been heard of since.

Anglo-Saxondom, and therefore Christendom, lay at his mercy but for this guardian power of the air. Its millions were unarmed and its wealth unprotected. Its indolent and luxurious democracies, occupied solely with social experiments and the increase of their material magnificence, would be crushed almost without resistance by his splendidly armed and disciplined legions.

The Crescent would replace the Cross above their temples, and the world would be a Moslem planet but for this empire of the air, universal and unconquerable, which barred his way to the dominion of the world and the final triumph of his faith.

For the hundredth time he had revolved the hopeless dilemma in his mind, alternately looking upon the conquests he longed for, and on the splendid but useless forces at his command, when a huge, strange shape dropped swiftly and silently out of the sky overhead, and, as though in answer to the unspoken call of his intense longing, one of those very air-ships of which he had been thinking with such angry despair swept with a majestic downward sloping curve out of the dusk of the night, and ran up close alongside the low parapet of the terrace on which he was standing.

It was the first time he had ever seen one of these marvellous vessels, which were the talk and the wonder of the world, at such close quarters. Paralysed for the moment by mingled curiosity and amazement, he recoiled with a startled invocation to the Prophet on his lips, and then stood staring at it in silence, wondering whether the strange apparition meant the visit of a friend or an enemy.

While he was standing thus the air-ship drifted as silently as a shadow over the parapet, and sank gently down until it[163] rested on the marble floor of the vast terrace. Then a sliding door opened in the after-part of the glass dome which covered the deck from stem to stern, a light metal stairway fell from it, and three men richly and yet simply dressed descended to the terrace and advanced to where he stood.

Two of them halted at a respectful distance, and the third, a man whose dignity of bearing was enhanced by the snowy whiteness of his hair and beard, advanced alone, and with a grave and courteous gesture of salute said in English, the language of universal intercourse—

“Am I right in believing this to be the palace of his Majesty the Sultan?”

It was some moments before Khalid recovered his composure sufficiently to answer the question, simple as it was. His wonder was increased tenfold when he saw that his visitor from the skies did not wear the golden wings which were the insignia of the Aerians.

Was it possible that some other inhabitants of the earth had, in spite of the rigid prohibition of the Supreme Council, managed to build an aerial navy? His heart leapt with exultation at the thought. Obeying the impulse of the moment, he took a stride forward and held out his hand, saying—

“I know not who you are, or whence you come, but if you come in friendship there is my hand in welcome. This is the palace, and I am Khalid, the Commander of the Faithful. What is your errand?”

His visitor took the outstretched hand, and, bending low over it, replied in a tone of the deepest respect—

“I am honoured and fortunate beyond measure! I trust your Majesty will pardon the strangeness of my coming for the importance of the mission that brings me.”

“Say on, sir, and tell me freely who you are and what your mission is, for I am all impatience to know,” said the Sultan, speaking even more cordially than before.

“I am Orloff Lossenski,” replied the ambassador from the skies, “and I am the bearer of a message from my mistress, Olga Romanoff, by right of descent Tsarina of the Russias,[164] and deprived of her lawful rights of rule by the Terrorists who reign in Aeria.”

“Then you are enemies of the Aerians?” broke in the Sultan, “and you possess air-ships like that marvellous craft yonder! How have you—but pardon me, I have interrupted you. You can satisfy my curiosity later on.”

“Her Majesty, my mistress, possesses a large fleet of air-ships, of which this is one,” replied Lossenski, “and she has sent me as her envoy to give your Majesty this letter which will explain my mission in full. At this hour to-morrow night the Tsarina will come in person to receive your answer to it.”

As he spoke he presented a letter to the Sultan, and then drew back a pace. Khalid took the missive without a word and walked towards one of the electric lamps with which the terrace was lighted, breaking the seal as he went. This is what he read—

To Khalid the Magnificent,
Sultan of the Moslems.

You have dreams of world-wide conquest, but the fear of the power of the Aerians restrains you from putting them into action. You command armies and fleets, but they are useless and helpless because you cannot fight in the air as well as on land and sea.

I can give you the power of doing this, and I will help you to the conquest of the world if you will help me to regain the dominions that were stolen from my ancestors in the days of the Terror.

Twenty-four hours after you receive this I will come for your answer to it. If you agree to the general terms I have no fear but that the details will be easily arranged between us. This is brought to you by Orloff Lossenski, my chief counsellor and responsible

minister, who, at your Majesty's desire, will lay the particulars of my proposals before you in full.

Olga Romanoff,
Tsarina of the Russias.

Hardly had the Sultan finished the perusal of this strangely curt and yet all-pregnant letter when a cry from Lossenski's two attendants caused him to look up. If what he had seen but a few minutes before had amazed him, what he saw now fairly stupefied him. A second air-ship, similar in size and shape to the first, but with a hull of a strangely lustrous blue^[165] metal, had dropped without sign or sound out of space, and was hovering exactly above Lossenski's vessel with her ten long slender guns pointing in all directions.

A moment later she seemed to drop bodily on to the Russian air-ship, splintering her thin steel masts with the weight of her hull, and yet stopping in her descent before she crushed in the glass dome of the deck. The next instant a score of men slipped swiftly over the side and gained the open door of the Russians' deck-chamber. Then there came a sound of fierce cries and oaths, and the quick crackling reports of repeating pistols.

The envoy's two companions turned as though to fly, but two shots fired in quick succession brought them down before they had made a couple of strides. Then a dozen men leapt down upon the terrace and covered Lossenski and the Sultan with their pistols before they had time to recover from the stupefaction into which the suddenness of the attack had thrown them.

The next moment a man, whose splendid stature raised him a good head above the Russian and the Moslem, came down the steps from the deck of the now captured air-ship. As he advanced towards them Khalid, brave and haughty as he was, looked up at him almost as he might have looked upon the visible shape of one of the angels of his faith.

He was dressed in the Aeria costume, save for the fact that, instead of azurine and gold, his winged coronet was black and lustrous as polished jet. In his left hand he carried a magazine pistol, and in his right a long slender rapier with a blade of azurine that gleamed with an intense blue radiance in the light of the electric lamps.

"Orloff Lossenski, you are our prisoner! Go back to your ship or you will be shot where you stand. Sultan Khalid, have you received that letter in your hand from this man?"

Alan's words came quick and stern, but before they were spoken the Sultan had put a golden whistle to his lips and blown a shrill call, in instant obedience to which a stream of [166] armed guards issued from a door of the palace opening on to the terrace, spread out into a semi-circle, and in turn Alan and his companions were covered by a hundred rifles.

"Now, sir, whoever you are," exclaimed the Sultan, recovering at once his courage and his composure, "you are *my* prisoner! Throw down your arms, or"—

"Stop!" cried Alan, in a voice that rang clearly over the whole terrace. "Don't you see that your palace is under our guns? Fire a shot, and in an hour it shall be a heap of ruins."

Khalid had forgotten the air-ships for the moment. He glanced up at the two rows of guns, and saw in the lighted interiors of the deck-chambers men standing ready to rain death and ruin in every direction.

Lossenski, too, grasped the suddenly changed situation in an instant. He knew far better than the Sultan did what would be the effect of a discharge of that awful artillery upon the palace and the city, and more than this, he saw the hopeless ruin of his mistress's plans that would follow the death of the Sultan. He turned to him with an appealing gesture, and said—

"Your Majesty, for the sake of all you hold dear, send back your guards! I surrender to save you!" and then, with a glare of impotent hate at Alan, he turned and walked quickly towards the air-ships.

Nothing could have brought the terrible power of the Aerians home to the mind of Khalid the Magnificent more convincingly than the position in which he now stood. Absolute master of the greatest empire on earth, he stood on the terrace of his own palace, in the midst of his own capital, and with thousands of soldiers within call, as helpless as a child.

But before he could force the words of surrender from his reluctant lips an event occurred which, brave as he was, struck terror to his heart. Alan had raised his rapier to command the attention of his men at the guns, and the captain of the Sultan's guards, thinking he was going to strike his master, [167] rushed forward and struck at the uplifted blade with his scimitar. As the steel rang upon the azurine the Damascus blade splintered to the hilt.

With a cry half of rage and half of fear the Moslem whipped a pistol out of his sash, but before he could level it the bright blue blade descended swiftly, and when its point

was within a foot of his assailant's eyes Alan dropped his own pistol and pressed a jewel in the centre of his belt-clasp. As he did so a pale blue flame leapt from the point of his sword, and the Moslem, without as much as a sigh, dropped dead on the floor of the terrace.

"Mashallah!" cried the Sultan, recoiling in ungovernable terror. "What are you, man or fiend, that you carry the lightnings in your hand?"

"A man like yourself, Sultan, and one who wishes your Majesty no evil," replied Alan. "I am Alan Arnold, the son of the President of Aeria, and therefore your friend, unless you choose to make me your enemy. I am at present in command of the cruiser *Ithuriel*, and we have followed that Russian vessel for over five thousand miles to find out what his errand was. When he landed on your palace we guessed it, I think, pretty nearly. Lossenski came to propose an alliance between your Majesty and his mistress, Olga Romanoff, did he not?"

Before he replied the Sultan, seeing some of his guards advancing again, and being now convinced that resistance was both unnecessary and impossible, ordered them to take away the body of their comrade and those of the two Russians who had been shot. Then he turned to Alan, and said with politeness that was perhaps more Oriental than sincere—

"Pardon my ignorance, Prince of the Air! I did not know that I was speaking to the son of one who is above all the kings of the earth. That slave deserved his death for raising his arm against your Highness. Yes, you are right. The Russian came to me with such a proposal from her you name. Here is her letter. She styles herself Tsarina of the Russias, but I have never heard her name before. Who is she?"

[168]

"I will tell your Majesty," said Alan, taking the letter which the Sultan now held out to him without hesitation, "for no one can tell you better than I can. She is the last living child of the House of Romanoff. She is beautiful beyond description, and evil beyond comprehension. She aspires to rule in fact as what she styles herself in name, and to bring back the gloom of despotism and oppression on the earth.

"She and her accomplices are responsible for that terrorism of the seas which has paralysed international commerce for more than five years, and they are also in possession of a fleet of about thirty air-ships. How they were enabled to construct them there is now no time to explain. Suffice it to say that they have them, that they have dared to challenge the forces of Aeria to a contest for the empire of the world,

and that during the fortnight they have been fighting they have had very much the worst of it.

“We have practically crippled their sea-power, blown up their submarine dockyard, and destroyed about half of their aerial fleet. I tell you this in order that you may receive her proposals with your eyes open. The course of events has made your Majesty to a great extent the arbiter of the destinies of humanity.

“Olga Romanoff knows that you have a splendid army at command, that you have illimitable wealth to spend on war material, and that an alliance between you would be irresistible. As an independent sovereign it is, of course, within your right, as it is within your power, to conclude this alliance if you think fit. Do so if you choose; but remember that if you do you must assume the tremendous responsibility of plunging the whole world into war, and bringing inconceivable desolation upon your fellow-creatures. You will be allying yourself with the worst enemies of humanity—nay, with the only enemies that humanity has on earth.