



THE STRUGGLE FOR EMPIRE
A STORY OF THE YEAR 2236
ROBERT WILLIAM COLE

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BY

ROBERT WILLIAM COLE

1900

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Robert W. Cole (1869-1937) was a former law student who became a photographer and author. He wrote three other novels in 1900 to 1908. All of his works were published by small presses which failed before the First World War and whose records are not available; this volume was published by Elliot Stock of 62 Paternoster Row, London E.C., a company most notable as a vanity press.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

IT was early in the morning of the 10th of June, in the year 2236. The sun rose in unrivalled splendour over the immense city of London, the superb capital, not only of England, but of the world, the Solar System, and the stars. It tipped the vast palaces with its golden rays; it flashed its light upon towers, domes, and cupolas; it drove away the sparkling dew and curling vapour from the masses of superb foliage and gorgeous flowering plants that rolled like oceans of precious stones around the towering buildings of the great city. Millions of human beings awoke to a new day of pleasure or labour, of joy or sorrow, but the brilliant King of Day ascended his appointed path through the sky unheeding and careless of the petty affairs of men.

What would the men of the nineteenth or twentieth centuries think if they could rise from the dead and see us now? They boasted of their civilization, but what would they think of ours? Their brick-and-mortar London, with its fog and dirt and crowds of narrow, unwholesome streets, has been changed into a splendid city built of the most beautiful granite and marble. It extends for miles far out into the provinces, covering hills and valleys with its imposing squares and winding streets diversified by colossal public buildings and places of amusement. The whole is traversed by a network of rivers, lakes, and streams, and varied by numerous parks and gardens. Mists, fogs, cold rains, and other nuisances of the older civilization, have been abolished, for the pole of the earth has been tilted round so that an almost tropical climate prevails through the whole of England. The air is purified from all deleterious matter by an ingenious scientific process. Salubrious showers of rain are brought whenever they are required by a force that was unknown two hundred years ago. Clouds are collected together or dispersed according as sunshine or shade is wanted.

The gardens and parks are filled with the most luxurious tropical plants, while birds of brilliant plumage flit about in the air or rest on the undulating masses of foliage. Gigantic trees of a species before unknown are seen on every side, here grouped into shady avenues, there dotted about in the parks and gardens, and surrounded by smaller but not less beautiful masses of vegetation. In some places the ground is coloured like a rainbow by the infinite variety of tropical plants, while the boughs of the trees are loaded down to the ground by the most luscious fruits. Everywhere fountains throw their refreshing showers into the air, while sheets and sprays of water burst forth from clefts in the rock and piles of mimic mountain scenery. Everything in and around the city is contrived on the most colossal and elegant style.

London is now the capital of the world, not, as formerly, from a commercial point of view, but in very fact; for the Anglo-Saxon race long ago absorbed the whole of the globe. The great European war, for which preparations were being made during the latter part of the nineteenth century, broke out with tremendous fury early in the twentieth. England, Germany, and the United States stood arrayed against France, Russia, Austria, Turkey, Italy, and a number of minor States. The earth was shaken by the convulsion. Torrents of blood were shed; armaments, the greatest that the world has ever seen, were totally annihilated in the terrible whirlwind of shot and pestilence. For a long time it seemed as if Great Britain must sink, overpowered by the vast hosts that beleaguered her, but she eventually came out of the struggle triumphant. Gigantic naval battles were fought at Dover, Gibraltar, Cairo, Constantinople, in the midst of the Atlantic, and in the Indian Ocean, and at last her enemies had not a ship or a colony left.

Then the drama was concluded on land. Germany crushed France and Austria in her iron grasp, and England subdued the rest, but not until some millions of her brave sons had perished on the field of battle.

The result of the war was that England obtained the whole of Turkey, a vast piece of the Russian Empire in Asia, and important ports and strongholds in France, Italy, and Spain; while Germany obtained as her share a good slice from France, Italy, and Russia. Shortly afterwards the United States were reunited to England, and the latter entered into a federal union with all the Teutonic States of Europe. The French race gradually died out, and their country was absorbed by the Federal Union, as were also Italy and Spain. The Russian Empire, pressed by England in Asia and by Germany in Europe, became so much reduced in size that at last it was quite insignificant. The Turkish

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nation likewise gradually died out or was absorbed into the ruling population, until finally the Anglo-Saxon race was dominant over all the globe.

Meanwhile, tremendous revolutions had taken place in the thoughts and aims of men. Our forefathers considered that science had made enormous progress in the nineteenth century, but during the closing decades of the twentieth it advanced with leaps and bounds, for all the energy and intellect of mankind was concentrated upon it. This was due to the new advance which had taken place in education. For a long time men's minds had been growing more and more practical, seeking for some tangible and useful result from their labours. The result was that the study of ancient and modern Languages and Literature, of Theology, History, Metaphysics, Antiquities, and the fruitless speculations of Philosophy, received less attention every year, until at last they were altogether abandoned.

The vast amount of intellect that had been hitherto wasted on these branches of learning was then wholly concentrated on the study of Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Mathematics, and Engineering, as being the only subjects that gave an adequate return for the labour spent upon them. The result was beyond the dreams of the most sanguine of the pioneers of science. Every day the world was astonished by the news of some marvellous scientific discovery. A telephotoscope, or apparatus for seeing at a distance by means of an electric current, which had long been eagerly sought for by the older scientists, was soon invented and brought to practical use. Then the other problems which physicists had so long been trying to crack were solved. The nature of the attraction of gravitation, and of the ether which was supposed to pervade all space, was found out, as well as the constitution of matter, and the nature of cohesion and of the force which was known to the scientists of the nineteenth century as electricity.

The nature of these forces being known, numerous properties belonging to them that had been previously unknown were deduced, and found to be of considerable practical importance. The most wonderful of all was the discovery that the attraction of gravitation could be prevented from acting on a body by surrounding it with wires, through which peculiarly constituted currents of electricity were flowing, or, in other words, it was possible to take away a body's weight altogether. The result was that flying machines were made practicable, and these soon became almost the sole means of locomotion. Ordinary vehicles could also have their weights reduced to nothing, and consequently required less force to propel them. About the same time a new light was discovered, which was so powerful and so easy to produce that it immediately superseded the old electric light.

Great as these discoveries were, still more astonishing ones were in store. The ether-motions were still further investigated, and the result was that three new and extremely powerful forces were discovered. These were Dynogen, Pralion, and Ednogen, and practically illimitable supplies of them could be obtained from the regions of space. They could be used either separately or in combination, according to the nature of the effect desired. When all three were set in action together, an amount of energy equal to many thousands of horse-power could be obtained from an engine of very small compass. It was then that the crowning application of all these discoveries was made, and this was the navigation of space. Gravity could be annihilated at will, and there was an enormous force at the disposal of the engineers, so cigar-shaped vessels were made perfectly air-tight, and fitted with engines for acting on the ether of space, and with the anti-gravitation apparatus. After several failures, successful trips were performed to the moon and the nearer planets. The interstellar ships were gradually improved, and an ingenious steering apparatus was added, together with instruments that registered the speed of the vessel, its distance from its destination, and the existence and exact position of any obstacles that might be in the way.

The voyages were extended to the further planets, but many fatal accidents took place before the rules upon which the navigation of space must be based were fully understood. But the dangers of the voyage were soon put into the background by the marvellous tales which the explorers brought back with them. They had found Mars, Mercury and Venus uninhabited, and only waiting to be taken possession of. The others were inhabited, but the natives were quite harmless. A virgin soil that hardly required any cultivation, a salubrious climate, trees laden with the most luscious fruits, myriads of animals, and vast mineral wealth spread quite a fever for emigration. Hundreds of thousands of pioneers, adventurers, and scientists rushed into the deep unknown, and reached their destination in safety. More followed, and soon the whole of the planetary system became fully colonized, and most of the planets are, at the time when we write this history, almost as populous as the earth is.

But the moral progress of the race did not go hand-in-hand with its intellectual advances. The human race had gradually become divided into two parts — those who had great brain power and those who had very little. The former

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did all the commanding and organizing, the latter did the menial work. As far back as the nineteenth century the thoughts of everyone had been bent on acquiring money and possessions, but in the twenty-second century it had become an all-consuming fever that occupied everyone's thoughts day and night. There was a frightful struggle for riches; those who had superior abilities soon got hold of everything, while those who had none soon had their possessions taken away from them, and they could get no more, so they were reduced to a position little better than that of slaves. The human race, in its greediness, ate up the earth, appropriating every acre of ground, and then it inundated the planetary system. The same was the case with the intellectual giants of the age; their curiosity was insatiable, their ambition boundless, and their greed all-devouring. The planetary world which had been opened to their researches did not content them for long. Larger and improved interstellar ships were constructed and fitted with enormous motive power, and the reckless scientists, accompanied by numerous adventurers, plunged once more into the unknown abysses of space. But they soon met with a power which was equal to, if not greater than, their own. They came to the fixed star Sirius, and found that his planetary system was inhabited by a race of men who had attained to the same degree of civilization as themselves — a people who were hardy and bold, and whom they had to treat as equals.

These people, who were all subject to the Sirian planet Kairet, were extremely numerous and powerful, and were bound together by a close union, so the Anglo-Saxons had to abandon all hopes of acquiring any territory in their system. As a result of these two great Powers becoming simultaneously aware of one another's existence, there was much mutual jealousy and dislike. The eager Anglo-Saxons turned their attention to other fields of acquisition, and plunged further and further into the depths of space, some even trying, in the pride of their power and their thirst for science, to seek God on His throne in those unknown regions. Dim accounts had been handed down from generation to generation of a certain great man named Napoleon Bonaparte who once nearly conquered the world. Now there were thousands of Bonapartes endowed with colossal intellect, vast energy, and boundless ambition, each burning to wrest for himself a world from the great Unknown. Provinces and countries were not even thought of; they desired to rule over a planet, a system, a universe. There was present everywhere an intense fever for acquisition; men burned with a desire to plunder in these new regions. Vast expeditions were fitted out and started off for the regions of space. Many of these were never heard of but some came back with wonderful tales of what they had seen and found.

It was while this was going on that the Anglo-Saxon race first came into rivalry with the people of Kairet, and a series of events followed which led to oceans of blood being shed, and entailed untold suffering on the human race. Many of us who have lived through the terrible events of the year 2236 and the five succeeding years often wished that we had been contented with our own planet, and limited our ambition to a more humble sphere. We still exist, but it will be many years before we recover from the effects of that awful struggle.

The achievements that were wrought in the other branches of science were not less wonderful. Chemists developed their science until it seemed incapable of any further advancement, and then applied the new forces to what had hitherto been considered as elements. These they succeeded in resolving into other metallic substances, which were stronger, tougher, and more durable than those previously known. The methods of analysis and synthesis were also vastly extended by the application of the force Dynogen, and the result was that thousands of new chemical bodies possessing very remarkable and useful properties were prepared.

As soon as these remarkable discoveries were made, Chemistry joined itself to its sister Science, Physics, and the two henceforth advanced hand-in-hand. Astounding discoveries had likewise been made in Biology and Medicine, with the result that diseases had been almost rooted out, and the average length of human life extended to over a hundred years, for no one hardly ever died except from an accident or the effects of old age. The human race was being gradually improved, both physically and mentally, and this, again, reacted on and quickened the progress of scientific discovery, and stimulated the race to still greater exertions.

The progress of science also introduced an enormous improvement into the provinces of Engineering and Technology. It had been found that the attraction of cohesion could be diminished or altogether removed by focussing on to the mass to be acted upon the energy radiated by the two forces Pralion and Dynogen. Hence it was easy enough, by properly regulating and applying these forces, to cut, plane, and saw masses of wood, metal, or stone, and to make them assume the form of any mould without the application of heat. In this manner, and by using the powerful motive force that could so easily be obtained, all building and constructive operations were very quickly

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performed. Telegraphy had also been much improved, and it was possible to send messages through space without any intervening wire over a distance of more than three hundred million miles. These messages could be received by, or sent from, an interstellar ship while in motion.

After the discovery of the great power that dwelt within the Sirian system, the science of war was steadily improved by the Anglo-Saxons. Hundreds of interstellar war-vessels were constructed and fitted with the most terrible destroying weapons, after the manner of the ironclads of olden time. These were always kept patrolling the regions of space, and were frequently exercised together in fleets, so that the men might be kept in good practice in case they should be needed for actual service. Besides these formidable fleets, numerous forts were excavated in the sides of mountains all over the world, and some half-million soldiers were kept under arms, so that there might be some means of defence should the earth, by an accident to the fleets, happen to be invaded by a hostile power. The people of Kairet made preparations of a similar nature, and the two powers copied improvements from one another until at last the means of destruction and self-defence had reached the highest perfection.

And so the Anglo-Saxon race went on wresting fresh secrets from Nature every day, while its individual members were continually acquiring more possessions and building more imposing palaces. To know at that time meant to possess.

Exulting in their might, the gray-haired scientists steered their vessels through the dark depths of space, while they ransacked worlds for treasures and luxuries; some even towed great masses of valuable rock or precious metal behind their ships. Rare and beautiful plants were uprooted, and strange animals were captured and stowed away in the interior of the ships, and finally deposited in London or the other great cities of the world. Whole families would band together and buy an interstellar ship, and rush out into space to seek for themselves a new country and more splendid fortunes.

There were many deeds of darkness done in those distant regions which no one ever heard of. Rival expeditions did not hesitate to attack one another when there was a conflict of interests, and murders were of frequent occurrence. But justice rarely overtook the offenders, for the mangled bodies and broken ships were flung into space, and there they floated on and on for ever and told no tales. The fate of the dead men was never known to those whom they had left behind.

But it was fated that the great race that ruled the earth should cross the path of another as great, as ambitious, and as unyielding as itself. They were gradually approaching one another, and soon there would be a crash that would resound far and wide through the universe.

CHAPTER II

LIFE IN THE YEAR 2236



THE 10th of June in the year 2236 was a day that will long be remembered in the annals of the Anglo-Saxon race, for on that day began a series of disasters that brought the proud inhabitants of the earth to the brink of ruin. Far off in the abysses of space the offspring of the two great races of humanity met, and flung defiance in one another's faces. But we are anticipating events, and must leave the description of what happened in those distant regions for another chapter.

The sun ascended higher and higher into the sky, diffusing his radiance around. The sky was covered with airships of all sizes and shapes, darting hither and thither. Some were of light build, and were principally used for transporting passengers and cargo from one part of the city to another; others were larger, and travelled to different parts of England; while still larger ones did the passenger and goods service to the more distant parts of the earth. Far up among the clouds the gleaming hulls of the huge interstellar ships could be seen returning from their voyages to the planets and more distant stars, and further down were the outward-bound vessels slowly floating into the air from the wharves below. Every now and then some great war-vessel floated slowly over the tops of the buildings, almost brushing the summits of the trees, on its way to the manoeuvring-ground, the sunlight glistening on its rows of murderous-looking cannon, and the complicated masses of wires and rods that covered the exterior of the hull. The bustle and noise of a great city ascended from the streets and squares, that were now filled with busy people and with vehicles of every description.

As the day wore on and the afternoon began to wane, a beautiful girl, scarcely out of her teens, stood at one of the windows of a magnificent house that was situated almost in the centre of the city, and looked out upon the cool shades of the garden that surrounded the house and the variegated buildings beyond. Her features were regular and of the most perfect type, her eyes were of a soft dark-brown colour, and the voluptuous curves of her figure were draped in a light-blue garment. Her name was Flora Houghton, and she was the only daughter of the famous Dr. Houghton, who had made many important discoveries in physical science. She stood in the sunlight for a few moments, showing off her marvellous figure to perfection, and then she drew back the light gauzy curtain from the window that she might drink in the refreshing perfume-laden breeze that blew across the garden.

'What a beautiful thing is life!' she murmured, with the joyous accents of early maidenhood, as she tripped lightly out into the garden. 'Everything around me is so fresh and bright. How happy I feel! Only three more hours and I shall see my dear Alec.'

She stooped over one of the flower-beds and made a small nosegay out of the most sweet-smelling flowers.

'There!' she said, as soon as she had finished binding the flowers together. 'That will do for his button-hole when he comes to dinner this evening. Now I must go and have just one look at him to while away the time.'

She returned to the house, dreamily twirling the button-hole in one hand, and entered a small room where there was a strange-looking instrument made of several concave reflectors standing in front of a large screen. She pressed a button and spoke into a telephone that was attached to the instrument. In a few seconds there came an answering ring, and then she turned a handle that was fastened on to one of the reflectors. A picture immediately began to form on the screen, and grew brighter until every detail depicted on it appeared to be quite real. It represented a young man of twenty-five or thereabouts, clad in naval uniform, and seated at a table covered with a mass of papers, which he was busily engaged in examining. This was Lieutenant Alec Brandon, of the first-class interstellar war-ship *Lightning*. He was a rising young officer of great abilities, who was expected soon to obtain his captaincy. This fact and some minor achievements that he had wrought in the field of science made him very acceptable to Dr. Houghton, who had consented to his engagement with his daughter. As soon as the picture was quite perfect, he looked up from his papers in the direction in which Flora was standing and kissed his hand to her. She smiled and nodded to him, and held the flowers up for him to see. He bowed his thanks to her, and then she turned a handle and the picture vanished.

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Flora then threw herself into an arm-chair with a book and a fan, and patiently occupied the next two hours by reading a sensational story about twenty-third century loves. She was just in the full swing of the romance when Lieutenant Alec Brandon was announced.

'At last, my sweet one,' he said as he entered the room, 'I am released from the toils of my office, and have the pleasure of seeing your sweet face once more. Are you tired of doing nothing, or would you rather that I waited just a little longer?'

'I was tired of being without you, Alec,' she replied, as he bent down and kissed her upturned face. 'I thought you were never coming.'

'Well, here I am at last, and so you have me safe enough. But really, you know, I think I have come away too soon,' he added, with a smile. 'I ought to be still working out those tactics for the Admiral. Shall I go back again for a little while?'

'Oh no, Alec; stay with me now you are here, and let the tactics wait,' she murmured as she rested her head on his shoulder. 'I don't see nearly enough of you as it is.'

'Don't you, my little girl?' he said laughingly, as he kissed her again. 'You will see enough of me to-night, anyhow, for I am going to take you to the Villeroy Theatre to see the new piece.'

'Oh, that will be grand!' she exclaimed, clapping her hands. 'We shall be able to have a nice evening together. Come into the drawing-room now and see the doctor; it is just upon dinner-time.'

He gave her his arm and led her into the drawing-room, where several guests, consisting mainly of men whose names were well known in the scientific and military worlds, were assembled, besides several very fascinating ladies. A few moments later dinner was announced, and the guests paired off and proceeded to the dining-room, where a dinner awaited them such as would have provoked the envy of the most particular diner-out of the nineteenth century. There were fishes and meats that had been brought from places hundreds of millions of miles off, and which were served up by cooks who had grown gray in studying the intricacies of the culinary art. They were accompanied by the most exquisite wines and vegetables, and followed by fruits that had been culled from among the stars. Miniature fountains that stood on the tables threw up showers of scented liquids into the air, and the room was flooded by a subdued light that seemed to issue from ceiling, wall, and table.

The conversation was highly intellectual. The gray-haired scientists talked of nothing but the subjects to which they had devoted their lives, and explained to one another the recent advances that had been made in their own special departments. The naval men discussed the subtleties of tactics and strategy and the latest instruments of destruction and defence, while Dr. Houghton entertained his own immediate neighbours with an account of the recent researches of the Sirian professors.

Lieutenant Alec Brandon sat next to Flora, and for a time both took part in the learned arguments that were going on around them; then they drifted into a species of conversation that was more congenial to the relation which existed between them.

Dinner over, coffee and more wines were served in the drawing-rooms, and Alec Brandon and his sweetheart set out for the theatre, leaving the other guests dispersed all over the grounds enjoying various kinds of intellectual food. They had arranged to walk part of the way, as it led through a park which was very refreshing in the cool of the evening. So they walked along arm-in-arm through groves of flowering zeratas that had come from Jupiter, under spreading Sirian palms, and past flower-beds covered with the luxurious blossoms of plants that had been brought from Uranus and Neptune. High over their heads were the arched branches of estinoderms that had been reared on Mars, and on the right and left, interspersed with shrubs that had come from the remotest depths of space, were pinophasts and purple mirapheas that had been brought from Mercury and Venus.

They walked by the side of artificial torrents rushing over their rocky beds, crossed lakes which teemed with the most beautiful fish that could be found in the universe, and then found themselves in a large open space. Here the air was filled with the voluptuous sounds of music, which seemed to come from above, but no performers were visible; for musical sounds could be transmitted all over London by a marvellous electric contrivance. There were hundreds of

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seats scattered about under the trees, and numerous restaurants in the open space, which was crowded with people who had come out to enjoy the fresh evening air and listen to the music.

The two lovers were making their way through the crowd, when they saw a tall pale man of about thirty years of age, apparently wrapped in thought, coming towards them.

'There is James Tarrant,' said Alec Brandon, as he nodded his head in the new-comer's direction. 'He is quite absorbed with his own thoughts, to judge from his appearance.'

The tall pale-faced man was about to pass by them without speaking, when Alec accosted him.

'Hullo, Dr. Tarrant!' he said. 'Still at it, then? Have you got any nearer to the solution than you were before?'

The individual addressed started and looked up, and showed a face that was seamed with lines, in spite of his youth.

'Ah, Lieutenant!' he said in an absent-minded voice, as he fastened his dreamy eyes on Alec; 'how do you do? Good-evening, Miss Houghton. I am just getting a little fresh air after my labours.'

'Have you found out anything yet, Doctor?' inquired Alec.

Tarrant shook his head somewhat sadly.

'There is one difficulty that I cannot get over,' he replied. 'If it were not for that, I could achieve the greatest discovery that has been made during the last fifty years, I could render all your great war-ships practically useless.'

That is not so easily done as you think,' said Alec, flushing slightly. 'Besides,' he added, with a slight laugh, 'you couldn't do it!'

'We shall see! we shall see!' said Tarrant somewhat bitterly. 'I have spent all my life so far on this one subject, and find it out I will. I am poor now and I have nothing,' he continued, as he shot a meaning glance at Flora, 'but I shall be powerful enough some day.'

'Well, I hope you will succeed, I am sure,' said Alec in a sarcastic voice. 'Come, Flora, or we shall be late.'

They walked on for a short distance, and then, hailing an open boat-shaped vessel that happened to be floating in the air, they entered it and quickly arrived at the Villeroy Theatre. This was a huge building quite in character with the city in the centre of which it stood. It was replete with everything that science could suggest to add to the brilliance of the performance and the comfort and enjoyment of the audience. The magnificent 'Chorus of the Worlds,' the greatest musical composition that the world has even seen, was first performed as an overture by an invisible orchestra, and the air was filled with a rapturous music that surpasses all description. Then the curtain rose and the performance commenced. The scene was laid in one of the far-off planets, and everything was arranged to produce as realistic an effect as possible. There seemed to be real houses and streets, real woods, and real clouds flitted across a deep blue sky. Everything was exactly imitated, even thunderstorms and rain, so that the audience could easily fancy themselves on the actual spot without any effort of imagination. When there was a garden scene, real trees and flowers appeared, the sun shone down from above, and a breeze flitted over the foliage, while every now and then the most luxurious music accompanied the movements of the actors. At last the piece came to an end and the curtain fell amidst a tempest of applause.

When Alec and Flora found themselves outside, the whole of the city was lighted up almost as bright as day by the numerous Menling lamps that were suspended far up in the air from tapering metal pillars. Here and there above their heads were numerous air-ships darting about, while an occasional war-ship making signals to its *confrères* scattered abroad long streaks of light of every colour of the rainbow. There was no moon visible, so the sky was dotted with innumerable stars, among which Jupiter and Mars were shining brightly, and in the far distance was Sirius gleaming angrily amidst a crowd of lesser lights. Flora shuddered somewhat when she noticed his threatening glare, and the slight tremor that passed over her limbs attracted the notice of Alec Brandon, and he, following the direction of her gaze, divined the cause of her alarm.

'Our only rival to universal dominion,' he said somewhat anxiously, and then he put her into an air-ship and returned with her to her father's house.

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The hours of the night fled on, but although everything without the city, with the exception of the ever arriving and departing interstellar ships, seemed to denote rest, a ceaseless activity went on in the numerous laboratories where the scientists were occupied in wresting her secrets from Nature. James Tarrant remained in the park for about an hour after he had met Alec and Flora, and then he returned to his laboratory, where his numerous assistants were still busily following out his instructions. It was a large room crammed with instruments of every description, while books, pages of calculations, and sheets of drawings lay about everywhere. He examined some of the instruments, and then dismissed his assistants for the night, but did not yet think of retiring to rest himself, although he looked intensely wearied. He sat down at a table and began eagerly looking over a voluminous mass of calculations.

'Ah, I think I shall have it soon!' he exclaimed half aloud as a gleam of triumph shot across his pale face. 'An excellent idea has struck me to-night, and if I get on to the right track it may lead me to the solution of the problem. In a few weeks I shall make the greatest discovery of the era, and then I can make myself Master of the Universe.'

He worked on and on until the sun rose above the horizon, and then he went to bed for a few hours, and then up again and hard at work until success at last crowned his efforts.

CHAPTER III

THE FIRST NOTE OF WAR

SOME weeks after the day on which Alec Brandon and Flora Houghton had visited the theatre together there was a tremendous commotion in London. One night telegrams of an awful and terrible import were flashed across space from Neptune to the earth, for one of the swiftest interstellar vessels had just arrived within the confines of the Solar System bringing news from the other worlds beyond. There was a hurried meeting of ministers, generals, and admirals at the Bureau of War to consider what was best to be done. They consulted together for hours with closed doors, but their deliberations were frequently interrupted by the arrival of fresh telegrams. The news soon leaked out. The morning papers were full of it, and an hour later it had been flashed all over the globe. What had been predicted a long time before by some far-seeing men had actually come to pass.

For a long time past, a band of adventurers had been colonizing a planet called Iosia, which was situated far beyond the confines of the Sirian System. This planet was particularly rich in mineral wealth and other natural products, hence its possession was considered by the Colonial Bureau to be a most valuable acquisition. But shortly after the first party of Anglo-Saxons had landed there, its existence became known to the people of Kairet, the ruling planet of the Sirian System, and they much coveted the enormous resources which it was rumoured to possess. Small parties of colonists were sent out and took possession of tracts of land that were far remote from those occupied by the Anglo-Saxons; but this was not at first noticed by the latter. Larger expeditions were sent out, and the first colonists soon became aware that they were not the only occupiers of the planet. However, they did not object, as the people of Kairet seemed to be peaceably inclined and quite willing to be under the Government of the Anglo-Saxons. But as time went on the former became more and more aggressive. They began to set the authority of the Government at defiance, and to export the produce of the planet without paying the moderate duties which the Anglo-Saxons demanded. Very little of what actually went on was ever known at the mother planets, since the distance was so great and the accounts that were sent were much warped by national prejudice. But the rivalry between the representatives of the two Powers continually increased; for although Iosia was much larger than the Earth, the rapidity with which the colonists could travel about in their powerful interstellar ships frequently brought the two parties into contact. Moreover, a mutual rapacity and greed caused the two parties to regard one another with no favourable eye.

Much secret anger was felt by the people of Kairet at their not having been the first to discover and annex such a valuable planet, and they secretly instructed their own colonists not to give way in any particular to their more fortunate rivals. War-ships were even quietly despatched, and hidden away immediately on their arrival in case they might be wanted.

Things went on in this manner for some time, but at last the rivalries of the two nations came to a climax. The men who held command of both parties at Iosia were impetuous and greedy, and could not bear to give up any advantages of locality or products to their rivals. Those under them followed their example and instructions, and soon both parties became extremely hostile to one another. But more moderate men managed to keep their passions in check for a time. At last, however, by some awkwardness of fate both nations hit upon the same site for founding a city. It was a spot that was eminently fitted, both by climate and surroundings, for such a purpose. Both parties were equally determined not to yield, so amidst much quarrelling they both began to make preparations for building on the same spot. An open rupture could not now be much longer delayed.

One day some engineers and workmen belonging to Kairet attacked a party of Anglo-Saxons who were engaged in quarrying some very valuable stone, and drove them from their works. But the latter collected what weapons were at hand, and dislodged their assailants. An obstinate fight then took place, numbers joining their own compatriots from the adjacent works until the place was like a battlefield. Night came on without either party gaining any material advantage. Being now thoroughly exasperated with one another, and regardless of consequences, both parties manned their war-ships the next day and brought them into action. A fierce and bloody engagement took place. Although the vessels were only fourth-class and were badly provided with munitions of war, the contest was obstinately maintained for hours, and only ceased when several ships had been totally wrecked and some thousands of

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men killed. The Anglo-Saxons on the whole had the worst of the fight, since their opponents had been secretly making preparations for the conflict a long time before.

As soon as the battle was over, both parties despatched the swiftest interstellar ships they had with the news to their respective Governments. At Kairet the news was received with enthusiasm by both Government and people, and they were urged on by their jealousy of the Anglo-Saxons to claim from the latter one-half of Iosia. The Anglo-Saxons, on the other hand, were angered at what had happened, and, having the right of prior possession, refused to listen to these demands. Months were occupied by negotiations and counter-proposals, but nothing was arranged. At Kairet the hatred of the Anglo-Saxons increased from day to day, and many covetous minds were turned to the planets of the Solar System. At last the Government yielded to the clamorous wishes of the people. It threatened to make war against the Earth and its federated planets unless its demands were acceded to. This was refused at once. Then a formal declaration of war was sent by the Government of Kairet to London, and it announced its intention of commencing hostilities three months after the date of the delivery of the declaration of war.

As soon as the news of the coming war was announced, it caused a tremendous sensation all over the Earth; for no one knew how the interstellar ships would fight, as they had not yet been tried in actual war. Every quarter of the globe resounded with the din of preparations, since it was determined that the fleets must be ready to start for space in a month's time. New ships were commenced at all the dockyards, which worked night and day fitting out transports and making cannon and ammunition. Telegraphic messages were flashed to Mars, Venus, and Mercury, instructing them to have their fleets assembled in the neighbourhood of London within a period of one month, and to Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune to have theirs assembled at the latter planet within a further period of one month. The air around London and above the great arsenals and dockyards was crowded with interstellar vessels of every description. Tenders were flying along hither and thither, bringing munitions of war and provisions. The drill-grounds were crowded day and night with new battle-ships, making trial trips or testing their cannon. At night the air was lighted up by the blaze of signal-lights as the fleets manoeuvred in various formations. Hundreds of huge ships were chartered from the great transport companies to act as transports and cruisers. The greatest exertions were made everywhere to have the preparations as complete as possible; for the War Bureau was well aware that the power of Kairet was not to be despised.

At last, when the month came to an end, a vast fleet was assembled at a short distance from London, ready to dash into space and annihilate the foes of the Anglo-Saxon race. There were in all nearly 300 huge first-class battleships, 800 of the second class, 1,600 third, and 500 swift ships to act as cruisers, besides numerous transports filled with soldiers, and a countless host of small craft that performed the same functions as the torpedo-boats of the old days of war on the sea.

The whole of the armament was divided into ten divisions, each commanded by an admiral who was, in his turn, with certain limitations, under the orders of the Admiral-in-Chief who commanded the whole. The divisions were further subdivided, and each subdivision was under a sub-admiral, so that the movements of the fleet could be controlled better. Nearly 2,000 vessels were ready to join the fleet at Neptune, and then the combined fleets were to dash into space and seek their foes. An arrangement was made under which the vessels that left the various dockyards within the next two months were to form second, third, and fourth lines of defence. Those from the outer planets were to form a second line of defence about the orbit of Neptune. Those from the inner planets were to form the third line of defence at the Moon, and those from the Earth to form the fourth and last line in the neighbourhood of London.

CHAPTER IV

THE FLEETS START FOR SPACE

EARLY in the morning of the 12th of May, in the year 2237, the vast space of ground where the interstellar fleet lay drawn up was a scene of great bustle and excitement. The last preparations were being made, for in a few hours they were to dash off into space. The vessels were drawn up in long lines, being arranged in divisions, with the flag-ship of each division in the middle, and the other ships lying on either side of it according to their size and qualities. The flag-ship of the Admiral-in-Chief was floating about a hundred yards in the air, the Union Jack flying from one of its masts, while its upper-deck was crowded with officers and men.

All the ships were built of the light and tensile metal Firmium, which is lighter and much stronger than the metal called Steel, which was so much used by our ancestors. Most of them were cigar-shaped, but others were much flatter, and there were a few that were very long and thin. The largest were about 300 yards in length; the rest varied in proportion down to the torpedo-boats, which were only 15 yards long.

All the ships were built on the same principle. The outside of the hull was surrounded by a thick sheathing of Firmium, and there was a powerful ram at both ends. The inside was divided into a number of decks, according to the size of the vessel. These, again, were divided into compartments by air-tight doors, so that if the hull were pierced by a shot the air would only escape from one compartment, and thus the rest of the crew would not be harmed. Air in the liquid state was stored in reservoirs in the middle of the vessel, and let out as required, while the vitiated air was allowed to escape into space. As the air in the interior was under a pressure of 15 pounds to the square inch, great care had to be taken to prevent it from leaking through the outer sheathing. If a hole happened to be made through the latter, the air rushed out in a second, and the unfortunate men inside died immediately.

The cannon slid in and out through tubes fitted with telescopic joints, which rotated in gimbals, so that they could be worked without allowing air to escape, and the muzzle of the gun was closed by a slide while the shot was introduced at the breech. The torpedoes were worked from torpedo-tubes in the same manner. The cannon varied in size from 200 tons to 10-pounders, the armament of each ship being selected according to the duties which it was expected to perform in an engagement. Besides the holes for the cannon, the hull was pierced in many places by other holes, which were filled up with the transparent metal Lumium, so that the sailors could see what was taking place outside.

The propelling machinery was placed in the centre, and protected by another metal sheathing, while in the centre of all was the captain's room. In the interior of this there was a sphere made of metal a couple of feet in thickness, and varying from 7 to 30 feet in diameter. It was here that were collected together all the handles and wheels for navigating the vessel and sending and receiving messages from other ships, and a number of telephones that communicated with every compartment. There were no windows, but a picture of the exterior was thrown on to a screen which extended right round the wall by the telephotoscope, so that the captain knew exactly what was going on outside.

When an engagement was taking place in space, the captain, accompanied by one or two other officers, entered this sphere and was hermetically sealed up in it. As two or more solid sheets of metal had to be pierced before they could be touched, the commanding officers and the important machinery which they controlled were comparatively safe while the rest of the vessel was being battered to pieces.

The exteriors of the vessels bristled with masses of bars, rods, wheels, and rolled-up torpedo-nets which could be let down to ward off the much-dreaded torpedoes. Besides these there were numerous signal-lights, searchlights, and a few masts to which the ensigns were fastened. There was a kind of deck on the top of the outside, surrounded by a slight railing, to be used only when the ship happened to be in an atmosphere that was fit to breathe. Here there was also an ingenious arrangement consisting of lock-gates and large flexible tubes by which communication could be effected with other vessels when they were in space. These could also be used for letting men, clad in diving dresses, get on to the exterior whenever anything happened to want seeing to there. All round the hull there was the complex network of wires belonging to the antigravitation apparatus, and a system of spiral tubes that formed the Stuberoff

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apparatus, which effectually insulated the vessel from radiant heat whatever its intensity might be. The use of the latter was to prevent the crew from suffering from the effects of the heat of the sun, which was very intense within the Solar System, and also to enable the vessel to approach the sun or any other luminary for purposes of strategy. As there was no attraction of gravity, a new force was induced equal in intensity to that of gravity at the surface of the earth, and this force acted downwards on to the decks, so that the crew could walk about and work exactly as if they were on the earth. Besides the powerful armament of cannon and torpedoes with which the vessels were provided, each had a powerful apparatus for radiating a force which would annihilate the attraction of cohesion wherever it happened to strike, and with another apparatus which would send destructive waves of the force Ednogen, that could kill any human beings that they might impinge upon. These awful engines of destruction would have been enough, but there was yet another that could paralyze the motor-power of an approaching vessel, and thus leave it helpless and useless. To counteract the influence of any such engines that the enemy might possess, there were receivers that could annihilate these forces should they impinge upon them. The ether of space and a kind of matter that could be made to radiate in elliptical waves were the basis of these terrible forces that were about to be wielded by the two great races for the destruction of one another. However, since neither they nor the interstellar ships had yet been used in actual warfare, the leading authorities expressed considerable doubts as to what really would occur in the heat of a great engagement.

The officers were all trained scientists; for no one could possibly work these flying collections of mechanism and scientific instruments without having spent years in studying the abstrusities of physics. The men who formed the crews had only to move the levers and turn the wheels as they were ordered, so they needed no special education beyond a little practice. The captains and admirals were mostly gray-haired men who were adepts at interstellar tactics, and had grown old in the study of the means of destruction. Some of the largest ships carried as many as three captains under the orders of a chief-captain, so vast was the machine which had to be controlled.

The aspect presented by the whole fleet was magnificent in the extreme. The great shining hulls bristling with guns and covered with men, moving about like ants, glittered in the sun. Here and there towered the largest vessels, which had as many as seven or eight decks, and carried over 400 guns. The river Thames wound its way down the middle of the fleet, and huge flexible pipes ran from it to many of the vessels which were still engaged in taking in water. Flags were waving from every mast, while numberless flat-shaped tenders were conveying officers and crews to their respective ships. The ground was covered with spectators, and the air round the outskirts of the fleet was thick with air-vessels which had come to watch the departure of the fleet. But as the time fixed for the departure drew near, order began to be evolved out of disorder. The Admiral-in-Chief arrived, accompanied by a crowd of officers, scientists, and professors who were going to travel with him in the flag-ship.

One hour more before they started. Lieutenant Alec Brandon stood on the ground close to the *Lightning* talking to Flora Houghton, whose tear-stained eyes and pale face made her look yet more beautiful. He held one of her small hands in his, and was telling her how, when he returned, he would be made a captain, and then he could marry her. But she shook her head sadly as she thought of the dangers of the fearful campaign upon which he was about to enter. He laughed gaily at her fears, and talked lightly of the power of the people of Kairet, although his voice trembled just a little as he looked at the mouths of the gleaming cannon that bristled around him. Her father was up above on the deck chatting with the captain about some new device which had lately been discovered for preventing the radiation of heat from interstellar vessels. James Tarrant was walking along the ground a little way off, with the usual absent-minded look on his face, while his thin lips curled slightly as he looked at the great leviathans which lay around him. But no one noticed the pair of lovers, for every man that belonged to the fleet was either engaged in his duties or in taking leave of his friends. The great flag-ship of the Admiral-in-Chief was floating high in the air above, casting a cold shadow on the fleet as it moved along.

At last the signal came to haul up the gangways. Alec pressed Flora to his breast while his lips met hers in one last kiss. Then he handed her over to her father and leapt on to the gangway just as it was being drawn up. He ran nimbly up the side of the *Lightning*, and then clung on to one of the projecting cannon, eager to speak a few last words to her. But a minute later there was a blinding flash from the flag-ship above, followed by a deafening report. It was the signal to start. Hundreds of captains saw the flash as they stood at their posts within their metal spheres, and they laid their hands on the levers before them. The engineers obeyed the call and let loose the pent-up power. The whole fleet undulated and rocked like the waves of a sea as the propellers whirled round, while jets of white vapour escaped from the sides. As the speed increased, a stiff breeze, that was created by the propellers, blew over the spectators. The

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vessels rose higher and higher, proceeding by divisions, each division being led by its flag-ship. Flora watched the *Lightning* with straining eyes and aching heart as it mounted into the air. The sky was darkened for miles around by the vast concourse of vessels. Higher and higher they ascended, shaking the air with the beating of their propellers, plunging upward into the awful abysses of space, rejoicing in the pride of their strength. The upper-decks were covered with officers in full uniform, and with sailors clustering like bees along the railings, taking what would be to many of them a last breath of the air of the earth. Upwards and upwards, higher and higher they mounted, the vessels looking like small specks against the sky.

Flora's eyes were blinded with tears. Dr. Houghton gently drew her arm within his own and led her away to a carriage that was waiting for them. As they drove along they passed by James Tarrant, who was walking along as if in a dream, with his head bent towards the ground. He looked up as they passed, and a slight smile passed over his pale, tired face as he raised his hat to Flora and nodded slightly to the doctor.

'Clever man that—clever man!' muttered Dr. Houghton half aloud, half to himself. 'Will do great things some day.'

Meanwhile the fleet was fast vanishing out of sight. High up in the sky the ships were shining like bright dust in the sunlight. When evening came they had vanished; but as soon as it was quite dark the signal-lights could be seen flashing out in all directions. The lights got fainter every minute. Soon they formed a misty haze like a nebula, and then they vanished altogether. The huge fleet, with its hundreds of thousands of brave men, had gone.

Many thoughts filled the minds of the people of England when their great fleet had departed. Some thought only of the glories of war, of fresh conquests and new mines of wealth; but others were thinking of husbands, brothers, and sons whom they might see no more. Many secretly wished that the national ambition had been more restrained, and that they had been contented with their own planet, and not crossed the oceans of space in search of fresh lands and fresh enemies. But everyone assumed an air of confidence, so the public spirit rose from day to day. The dockyards continued to work day and night, making another fleet that was to be despatched to invade Kairet as soon as it was ready. The workshops resounded with the thumping of hammers, the crunch of rolling-mills, and the hissing of metal as it was liquefied under the new process. The vast forms of new interstellar ships were rising and taking shape under covered sheds, while all round them was the rattle of machinery, boring, cutting, planing, and bending. Huge guns were being turned out at the arsenals every day, and hundreds of tons of the most terrible explosives. Fresh levies of sailors were called out and drilled, more officers were appointed: for cost what it might, Kairet must be subdued.

A little more than a month after the fleet had left the earth a telegraphic message was received from Neptune, stating that it had arrived safely at that planet, and had plunged into the abysses of space beyond. Then days, weeks, and months passed by without anything being heard. The usual transport vessels kept on leaving the earth for the planets as if nothing unusual had occurred. As time went on and no message was received from the fleet, everyone began to feel disquieted. Months passed by, but no news came. Intense anxiety began to be felt everywhere. What had happened to the fleet? Where was it? What was it doing? Had it reached Kairet? Was it victorious? Such were the questions that were asked everywhere and from morning to night. At last, about eighteen months after the fleet had departed, an answer came. It was flashed from planet to planet until it reached the earth, where it sent a thrill of horror and desolation through the length and breadth of the land.

CHAPTER V

FIRST EXPERIENCES OF SPACE

ALEC BRANDON hung over the bulwarks of the *Lightning* as the fleet gradually ascended into the air, watching a small figure that was waving a handkerchief to him from below. But Flora was soon lost in the indistinguishable crowd, for the relentless whirling of the propellers stopped neither for love nor money, and the fleet was quickly leaving the earth's atmosphere. A slight sigh escaped from Alec as he turned away his eyes from all that he held dearest in the world.

'Never mind, my boy, cheer up!' said a hearty voice behind him, as a hand was laid kindly on his shoulder.

He turned round and saw the commander of the ship, Captain Minton, standing close behind him.

'Cheer up!' he continued. 'You will soon see her again. And who knows—when we have conquered Kairet, you may find someone else whom you will love as well, or even better.'

'There is only one being in the world whom I can ever love, and she is there,' said Alec, as he pointed down to the hazy ground below.

'Ha, ha!' laughed the cheery old captain, but not unkindly. 'Eternal love, eternal vows — eternal fiddlesticks I call it. I was a boy once myself, and I know very well what that means. Well, well,' he added, as he noticed the sad look on Alec's face, 'go and have a look at the nets, and see that they are hitched up all right; it will take your mind off a bit. Be true to her, my boy — be true to her. She's worth it.'

The captain turned away and went down below to his private sanctum; but was it to perform some duty, or only because his eyes were becoming moistened by some tender recollection? But the great vessel dashed on unheeding and uncaring. The crew were busy on the outer deck, letting down the masts and making all snug for the voyage through space. The sky above became darker and darker, and the air more difficult to breathe. Suddenly a bell rang violently.

'All hands below!' shouted a deep bass voice. 'Close up the hatches!'

The sailors hastily finished their tasks and disappeared down the hatches. Then an officer came along and examined every-thing; the hatches were fastened down, and the keys sent to the captain. Alec went down to the officers' room, where a meal was laid out, but he did not feel inclined to eat. He talked in a desultory manner with his brother officers, wishing for something to do. However, he was not allowed to remain in idleness for long. A bell rang, and a voice shouted :

'Lieutenant Brandon will command on the fifth deck.'

Alec went up to a telephone that was fastened to the wall and shouted, 'All right, captain.' He climbed down hatchway after hatchway, along winding corridors, past great tanks, and then through the engine-room. Here everything was in a state of bustle and activity. The air was filled with the whirling of wheels and the panting of great piston-rods, for the engines were now in full activity. Above, below, and around the narrow gangway huge cranks were whirling round, immense rods shooting backwards and forwards, and ponderous wheels rotating so fast that they appeared to be quite motionless. At one end were the rows of shining reservoirs where the motor energy was converted before it was passed on to the engines. Here, there, and everywhere were engineers perched on little ledges amidst the moving masses, filling up the oil-cups, or moving levers and turning wheels.

'Speed ninety!' shouted a man who was standing by a telephone apparatus.

A bell rang at the further end, and an engineer came hurrying along.

Turn on more energy,' shouted another man. 'The speed is not fast enough.'

'Speed ninety-five, a hundred, a hundred and four,' shouted the man at the telephone.

An engineer pulled over a lever, and there was a roar and a hiss from down below.

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'That is the Ednogen, which has just been turned on,' said an engineer as he hurried past Alec, who paused to gaze for a minute at the palpitating machinery. 'We are going like lightning now. A pretty sight, isn't it?'

'Speed a hundred and forty,' shouted the first man again. 'Turn on number six.'

Another man pulled over a lever, and a great wheel that had hitherto been motionless began to spin round, while flashes of fire darted among the moving rods.

'Getting hot,' remarked someone; 'but it is not full speed yet.'

Alec passed on, and then came to the fifth deck, where all the air-tight doors had been slid back to allow free passage from compartment to compartment. From one end of the deck to the other the gleaming breeches of the great guns, with their loading and sighting apparatus, could be seen in endless perspective, while the gunners were drawing them back so that the muzzles should not be damaged by any chance meteorites.

'Well, Howard,' said Alec, as he approached a stalwart man who was standing by a huge cannon, 'how is the Infant? Likes the voyage?'

'Ay, ay, sir,' replied the man fondly, patting the great breech of the gun. 'Depend upon it, sir, he'll wake 'em up when he sends a few of his nuts into their ships. Why, they'll go through their sides like cardboard.'

The men went on working for some time, while Alec minutely inspected everything that was being done. Then a bell rang.

'Time for the third meal!' shouted a voice. 'All hands except those on duty can cease work.'

The men came crowding along the deck to an open space at the end, where tables were spread out amidst the deadly weapons that glittered on all sides, and soon nothing was heard but the clatter of knives and forks. Alec remained on duty some two hours longer, when he was relieved by another officer and summoned to the captain's spherical metal box.

'Here, my lad, come and take a turn here while I go and have a spell off,' said the latter, as he gave Alec a sheet of paper. 'This will show you the course you must follow. You have to take orders from the *Magnificent*, just in front of you.'

Alec seized a lever which Captain Mainton relinquished to him, and fixed his eyes on some dozen dials which were arranged in front of him, and indicated, besides other things, the speed of the vessel, the direction in which it was moving, the approach of any opposing body and its probable distance and mass. All round the room there extended a perfect picture of the heavens outside, which was thrown on to the walls by the telephotoscope. The sky was now as black as ink, and was bespangled by hundreds of thousands of stars, while the sun shone in the middle, and the great belt of the Milky Way surrounded the whole. The earth lay stretched out behind like a great fiery ball that filled up a good part of the sky, but the individual objects on it were now indistinguishable. The sun was gradually approaching to the edge of the earth's disc, so that in a short time there would be complete darkness. In front and around, as far as the eye could reach, were the other ships, which appeared to lie quite motionless and silent in the ocean of space. There was the distant rolling noise of the machinery, and the faint shouts made by the sailors as they performed their various duties, and the occasional ringing of bells. There was sometimes a dull thud on the outside of the vessel, as some wandering meteorite came into contact with it.

Alec sat for a long time moving the levers backwards and forwards, and keeping a steady look out ahead. Far in front was their goal, the planet Neptune, shining faintly among numberless stars. Meanwhile, the sun's disc was gradually getting closer to the earth, and in a few more minutes it was quite hidden behind it. An intensely black darkness immediately succeeded to the brilliant light of the sun, a darkness so thick that it could almost be felt. The blackness of space was in front, around, everywhere. Alec pulled a handle in front of him, and then pressed a button. The whole of the interior of the *Lightning* was immediately lighted up, and the powerful searchlights outside threw their rays in all directions. The other ships did the same, and the whole fleet presented a magnificent and beautiful spectacle as the light darted from ship to ship, until a considerable portion of the sky was covered with the streaks of light that crossed one another in every direction. A little later on another officer relieved Alec at his post, and he retired to his cabin to enjoy a few hours' repose.

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Not long afterwards the fleet emerged from the earth's shadow, and plunged again into the sunshine, and the lights were extinguished, as being no more required for the present. The heat-radiation apparatus was set at work to prevent the vessels from getting too hot, for in space, where there is no air, the temperature is much higher than that of boiling water. The moon was soon approached and passed, the numerous craters sweeping past like a hurricane, showing how enormous the speed of the vessels had become. As day after day passed by the speed kept on increasing, until it was some thousands of miles an hour. Great care was necessary while the speed was so great to prevent the vessels colliding with one another or coming into contact with any minor planet, for any such contact would have resulted in immediate reduction to incandescent vapour. From hour to hour responsible and experienced officers on every vessel kept their eyes fixed on the dials and on the ships in front of them, noting every movement of the needles and any signals that might be sent from the flagships.

Meanwhile, both sun, earth, and moon kept on growing smaller. The earth was soon only a shining disc, that covered about six degrees of space, while the moon was like a small dot by its side. But far in front Uranus and Neptune were gradually increasing in size as the days went by.

On the eleventh day two second-class battleships collided owing to a steering apparatus having failed. There was a blinding flash of light as one vessel ripped up the side of the other with its ram. Then the magazines blew up from the heat developed by the collision. A huge cloud of smoke was suddenly generated where the two vessels had collided, and out of it were hurled with prodigious force vast masses of torn metal-work, pieces of machinery, huge cannon, and the torn fragments of human bodies. Some of these were hurled right out into space, others struck the surrounding ships and did a little damage; but the worst danger was caused by the shells and projectiles which were let loose in all directions. Pieces of human bodies and showers of blood were scattered all over the place, the latter even falling like rain against the windows of some of the vessels. A shudder passed through the whole of the fleet when the horrible results of the accident were seen, but it was impossible to render any assistance, and it was certain that no one on either ship could have survived such an explosion. For some minutes afterwards the shells and torpedoes could be seen exploding far away in the distance, and then there was nothing to be seen of either ship. The fragments would go on dashing through space until they encountered some obstacle or were attracted on to some planet.

Nothing occurred for some time to vary the monotonous routine of the voyage. All of the officers and most of the men had been for a voyage through space before, so it was no new experience for them. The superior officers were busily engaged during most of the time working out various tactical problems, and the men were kept constantly practising at working the guns and other offensive apparatus. Messages were continually being flashed backwards and forwards to the earth and Neptune. When the fifteenth day had arrived, Neptune showed a large disc, and this grew rapidly larger. Then it became a huge ball on which continents, seas, islands, rivers, and mountain ranges could easily be seen. The propelling power was shut off on board all the ships, and the engines were reversed. A few days later the whole of the fleet plunged into the atmosphere of Neptune at a speed of some hundreds of miles an hour.

As soon as the speed was low enough, the hatchways were opened and the men were allowed to go out on to the outer deck. Many of the vessels bore on their exteriors the ghastly traces of the collision. Arms, legs, strips of skin, and heads, often so burnt and bruised as to be hardly recognisable, were hanging on to the torpedo-nets or wedged up between the rods and wires. These were quickly removed, and the blood was washed away from the windows and the other parts of the hulls where it had been splashed. The masts were set up and flags run up on to them, so that the fleets might have as fine an appearance as possible. The ships kept on rushing through the air at a great speed, as was testified by the rate at which the objects beneath flashed past. They careered over villages, towns, cities, and mountains, the admirals carefully examining maps all the time to see their way to the capital. When they passed over the great towns, they saw crowds of people standing out in the open air and gazing up at the huge fleet, but they were come and gone like a flash of lightning. At last a dull booming was heard in the distance. The speed was slackened, and gradually the houses thickened together and became more large and splendid. Everywhere, as far as the eye could reach, the roads seemed to be converging together as if to some centre, while numerous small craft plying about in the air announced the vicinity of a great city. Then they crossed a ridge of mountains, and Makouffon, the capital of Neptune, lay stretched out at their feet, and in the distance the allied fleets appeared anchored in lines within a few yards of the ground. The latter fired a salute as soon as the fleet from the earth had come to a stop.

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A rest of twenty-four hours was allowed before the combined fleets plunged into space, so most of the men had leave to go on shore, or, rather, on planet, for a few hours. The admirals and their staffs paid ceremonial visits to the great men of the city, and a state ball was given that night in their honour. The streets were filled with brilliant uniforms and all the clash and noise of naval and military panoply. The great ballrooms were aglow with colour and beauty, the lights of the chandeliers scintillated from gold lace, orders, and military insignia.

'Music arose with its voluptuous swell,
Soft eyes looked love to eyes that spake again,
And all went merry as a marriage-bell.'

Alas! if they could only have foreseen what— But never mind; it must wait for the present. The story shall unfold itself in due course.

By the middle of the next day everyone was on board again. The Admiral-in-Chief gave the signal, and for the second time the numberless vessels rose into the air with their human freight and palpitating machinery. There was a waving of cocked hats and the clash of swords. The air shook with the roar of a thousand guns as the forts saluted the departing fleet. Then sheets of flame leapt from the sides of every war-ship, and there was a terrible crash of thunder as the fleet returned the salute.

A few hours later not a speck was visible in the blue sky of Neptune, and there was not a trace left of the mighty host that had vanished into the depths of space.

CHAPTER VI

FIRST APPEARANCE OF THE ENEMY

AS soon as the fleet was fairly launched into space the torpedo-nets were let down, in case the ships might come into contact with any of the enemy's swift cruisers. As they got further away from Neptune, the sun gradually became smaller and its light fainter, until at last all the vessels were obliged to turn on their searchlights to enable them to avoid colliding with one another. They directed their course straight for Sirius, as it was presumed that the enemy would probably steer for the Solar System, and so they would be likely to run straight into them. The speed became faster and faster, until at last it was terrific. Many an anxious captain kept his eyes fixed on the dials in front of him, eager to detect the least movement of the needles that might indicate the approach of hostile vessels, but they still hung down quite motionless. An advanced squadron was sent on some hundreds of thousands of miles in front to explore the way, while the rest of the fleet was spread over a vast area in the form of a square. Alec looked out of the windows of the *Lightning*, and could see the lights of the other vessels shining like specks in the distance. A vast loneliness sometimes almost overpowered him as he gazed upon the dark depths of those silent solitudes of space, where no sounds could be heard and there was nothing to see but the unchangeable face of the star-strewn heavens.

Days, weeks, and months passed by without anything happening. There was no difference between day and night, for there was no sun to rise or set. Time was arranged throughout the fleet by the chronometers, which had been set to London time. As hour after hour went by, the bells clanged through the war-ships, announcing the time for getting up, taking meals, or going to bed. The sailors were wearied by the unchanging routine of their daily duties, which were varied by no recreation and no fighting. Outside were the black depths of space, within was the blaze of the artificial lights which illuminated the glittering breeches of the guns and the numberless bars, levers, and tubes that formed the loading apparatus. In the engine-room the machinery was still whirling round, and the engineers were still climbing about among the moving cranks, while sparks and flames shot about in all directions. Many of the men longed to meet the enemy, that they might have something to do; but still there was no sign of an approaching fleet — the needles hung down quite motionless.

Signals were continually being flashed backwards and forwards from one end of the fleet to the other, giving orders as to formations and asking for any indications of the approach of the enemy. The coloured lights were flashing all over the sky — green, blue, yellow, and red — while the vessels moved this way and that way according to orders. The admirals met and consulted together for a long time, and then the ships were ordered to spread out much further apart. Small squadrons were detached from the main body, with orders to scour space in all directions. The captains had now become exceedingly anxious about their position. The methods of war used by the people of Kairet were but little known to them, and they suspected some secret method of destruction that had not yet been divulged by them. Had they some means of rendering themselves invisible? Would they suddenly fall on the fleet and annihilate it without being seen themselves? Had they slipped past the great Anglo-Saxon fleet and rushed on to annihilate the centre of their power in London with one fell swoop? These and innumerable other surmises of the same kind tormented the minds of the commanders until they were worn with anxiety.

But on the eighty-fifth day after the departure from Neptune, the waves that are set up in the ether by solid matter came rolling through space and passed through the fleet. The needles vibrated backwards and forwards for some time and then began to rotate with great velocity. A cheer went through every ship when the news was announced. The engines were immediately reversed, and orders given to make everything ready for an engagement. The decks of every vessel soon became a scene of bustle and activity. Men were hurrying hither and thither to their posts, and the air was filled with the clanging of bells and the rumbling of machinery. The guns were pushed out and loaded, and the torpedo-tubes were filled with their deadly projectiles. The anti-cohesion apparatus and the engines for sending waves of force through space were made ready to take their part in the terrible destruction that was about to commence.

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The ships that had been sent on in advance soon returned to the main body, and announced that they had had a slight brush with the enemy's cruisers, but without doing or receiving any material damage. A few hours later lights were seen moving across the sky far in front. The fleet was immediately ordered to concentrate, and soon the great battle-ships were advancing in lines drawn up one above the other and extending many miles. The torpedo-boats flitted hither and thither amongst the larger vessels or were hurrying to the front, eager to try their destructive powers on the enemy. The cruisers were spread out over an area of several miles, examining the strength of the enemy's fleet. Soon long streaks of purple fire, darting about in the distance, showed that they had become engaged with the enemy; but this was only the merest skirmish compared with what was to follow. In a short time the whole of the space in front of the Anglo-Saxon fleet as far as the eye could reach was filled with a blaze of light that rendered the stars quite invisible. Beams of light of all colours flashed hither and thither, while the long flashes that came from the guns looked like distant lightning. But whatever was going on in front, or whatever giant forces were being called into play, not a sound was heard by the crews of the Anglo-Saxon fleet, and no one could make out what was happening on account of the inextricable confusion of lights. But by degrees the individual ships became visible. The lights moved hither and thither, sometimes being extinguished, then suddenly reappearing again. At last, by executing a neat manoeuvre, the whole fleet appeared drawn up in battle array a few miles in front of the Anglo-Saxons. The latter were now ready for action; all the gunners stood at their guns with their fingers on the triggers ready to fire at a moment's notice. The flag-ship of the Admiral-in-Chief retired to the rear; but the other flag-ships were drawn up by their divisions, ready to lead them to the attack. The Admiral-in-Chief displayed a signal to the whole fleet before it went into action. It was : 'England expects that every man will do his duty' — a signal which historical records tell us was used by a great commander in the old days of battles on the sea. There was frantic cheering on all the ships when the signal was read out, and everyone, from admiral to gunner, was determined to conquer or die. There was a little more preliminary manoeuvring, and then the battle began.

CHAPTER VII

THE GREAT BATTLE IN SPACE

THE sixth division, under Admiral Enham, was ordered to advance and commence the attack. As they moved forward in a long line a powerful division of the enemy advanced to meet them. When they were within two miles of each other the sixth division opened fire, and the Sirian ships immediately replied. Long jets of white fire some hundreds of yards in length leapt from the sides of every ship, and were followed by great clouds of white vapour that rushed through space with the speed of a tempest. These rolled along until they hit against another ship, when they were shattered to pieces and filled the space around with a dim mistiness. Every now and then a column of vapour burst forth from the side of some vessel when the metal sheathing was pierced and the imprisoned air rushed out. The two long lines of flaming vessels gradually drifted nearer to one another, until they were about a mile apart, vomiting out sheets of fire, while the space between was swept by a storm of shot and shell. Neither side dared to approach any nearer, for the concentrating reflectors were ready to liquefy any vessel that came within range. The space all round the contending lines was soon filled with clouds of vapour and pieces of exploded shells and fragments of metal that had been torn off the outsides of the ships. Most of the vessels were slowly turning round about their longitudinal axis, discharging a terrific broadside from each deck as it came within range, the discharged guns being loaded while they were turned away from the enemy.

Both sides soon began to show the effects of the terrible fire to which they were exposed. Many of the ships had large dark-coloured rents in their hulls, from which masses of twisted and broken metal-work protruded. The fittings on the exteriors were severely damaged. The balustrades were shot away, the muzzles of the guns were cut off and blown into space, and the protection apparatus on the outsides was soon pounded into a useless mass of wires and rods. Dismounted guns, mangled bodies, and reddened limbs were floating about everywhere, some of them suddenly vanishing as they were struck by a passing shot. Great pieces of metal with the guns and other machinery attached to them were blown off wherever a shell from one of the largest cannon hit its mark. The scene was sublime, but awful. The sides of every ship soon became a seething mass of flame and smoke, in the midst of which its form could be barely distinguished. Every moment long white flashes leapt outwards, being varied at intervals by columns of purple and green flame when the great guns were discharged. When the ships were close together, flames clashed against flames, leaping up and tossing high into space like a tempest-raging ocean, and the smoke columns dashed against one another, forming walls of white vapour that quivered under the shock. Sometimes the projectiles and torpedoes clashed together, producing brilliant flashes of light.

For hour after hour the two lines continued to pound away at one another. The torpedo-nets of every vessel were soon completely torn to pieces. Then the torpedo-boats advanced and clustered like bees round the larger ships, seeking to fire their torpedoes against the most vulnerable parts. But although the nets were gone, the torpedo-men carried their lives in their hands. Directly they approached a hostile vessel the guns were levelled at them, and several boats were blown to pieces before they had time to fire a single torpedo. But some did good work before they perished. Vast columns of smoke belched forth from the side of some mighty war-ship, and when they had drifted away showed a gigantic rent where the honey-combed air-tight compartments and dismantled guns were clearly visible, while showers of blood and masses of metal fell on the surrounding ships. Then more torpedo-boats would dash into the chasm, but the guns on the yet intact part of the ship destroyed many of them before they could effect another explosion. Many of the first-class battleships were almost cut in half in this manner, but still the remainder kept on fighting with undaunted courage.

Meanwhile, the rest of the fleet had not been idle. At the commencement of the engagement the enemy's fleet detached nearly a hundred vessels, which began to drift slowly away to the right. The Anglo-Saxon Admiral-in-Chief sent a considerable part of his fleet to observe these, in order to avoid being outflanked. Thus, both fleets became divided into two parts, the greater being actively engaged, while the other was occupied in manoeuvring. The Sirian divisions that had been detached then began to make directly for Neptune, and the Anglo-Saxons pursued them vigorously, keeping up a running fight all the time, but little damage was done on either side. Soon the main body of

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the fleet was quite out of sight, and nothing could be seen of the fight but an occasional faint flash of light in the distance. The Anglo-Saxons still kept up a hot pursuit, firing continually, but, to their surprise, they noticed that they did no damage whatever to the enemy. Whenever one of their shells reached its mark, it appeared to go through the side of the ship as if it were made of some elastic substance, and did not do any damage at all. When the heavier guns were fired, the same effect was observed. The pursuit was kept up for some days; and then, mad with fury, the Anglo-Saxons turned on the full power of the engines and charged the enemy with their rams. They rushed through the ships without shock or jar, as if they did not exist at all. Then one of the officers suddenly started the idea that an ingenious trick had been played on them by the enemy, and that the appearance of the ships which they could not destroy was only an optical illusion. Tests were immediately made, and this was found to be the case. They had been deceived by a number of reflections which had been thrown into space by a dozen ships some hundreds of miles in front of them. A cry of rage and despair went up through the whole of the fleet when they discovered how they had been duped. But there was no time to give way to these feelings of useless rage; the mistake must be remedied as soon as possible. The ships of the enemy that had been throwing the reflections were allowed to go where they pleased, for they were not numerous enough to break through the strong lines of defence which were by this time formed about the orbit of Neptune. The fleet put about and made for the spot where the fight had commenced, but they did not get there for some days. While they were dashing along, one ship was struck by a wandering projectile that had been thrown hundreds of thousands of miles from the field of battle, and serious damage was done to it. At last they reached what was, as nearly as they could judge, the place where they had left the main body of the fleet; but there was nothing to be seen of either of the contending armaments. They scoured space in all directions. Sometimes the needles moved, indicating the approach of a mass of solid matter, but it only turned out to be the disfigured wreckage of what was formerly a magnificent war-ship. Some of these wrecks belonged to the Anglo-Saxon, others to the Sirian fleet. Sometimes they saw the disfigured and mangled bodies of human beings drift slowly past the windows, the limbs and flesh being torn into horrid shapes and blackened by the flames of battle. But they could find no war-ship with living beings on board; either one or both of the fleets must have been totally annihilated. They remained for days wandering hither and thither, endeavouring to find out what had happened to their compatriots; but they were disappointed : not a living being could they see. Then sadly and reluctantly the admiral gave the order for the ships to concentrate and give up the search, for it seemed useless to waste any more valuable time. There was not enough ammunition left to make it safe for them to proceed to Kairet, so they turned about and steered for Neptune. When they arrived at that planet, they found out what had happened to the rest of the fleet. It was a tale that filled every man in the fleet with horror and awe.

CHAPTER VIII

IN THE THICK OF THE FIGHT

AS soon as the main bodies of the fleets were left to themselves, the Anglo-Saxon Admiral-in-Chief noticed that he was out-numbered to the extent of more than two ships to one, for, although a large number of the enemy's ships had departed, they seemed to have obtained a fresh supply from some invisible source. He telegraphed back to the division he had sent in pursuit to rejoin him, but they did not answer or appear. The reason of this was, as they afterwards found out, that the Sirians had sent waves of Ednogen through the surrounding space, so that the Anglo-Saxons could not send any telegraphic messages to their rear. The Admiral then hastened to make up for his bad fortune by bravery and strategy. Line after line of ships advanced against the Sirians until nearly every ship was engaged. The ships moved hither and thither, singly, in lines, and by divisions, pounding away at their adversaries. As soon a ship was reduced to a helpless condition, the torpedo-boats swarmed around it, forcing their terrible explosives into its yawning rents, until it was literally torn to pieces and disembowelled, the massive machinery floating about in space with its wheels still whirling. Sometimes the sides of a ship would be seen to melt and run down as a liquid under the rays which were directed upon them by the anticohesion apparatus, the liquefied metal falling down like rain on to the ships below. Then the sides would become too thin to withstand the strain, and would be blown outwards by the pressure of the air within, scattering the softened and liquid metal far and wide. The torpedo-boats frequently melted and became a mist of vapour from the effect of the terrible rays. Sometimes the rays from different ships clashed together in space, producing blinding sheets of light. Every now and then there was a terrific explosion, when a shell found its way to the magazine of a large battleship, and in a second the vast fabric disappeared, leaving nothing but a cloud of smoke, while its fragments were sent flying to the uttermost ends of space. These explosions were often as destructive to friend as to foe, for no one could tell where the vast fragments would be likely to be thrown. Thousands of shells would be hurled in every direction, exploding whenever they came in contact with a solid body, and filling the space around with blinding flashes of light and dense clouds of smoke. The rams were used whenever there was an opportunity, and then the destruction became appalling. The great battleships dashed into one another with a force that nothing could resist, the ram being frequently vaporized by the heat developed by the impact. Sometimes the ram stuck in the middle of a ship, and the two were locked together and kept on firing at one another until one or both were completely wrecked. Sometimes a ship would dash at another, but when only a little way off, its victim poured out sheets of flame and the attacking vessel was literally beaten back by the force of the shot.

But still the battle continued for hour after hour without either party gaining any advantage. The ships often lay within a few yards of one another exchanging a continual tempest of shot and shell. Flames dashed from ship to ship and leapt back again until the intervening space was one sea of fire. The hulls were scorched and blistered by the heat, and the anti-gravitation apparatus was completely melted.

After the battle had lasted for thirty hours, the ships of friend and foe were mixed together in inextricable confusion. The admirals could no longer control their ships, for it was impossible to see what they were doing amidst the blinding flames and clouds of smoke. Every captain acted for himself, as he thought best. Above, below, and around there was nothing but a mass of floating monsters vomiting flame and smoke, and a vast quantity of wreckage strewn in every direction. The ships floated about seeking and engaging a hostile vessel wherever they could find one.

The hours went slowly by, but still the deadly struggle continued with unabated vigour, for both sides felt that they were contending for the empire of the Universe. The captains still stood at their posts in the midst of the wreckage of what were but a few hours previously such magnificent ships, guiding them with the same calm precision as before. Waves and eddies of vapour, showers of twisted and rent metal, and storms of shot swept around the contending fleets. Whenever a water-tank was burst open, the liquid immediately spurted out and was converted into dense clouds of steam that obscured whole lines of ships from view.

But still the clash and clatter went on. The ships dashed out of the rolling columns of smoke and rammed, fired, and hammered at one another with ceaseless vigour. Sometimes the whole side of a ship was blocked by the

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whirling masses of wreckage that hung on to the guns and outworks. The destruction was frightful. There was no way of getting out of the refuse of the tremendous conflict. Far and wide over space extended the columns of vapour, the clouds of vaporized metal, and the twisted and scoriated remnants of what were once magnificent ships. When the battle had lasted sixty hours, fully four thousand vessels had been blown to pieces, while nearly all the rest were more or less damaged.

But other forces besides the impact of cannon-shot contributed to the destruction. Many a huge ship electrified its rival's machinery so that it could not move, and when it was thus fascinated, as it were, tore it to pieces bit by bit. Sometimes two or more ships would hold another thus in their grip and tear it to pieces between them, and then go on and seek another victim. Thousands of men were killed by the destructive waves of the force Ednogen, which were focussed on to the ships in which they were fighting. Every now and then some huge ship rushed out of the darkness and rammed another to pieces, and then, staggering along under the shock, was perhaps rammed in its turn or had its sides torn open by torpedoes.

The scene inside many of the ships was appalling. The battle had now lasted for seventy hours without ceasing, and the men were fainting from excessive toil. The heat between the decks was over-powering, for every time a gun was discharged the air became hotter. Every man was stripped to the waist, but even then they were streaming with perspiration. Thousands fell down at their posts from sheer exhaustion, and, as there was no one to take their places, the captains had to cease firing and use their rams and other destroying apparatus until they had recovered from their exhaustion. Every time a compartment was pierced the air rushed out, and all the inmates died, their bodies being frequently burst open by the pressure of the air inside. Without a word of warning the shot came crashing through the armour plating, or a piece of the side was torn off by a torpedo. When the force Ednogen was focussed on to a ship, the men in the part where it fell were suddenly seized by violent spasms. They twisted their bodies into every conceivable form. They writhed on the floor like snakes, they clutched at the guns and levers, and then they fell back dead, the blood streaming from their mouths and nostrils. Sometimes these terrible invisible forces that could pass through metal like air would clash together inside a ship, and then the compartments would be filled with sheets of flame that burnt the inmates to death.

The time passed on until the fight had raged for ninety hours. Admirals and captains fell down at their posts overcome with nervous prostration that resulted from the long duration of the battle. Some of the latter were relieved by their lieutenants, but others persisted in sticking to their posts, until they went raving mad from the tremendous strain. They were carried out of their metal spheres, and other officers took their places. But neither side thought of retiring from the battle area even for a short respite. It was a struggle to see on which side the brain-power of the commanders would hold out longest.

The carnage was terrible on board the *Lightning*. She had been kept among the reserves during the early hours of the fight, but she had been called into action when the numbers of the fleet began to diminish. Captain Minton stood ready in his metal sphere, with his hands on the levers, and two officers by his side, waiting for the signal to plunge into the turmoil. Alec Brandon was in the middle of the fifth deck, looking through the windows in the sliding doors to see that every man was at his post. The gunners stood ready at their guns with their fingers on the triggers, and behind them their assistants were receiving the shells as they were hoisted up through the floor from the magazines. At last the signal came from the admiral's ship. The *Lightning*, with the *Majestic*, the *Morning Star*, the *Flame*, and the *Terrible* were to advance to the support of the seventh division.

Captain Minton turned a handle. The dull rumbling of the engines was heard through the ship as it leapt forward into the contest. A moment later the thuds of the shot were heard against its side, and the metal sheathing was pierced in several places. Then Captain Minton shouted into a telephone. The vessel was wrapped in sheets of flame and clouds of vapour. A terrible roar resounded through every compartment, and the hull quivered from stem to stern as a double broadside was discharged.

'Excellent!' he muttered.

But a moment later his face clouded, and he hastily turned a wheel. The vessel swung round, but there was a shock at the bows that knocked nearly everyone down and made the ship rock from side to side.

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'A nasty one that!' remarked the captain; 'nearly had us that time. Now for revenge!'

He gripped the steering-wheel and shouted into another telephone. The vessel swung round, and then dashed forward at a terrific pace. Two minutes later both broadsides were again discharged, and then there was a frightful crash and a shock that seemed as if it would shake the vessel to pieces. The two under-officers looked at the telephoto-scope, and saw a great ship just behind them with a yawning rent cut all along its side.

'Very nicely cut,' said the captain.

But the *Lightning* had not come off scatheless. Thirty-three of her compartments had been pierced, five of her largest guns dismantled and rendered useless, and more than a hundred men killed.

There was next a conflict with torpedo-boats, and these kept fully half of the guns employed in destroying or warding them off. And so the *Lightning* fought on for hour after hour. Compartment after compartment was pierced and its inmates destroyed. The torpedoes tore off great masses from the metal sheathing, but Captain Minton handled her well, and she did more damage than she received. When the eightieth hour came, the bows were crushed in by a ram and the sides were torn and riddled by shot until they looked like a sieve; but the machinery was still intact, so she could still hold on her way. When the ninety-fifth hour came, Alec was sent for by the captain. He entered the metal sphere, and found him looking worn and pale and very grave. At his feet lay two lieutenants, who had fallen down at their posts, exhausted by the long duration of the conflict.

'Things are going very bad with us,' he said, in a low voice, as he signed to Alec to take charge of a wheel. 'We are outnumbered; they are too many for us.'

Hour after hour went slowly by, while the captain still worked the ship with the same calm precision. The guns still continued to fire, but the broadsides were not nearly so strong as they had been at first. The scene between the decks was frightful. The guns were dismantled from their carriages, which were twisted into every conceivable shape. Fragments of human bodies were strewn about everywhere, and the floor ran with blood. The air-tight doors had been wrenched off and hurled all over the place. Water-tanks had been pierced, and some of the cylinders where the energy was stored had been wrenched open and produced frightful havoc. When the hundred and eighth hour of the combat struck, the engines responded no more to the movements of the levers.

'The engines are done for,' said Captain Minton quietly.

But the ship still continued to fight, firing what guns were left intact, and using the Ednogen force apparatus. But one by one the guns were extinguished, either by the compartments where they were mounted being pierced, or by their muzzles being damaged from the outside. Then the stern was battered in by a ram, and she spun round under the shock. The captain still held the levers, and looked calmly at the telephoto-scope picture. Not a muscle of his face moved.

Next there was a frightful shock against one of the sides, and three more guns were rendered useless, while the space outside was filled with clouds of vapour.

'The *Lightning* will be destroyed rather than surrender,' said Captain Minton.

The guns still continued to fire feebly. The captain shouted into a telephone, and Alec's face blanched when he heard the reply that came back.

A swarm of torpedo-boats were settling down on the sides of the dying giant. The force of Ednogen was turned on to them, and two were rendered useless; a third was half melted by the anticohesion apparatus.

'The *Lightning* can still strike,' said the captain.

A minute later a huge first-class battle-ship bore down upon them, intending to annihilate what remained of the *Lightning* with its ram. A stern smile flitted over the captain's face.

'Not so fast,' he said as he turned a wheel.

There was an awful shock, but their huge assailant lay helpless in front of them. More than four hundred of its men had perished in a few seconds.

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Another vast battleship came charging along and cut the *Lightning* completely in half. The captain's metal sphere was fastened on to the stern, but the bow part was totally wrecked. Their assailant made a signal to them to surrender, but Captain Minton replied by ordering the remaining guns to be fired. The stern part was gradually shot away piece by piece until nothing was left but the captain's sphere and a quantity of wreckage hanging round it.

Then the air inside began to get very oppressive. Alec felt his head beginning to spin round, while he hardly knew what was going on around him. Captain Minton gradually sank down on to the ground, still holding the lever in his hands, and died murmuring the words 'No surrender' with his last breath. Darkness passed over Alec's eyes, and he tottered round the room until he fell down insensible. Nothing was left of the once mighty *Lightning* but innumerable fragments scattered through the cold regions of space.

CHAPTER IX

THE END OF THE BATTLE

WHEN the hundred and twentieth hour of the battle struck, the Anglo-Saxons were virtually defeated, for they were hopelessly outnumbered. All around lay fragments of mighty vessels, masses of machinery, and thousands of human bodies torn and mangled in the most horrible manner. Masses of wreckage were drifting about, sometimes collecting in vast piles that rotated slowly about the centre of gravity. Here and there lay some maimed monster, unable to move, but still firing its uninjured guns. Columns of smoke came rolling along from the regions where the battle was still raging, and then vanished again into the distance. Sometimes a stray shell or a torpedo that had missed its mark struck a mass of wreckage and hurled it far and wide. The tide of battle rolled along through the starry depths, strewing its path with destruction and death.

The Anglo-Saxon Admiral-in-Chief now saw that it was a case of surrender or the total annihilation of his fleet. He preferred the latter; death was better than disgrace. With the courage of despair, he resolved to gather together his remaining forces and make one giant stroke to ward off defeat. All the remaining battleships that still had their engines intact were collected together and formed into line while the torpedo-boats flung themselves on to the enemy to divert their attention. The admiral's ship was in front of the line to lead the way. When they were all ready a last signal was made from the flag-ship : *Conquer or die*.

A cheer roared through every ship when the signal was made out. The guns that were left were pulled in to prevent them from being damaged. Then the order was given to charge the enemy at full speed. The captains pulled their levers, and the long line dashed into space. But, to the astonishment of the men, they appeared to be flying away from the battle area. So thought the enemy, too, but they were mistaken. They prepared to start in pursuit, and shook themselves free from the pestering torpedo-boats. But suddenly the long line wheeled right round and came towards them at a thundering pace. They tried to open out, but in vain : there was no time. Some reversed their engines and began to retreat; others had just time to swing round so that only their bows were exposed to the charging mass. A tremendous cannonade was opened, but it did not check the oncoming mass. In a few seconds the intervening space was crossed, the admiral's flag-ship still leading the way. Then the monstrous ships leaped upon the enemy with the force and courage of despair. There was a frightful crashing, rending, tearing. Some of the ships met bow to bow and ram to ram, and quivered through and through with the shock. Others sent their rams along the sides of their opponents, ripping up the thick armour plating as if it had been paper and laying bare the palpitating machinery and honey-combed compartments. Many charged into the battle-ships broadside and sent their rams right through the double walls of metal plating, through the engine-rooms, and out again the other side, bearing the stricken ship along with them by the momentum they had accumulated. A few that had been previously severely handled folded up under the shock and were reduced to a state of utter powerlessness. Many of the magazines exploded from the shock, blowing everything around them to pieces and making huge chasms in the fighting masses. The space around was filled with blinding flashes, sheets of flame, and clouds of smoke. The charging vessels still crashed along, dashing alike into friend and foe in the confusion. In a few minutes what was left of the Anglo-Saxon fleet emerged on the other side, but there were only thirty vessels remaining out of the vast fleet. Some were rocking from side to side from the effects of the shock, while others were spinning round. There was not a ship that had escaped unscathed.

The captains looked round to see what had been the effect of the charge. The enemy's line was annihilated; their ships were mixed up together in inextricable confusion. More than a hundred vessels had been rendered *hors de combat*.

But there was little cause for self-congratulation. Fresh lines of the enemy's ships were bearing down on the devoted bands of Anglo-Saxons. Onward they came, their bright sides, as yet untouched by shot or shell, gleaming in the flashes of the searchlights. Wearily, but bravely, the vanquished men ran out their guns, and prepared to destroy until they were themselves destroyed. Four of the smaller ships were despatched to Neptune with the news of their defeat and the overwhelming odds to which they were exposed. Then the relentless lines closed in around them, and the tempests of shots came crashing through their hulls. The flag-ship perished first, being completely shot to pieces,

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the brave admiral and his officers still holding out until they were suffocated by the escape of air. The vessels were destroyed one by one, the Sirian ships searching them out with their powerful lights, and firing at them till they were totally wrecked. But the destruction of the last terrible charge still haunted their memory, and they wisely separated out and kept their distance. Ten ships were now left, but they fought bravely on, still working their guns with the same precision as at the commencement of the fight. And they could still bite, as many a Sirian battleship found out to its cost when a shell was hurled right into its vitals.

The battle had now lasted six days, and only five ships remained to the Anglo-Saxons. These were destroyed one by one, until the Sirian fleet rode over the scene of the battle without an enemy to hinder it. They had now about 800 ships remaining, but they had lost many more than the Anglo-Saxons. For a long time they were busily employed in collecting the spoils of the victory and in succouring those of their own ships that had been more severely handled. Chains were thrown across many of the larger wrecks, and they were attached to the Sirian ships, to be towed back to Kairet as trophies of the fight. But the victorious fleet had to pick its way carefully through the wrecks, for the battle area was full of unexploded shells and wandering torpedoes. A few days afterwards they were joined by another fleet more vast than the one that had been fighting. This had been hovering in the rear during the battle, and had been kept constantly informed of what had taken place. So vast was the power, and so enormous were the resources of Kairet, that they even had a third fleet ready behind this one, so they were prepared to carry the war into the heart of the Anglo-Saxon Empire, and exterminate it — if they could.

When all the spoil that was worth taking had been removed, and the conquering vessels had been supplied with more ammunition by their tenders, the united fleets set out for Neptune, while the third fleet followed leisurely in the rear.

CHAPTER X

A PEACEFUL INTERVAL

WHEN Alec Brandon came to his senses again, he was dimly conscious of a feeling of quietness and peace, that was quite different from the noise and clang that was deafening his ears when he lost consciousness. He slowly opened his eyes and looked around. He lay on a bed in a good-sized room, which was lighted by a dimly - burning lamp that hung from the ceiling. He tried to move, but an overpowering weight held him down to the bed, and he felt a dull pain in one of his legs. In a few seconds his head whirled round, and he became unconscious. How long he lay he knew not, but when his senses returned he felt another hand holding his own, while someone was bathing his forehead with a cooling liquid. He opened his eyes, and saw a girl standing by his side. He tried to speak, but his throat was parched and dry.

'Hush!' she said playfully, in a low, musical voice, as she held up one finger. 'You must not speak yet, for you are still very weak. You have nothing to fear; you are in the hands of friends.'

A moment later he saw a young man standing close to him and examining him attentively. Then he walked away from the bed, and talked to the girl in low tones for some time.

'He will do all right,' he whispered, as he left the room. 'He has had a near shave, though. I hardly thought we should have succeeded in bringing him round. You must take care of him and feed him up well.'

There was a click as the door shut, and Alec was left alone with the girl. She came up to him and fed him with some liquid food from a spoon, after which he felt much refreshed. Then he turned over on his side and fell fast asleep. When he awoke again, the girl was sitting by his side doing some fancy work.

'You look better now,' she said, as soon as she noticed that his eyes were open. 'You can talk a little if you like, but only a very little, mind.'

'Where am I? How did I get here?' he asked feebly.

'You are on Herbert Eastland's private yacht, the *Mermaid*,' she answered. That was Herbert you saw just now, and I am his sister Celia. We were cruising about in space, when we came upon a lot of wrecks lying about. I suppose there has been a great battle somewhere. Oh, this terrible war!

'There has been a great battle,' murmured Alec. 'We were outnumbered and defeated. It was a terrible battle that lasted for more than six days.'

'Oh, this dreadful war!' said Celia as her deep brown eyes filled with tears. 'But never mind,' she added as she noticed the look of pain that passed over Alec's face; 'we shall beat them yet. Now I will tell you how you came here. We were voyaging about in space, when we came upon a lot of wrecks, and among them there was a great metal sphere with some pieces of wreckage still attached to it. Herbert said that it was one of the boxes where the captain goes during an engagement. Then I suggested that there might be someone still alive, shut up in it; but Herbert only laughed at me, and wanted to proceed on our way, in case we might get mixed up in a battle. At last I managed to persuade him to send a diver to attach it to the *Mermaid* with grappling irons and see if there was anyone inside. After a great deal of trouble the diver managed to unfasten and open the valve and get inside, and there he found you and the captain and two other officers. The others were quite dead, but you were still warm, so we put you to bed and blew air into you and tried to revive you. For a long time all our efforts were in vain, but at last we were relieved by seeing you begin to breathe. You hung between life and death for days. Every time I looked at you I expected to see that you had breathed your last. Herbert said he was so afraid that you had received severe internal injuries from having been in a vacuum, but I don't think you are much the worse for it now, except your broken leg, which we managed to patch together for you.'

'I owe my life to you,' he said gratefully as he pressed her hand.

'To Herbert,' said Celia laughingly.

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'To you.'

'Herbert carried you down here. It was his ship that saved you,' with another laugh.

'But you nursed me.'

'Well, what if I did? It would have been very unkind of me if I had not.'

'You are an angel.'

'Don't be silly,' said Celia as a slight blush suffused her cheeks. 'Now let me continue my story. As soon as you had been brought down below, we fastened the captain's sphere on to the outside, and now we are towing it along with us. If you look out of the window, you will be able to see it.'

Alec raised himself up on one hand and peered forth into the star-bespangled space. There, not far from the hull of the *Mermaid*, he could make out by the light cast from the windows a spherical object much battered and torn about.

'But what have you done with Captain Minton and the other two?' asked Alec.

'They were left in the sphere,' replied Celia sadly. 'They will be buried when we get to Neptune.'

'To Neptune! Is that where you are bound for?'

'Yes; that is where I live with my brother and sister. Herbert is a great engineer, and we are making this voyage to test the efficiency of a new combination of forces that he has discovered. We expect to be back at Neptune in about eight weeks.'

'How long is it since I was brought here?' asked Herbert.

'About a fortnight ago, and you have been unconscious nearly all the time. But come,' added Celia, as she assumed an appearance of mock solemnity: 'you must not talk any more now. You must try and go to sleep like a good boy, or you will never get well again.'

She bent over him as she spoke to arrange his pillows, and he was conscious of a strange thrill that swept through his body as a few stray tresses of her magnificent golden hair lightly touched his face. She bustled about the room for a moment, her fresh light figure brightening everything with its presence. Then she turned the light down a little and vanished altogether. A faint sigh that he could not altogether suppress escaped from Alec's lips, and the sunshine of his life seemed to have gone in a moment.

Oh, faithless and perverse generation of men! Is this your love? Is this your constancy?

Alec Brandon's mind was troubled for some moments with various conflicting thoughts, and then he fell fast asleep. When he awoke again he felt stronger and better. After some days had passed he was able to get up and recline on a sofa, for he was too weak to walk about at all. Herbert Eastland came to see him some-times, but he could not stay long, for his duties as captain of the ship took up nearly all his time. But Celia was almost always with him, flitting about in his room like a beam of sunshine, smoothing down his pillows and anticipating every wish before he uttered it. Sometimes she would turn round quickly and notice his eyes fixed on her longingly and lovingly, and then a deep blush would suffuse her cheeks, and she had to turn away her head to hide the new feelings that had been born to her heart. Sometimes—oh, delicious moments!—she would support him with one arm while he walked up and down the room trying to regain the strength of his legs. Sometimes their faces almost touched, and he could smell the perfume of her golden hair and feel her hot breath on his cheeks, and he had to put his arm round her shoulders to steady his tottering footsteps. Then he would sit down on the sofa and she would read to him, and later on Herbert would join them at a meal.

And so days and weeks sped by, days which Flora Houghton, tied down to the little earth millions of miles away, spent in watching for the smallest scrap of news of the Anglo-Saxon fleet. As they approached nearer to Neptune the dim shimmering light which pervaded space became brighter as the sun grew larger. They sped on at the same rapid pace, but soon the speed had to be slackened and they proceeded more carefully as they approached the orbit of Neptune; for here there were vast fleets manoeuvring about trying to catch one another at a disadvantage.

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Herbert Eastland was in his room for hours at a time carefully watching for the needles to indicate any approaching mass. The disc of Neptune became larger, spreading out into a vast glowing sphere, that showed continents, seas, islands, and rivers. The engines were reversed, and they carefully wended their way along as the needles moved this side, that side, passing by single ships, squadrons, and divisions thirsting for one another's destruction. Sometimes they passed quite close to the edge of a battle area, where thousands of guns were vomiting forth fire and smoke, and the blinding flashes caused by the rays of Ednogen meeting together lighted up every cabin in the ship. At last they plunged into the atmosphere of Neptune, and were safe for the time being.

They now cruised leisurely on over Neptune, Celia carefully explaining to Alec every object of interest they passed over. When they were low enough the hatches were opened, and he went up on to the outer deck, so that he could breathe the fresh air of Neptune. In a few days they passed over the capital, and the *Mermaid* was let down on to the ground in one of the suburbs, in a kind of park that belonged to Herbert Eastland.

'Safe at last!' he muttered; 'but it was a risky voyage. I won't try it again when there is such hot fighting going on.'

Alec was not yet able to walk much, so he was put into a chair, which was let down over the ship's side, and carried into the house under the directions of Celia. As health and strength returned, he began to experience a slight remorse for what he had done, and to think of the absent Flora, to whom he had plighted his troth. But such feelings only took possession of his mind when his pretty nurse was absent. His love for her came rushing back as soon as she returned, putting to flight all prudential considerations. Sometimes he resolved to confess everything to her, and ask to be removed to some other house, where he would not be exposed to her seductive attractions; but as soon as she came into the room his courage gradually oozed away, and perhaps he was not sorry that it did.

And so at last he resigned himself to the inevitable. They always talked together and behaved as lovers, and her brother began to look upon them as already engaged. She effected the conquest of his heart more and more every day as she flitted about before him, a smile on her lips, and her wealth of golden hair falling in silken ripples down her back. He thought he had never seen anyone so pretty or so engaging before. It was many months now since he had seen Flora, and it would be months before he could see her again : for the war was raging all round the planet, and it was unsafe for any boat but an armoured battleship to venture into space. It was impossible to tell when he would be in a fit state to recommence his duties on a war-ship, for he still felt the effects of his narrow escape.

So Alec Brandon, partly from pleasure, partly from necessity, resigned himself to the inevitable, and the delights afforded by Celia's society drowned any qualms of conscience that he might be afflicted with. He did not mix much with the people of Neptune, and therefore he had little society but that of his late nurse, for Herbert was engaged in his laboratory all day long and did not leave it even for meals. So he took his meals alone with Celia, enjoying her lively conversation without a thought for the future or consequences. He walked with her, he flirted with her all day, weaving the silken chains that bound them together ever tighter.

While all this gentle love play was going on at Neptune, the surrounding space was echoing with the crash of battle. Sometimes the stillness of the air and the peacefulness of some quiet country scenery would be rudely interrupted by a frightful shriek as a flaming mass of metal crashed down on trees, rocks, and buildings and made the ground quiver with the shock for miles around. As soon as the mass of twisted and scoriated metal was cool enough, the inhabitants crowded round it with feelings of reverential awe. They knew that it was the wreck of some battleship that had met its fate in the distant regions of space far above their heads. When these wandering masses got within the sphere of the planet's attraction they were drawn towards it with ever-increasing velocity until they reached the atmosphere, when they were heated to incandescence by the friction. Sometimes the magazine was exploded by the heat, and then the terrible projectiles would be flung far and wide, bursting as they fell. These occurrences impressed the minds of those who saw them with greater terror, as the contending fleets were quite invisible, and no one would have known what was going on but for the occasional fall of the battered wrecks.

At night the scene was more brilliant but more awful. Frightful detonations disturbed the season of darkness. The awakened inhabitants rushed out into the open air, fearing to be buried under the ruins of their houses. They saw a fiery object falling to the ground in the distance accompanied by a long trail of flame. Sometimes the flaming meteorite would emit terrific explosions all the time that it was falling, and after it had touched the ground, as shell

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after shell exploded, and the air around it would be filled with clouds of smoke and steam. At other times there would be long flashes of green and purple light and distant detonations as wandering projectiles struck the air and blew up. Sometimes on clear nights thousands of inhabitants would turn out and gaze upwards in awe at the silent flashes and sheets of flame that darted about in the sky. Then, far beyond these, they could see a flaming nebulous cloud that moved slowly over the sky, vibrating and palpitating, and gradually changing its form, but always glowing with the same brightness. When examined by powerful telescopes, it was found to consist of sheets and jets of flame that continually dashed forth, apparently out of nothing, and clashed against one another. Beyond this and in the direction of Jupiter was another similar cloud moving slowly across the sky, sometimes like a long bright thread, then circular, then like a dim mist. These clouds lasted for some days; then, one after another, they broke up into small pieces. Evidently terrible battles were being fought in the neighbourhood of the second line of defence. Those who witnessed the appalling nature of the forces that were being used trembled for their husbands, brothers, and sons, who might be perishing even before their eyes.

But the omniscient Deity was about to punish the impiety of men for carrying their hates and jealousies into the silent abodes of space, and their wickedness in unchaining the giant forces with which He had provided them, for the purpose of destroying one another. A terrible event was about to happen, which would send a thrill of horror through the Universe. The contending nations had been recklessly letting loose enormous forces, and sending them quivering and destroying through the regions of space. A catastrophe which had never been hinted at by the calculations of scientists, admirals, and strategists was about to occur and precipitate both sides alike into the extremities of woe.

One night the inhabitants of Neptune were standing out in the open air watching the distant flashes in the sky, when suddenly there was a blinding glare of light somewhere in the orbit of Jupiter's moons. Columns of incandescent vapour shot out into space, enveloping Jupiter and his moons, and covering a large portion of the sky. So bright was the light that it cast cold, dark shadows all over the part of Neptune that was turned towards it. Tongues of flame shot up from the luminous cloud of vapour, and waved this way, that way, as if they were agitated by a violent tempest. A thrill of horror and fear passed through the innumerable multitudes who were standing with their faces turned towards the sky and blanched by the white glare. What had happened? Had some terrible new explosive been discovered and used now for the first time, or had some awful convulsion of Nature overtaken the fighting myriads and overwhelmed both conqueror and conquered alike in an awful ruin? Telegraphic messages were sent, but no answer was received; all the means of communication had broken down. Night after night the seething, heaving mass shone in the sky, quenching the stars by its brightness, and casting cold shadows over the ground; night after night it shone through space, sending a wave of terror through the minds of all who saw it.

CHAPTER XI

THE CATASTROPHE AT JUPITER

AS soon as the Sirian fleets had broken down the first line of defence of the Anglo-Saxons in the depths of space, they steered for the orbit of Neptune. While they were cruising about in these regions, they fell in with the outposts of the second line of defence, and vigorous fighting soon commenced. More ships joined in, until the combat extended over a very wide area. But the main body of the enemy kept hovering about in the rear, invisible to the Anglo-Saxons, and sending aid to their own fleets whenever it was required. Sometimes the tide of battle rolled almost within the atmosphere of Neptune, and the affrighted inhabitants could see the cannon blaze in the skies, while the air was shaken by deafening reports. Many disabled ships, with their antigravitation apparatus broken, sank lower and lower, until they, with their helpless crew and magazine of explosives, fell crashing down into the atmosphere of Neptune, and blew up with an explosion that desolated the ground for a mile around. Dismounted guns, pieces of metal wrenched off battle-ships, and wandering projectiles fell down on to the planet like thunderbolts, crashing through the trees and houses as if they had been made of paper.

Occasionally the Sirian war-ships hovered over Neptune, quite out of sight during the daytime, and then, under cover of the night, they were let down close to a river or lake, and fresh supplies of water pumped up, while the engineers repaired the damage done to the outside. Then, as soon as it began to get light, they rose up into the air, and were out of sight in a few moments. Some were let down into the heart of dense woods, and remained on the ground for some days repairing the more serious wounds they had received; others, more daring, took to plundering, and sailed away with their holds full of fresh provisions. This was soon noticed by the inhabitants of Neptune, and the Home Fleet was scattered all over the planet to search out and suppress the marauders. Soon the solitary woodlands and barren mountains rang with the roar of cannon and the shouts of the combatants. Great battleships lay among the trees or behind projecting rocks, firing shells at one another, that tore up giant trees by their roots and hurled them over the forest, or spattered jagged rocks far and wide. Then at night the searchlights shone among the trees like mimic suns, while the waves of Ednogen force flowed hither and thither, burning up trees and melting rocks like wax. But there were no hand-to-hand combats between the crews; they all preferred to keep behind their metal walls.

Meanwhile, fighting was continued with undiminished vigour in the space outside. The guns kept on belching forth flames and smoke day and night without intermission. Hundreds of ships were destroyed, but more kept on coming up from the reserves to take their places. There was much manoeuvring in Neptune's shadow. Whole lines of battleships lay calmly waiting in the darkness with their lights extinguished, and then they would paralyze with their radiant forces any unwary ships that came within their reach, and tear them to pieces bit by bit. But the Anglo-Saxons were terribly outnumbered again; although fighting bravely, they were slowly but surely getting the worst of the fight.

The advance fleet of the Sirians had now proceeded as far as Jupiter. Here it was met by an Anglo-Saxon fleet, and after several desultory combats a terrible battle commenced. For days the ships chased one another round the planet and between the moons, throwing down a continual shower of wreckage and shot on to the ground below. Far in the rear the admirals of both fleets watched the progress of the fight, directing the movements of the vessels and carefully devising combinations of force which might lead their own ships to victory. For hour after hour the perspiring and weary gunners stood at their guns until they were relieved by others and enabled to retire to rest. But sleep was impossible as long as the strife lasted, for the roar of artillery resounded from end to end of every ship. Wearied, but not conquered, the gunners rose from their beds when their turn came, and returned to their posts ready to conquer or die. But masterly as were the tactics of the Anglo-Saxon admiral, he was gradually being driven into a death-trap by the skilful strategy of the Sirians and their numerically superior forces. Nearly all of his fleet had become collected together between two of Jupiter's moons, and around them as far as the eye could reach lay the Sirian ships vomiting forth flames and smoke and gradually drawing a network of invisible forces around the devoted fleet. Several ships tried to break through, but directly they reached the invisible barrier their machinery was paralyzed, and they lay in space like helpless logs unable to move. On either side were the discs of the two moons clearly shining. Behind them was Jupiter, with its continents and seas clearly marked, but it was impossible to reach either without destroying the

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blockading vessels or breaking their formation. The Anglo-Saxon admiral was fighting with his hands tied behind his back, for he could not move beyond the charmed line. So he drew up his vessels into the form of a hollow sphere and trusted to the strength of his guns. Both parties fought with desperate energy — the Sirians to keep their prestige of victory, the Anglo-Saxons to ward off defeat and save their lives. The Anglo-Saxon formation soon became a mass of flame. Wave after wave of Ednogen was sent rolling through space, followed by showers of shot and shell. Neither side could use torpedo-boats now on account of the waves of Ednogen, for they would have burnt up smaller craft in a moment. There were blinding sheets of light, columns of smoke, and tongues of flame. The Sirian ships quivered and rolled backwards and forwards. The strain was terrific. Wave met wave; crests of flame leapt up as they dashed together. Sometimes it seemed almost as if the Sirian formation must break up, but it opened out more and relieved some of the strain. Intense anxiety was felt on board all the ships. The gunners redoubled their efforts, and fired so quickly that many of the guns were damaged by the heat.

Soon a signal flashed from the admiral's ship in the centre of the sphere. Simultaneously every captain pulled over the starting lever of his ship, and the great sphere spread in all directions, hurling itself on to the enemy. But the latter was on the alert. Some ships sprang through the invisible circle and went plunging into the space beyond. Some charged the opposing ships broadside and pushed them far away, rending and tearing up their armour sheathing. But others were beaten back by the invisible force, and rolled over and over, pitching and tossing, to their former positions, while the gunners held on to whatever they could lay hold of to avoid having their brains dashed out against the guns.

But the charmed circle was broken at last. The ships that had got through quickly reversed their engines, and came charging back on to the Sirians. The shock was awful. Numbers of ships were pierced right through by the rams and converted into hopeless wrecks; others had just time to turn round a little so that they received the rams on their least vulnerable parts; but in spite of this they were dreadfully mutilated. By this successful charge the numbers of the two contending fleets were made very nearly equal.

The battle area had now become a scene of great confusion. The space around the ships was filled with smoke and wreckage. The two fleets were so mixed up together that organized fighting became impossible. The ships wandered about until they found an enemy and then fought with him hand-to-hand.

It was about this time that Providence prepared a retribution that was to fall upon both parties alike and punish them for their impious daring and unbridled passions. They had been recklessly letting loose through space, for the purpose of mutual destruction, giant forces which should have been used for better purposes. The admirals never guessed that the results of the great battle which had taken place months before in the depths of space would be likely to pursue them for hundreds of thousands of miles, and find them out when they were fighting within the bounds of the Solar System.

Yet such was the case. The giant forces which had been let loose on that occasion were not exhausted in the battle area. They interacted upon one another until a vast vacuum, a space absolutely devoid of ether, was formed, and this slowly travelled through space as a great wave. It sped on and on without anyone being aware of its existence or the destruction it might occasion. It passed through the orbit of Neptune and rolled on until it came to Jupiter. Then it passed over the two moons between which the Anglo-Saxon and Sirian fleets were contending in deadly combat. The result of the vacuum was that the two moons were driven towards one another by a colossal force. Most of the officers and crews were suddenly startled by observing that the two discs on either side of them, which had hitherto been so small, were rapidly getting larger. Nobody could make out what was happening; some thought it was merely an optical illusion. But the discs rapidly grew in size from minute to minute, until they covered almost half of the heavens.

Then a blind, unreasoning fear seized on every man in both fleets. They stopped fighting and looked through the windows in terror at the ever-increasing moons. Many of the men burst open the air-tight doors and rushed all over the ships in a state of distraction. The captains tugged at the starting levers with a blind desire to flee anywhere away from the unknown danger. The propellers revolved, but they did not move the ships an inch, on account of the vacuum. Every ship lay helpless like a log, moving along under the impulse of the momentum it had already acquired.

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All discipline between the decks was soon at an end. The gunners abandoned their guns and stared with fascinated gaze at the great mass on to which they appeared to be falling, shrieking out that they would all be destroyed. The officers tried to restore order, but no one listened to them. The panic was universal.

Larger and larger grew the moons and brighter the light. Now they occupied the whole of the heavens; there was nothing to be seen but mountain and forest rapidly expanding and spreading out before their eyes. The crews howled with terror, but the masses rushed on, irresistible, relentless. The outlying ships were caught up on the rocks and pressed on until they clashed against the others. Then, in a second of time, before anyone could move or speak, the two moons met with a fearful crash. Every ship was ground up, pressed flat and destroyed. Mountains and hills were broken off and ground to powder; forests of trees were snapped off and torn to matchwood. The heat generated by the impact was intense. Lakes and rivers were immediately evaporated; but the grinding, crushing, and splitting still continued. Mountains melted and were converted into incandescent vapour; whole countries were torn off and went bounding against one another, crashing and smashing, until they, too, were vaporized. There was a chaos of rocks, mountains, stones, and dust shaking, clashing, and rebounding. A cloud of vapour hung around and grew until it reached Jupiter, throwing a fierce heat and light all over the planet, and even lighting up the distant earth and Neptune. And so in a moment the two great fleets had been wiped out; not a ship escaped to tell the tale.

The damage done to Jupiter was immense. For hours a perfect tempest of half-melted rocks, jagged hills, and lumps of liquid metal fell on to it, committing frightful havoc. The great cloud of luminous vapour slowly rotated round it, withering the foliage of the trees, drying up the rivers, and scorching the face of the land. Men and women perished by thousands. They lay panting on the ground or hiding in cellars and caves while the great fire-cloud moved slowly over their heads, burning, killing, and destroying. Then it vanished for a while, and they went about their ordinary occupations till it rose again above the horizon ready to burn afresh. For weeks this continued, while the waters were evaporated and the ground was burnt with the frightful heat. But at last the excessive heat was dissipated, and the cloud gradually contracted, only giving out a mild warmth. The times and tides of Jupiter, however, were altogether set wrong by the catastrophe, and the orbit of the planet itself was altered by the displacement of the two moons. The headquarters of the Anglo - Saxon fleet that had been established there had to be removed to Mars.

Telegraphic accounts of what had occurred were sent as soon as possible to the other planets, but no one was aware of the fate of the two contending fleets. In fact, no one ever knew what had happened to them; it was nothing in those days for whole fleets to vanish in a single battle without leaving a vessel to tell the tale.

Fighting still went on in the regions between Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars; but the Anglo-Saxons nearly always got the worst of it, they were so heavily out-numbered. The admirals often gazed with despair upon the distant earth shining like a great star, as they recognised their inability to maintain the second line of defence much longer. Many a brave commander standing in his ship riddled by shot sighed for some means to destroy the daring ships that were collecting nearer and nearer about the earth, which he was bound to defend. They ought to have been at Kairet by this time had there been enough ships, and here they were being daily driven back nearer to London. But still they fought on and on, fiercely, dauntlessly. They must keep away the enemy at any sacrifice.

The strategy employed by the Sirian Admiral-in-Chief was exquisite. Day by day he kept on destroying and hemming in the Anglo-Saxons, driving them exactly where he wanted them to go. Oh, why had they been so slack in their preparations? Such was the lamentation uttered by hundreds of captains when they began to recognise their own powerlessness to turn away those terrible fleets.

CHAPTER XII

THE BATTLE AT THE MOON

THE Solar System had now been cleared of the Anglo-Saxon ships as far as the orbit of the moon. Whole fleets belonging to both sides had been totally annihilated, but more rose up from the depths of space to take their places. The Anglo-Saxons still fought bravely on, with no thought of yielding. Telegram after telegram was flashed back to London urging the necessity of building more ships and preparing more men to defend the capital in case of need. There were now only two more lines of defence to be broken down before the victorious enemy would be enabled to come and rain down their shells on to London. These were the fleets stationed at the moon's orbit, and another just outside the earth's atmosphere. Only 240,000 miles lay between London and destruction. The prospect for England became more gloomy every day. The two lines of defence that remained were nothing like as strong as the two which had already been broken down and annihilated. They were composed chiefly of inferior and out-of-date ships, commanded by inexperienced men. The best officers had already been slaughtered at the two outer lines of defence.

The Sirian Admiral-in-Chief soon showed by his vigorous movements that he was not going to allow the grass to grow under his feet. The fires around Jupiter had hardly died down, when the Sirian fleets were already at the moon. Numbers of the Anglo-Saxon ships were let down on to the surface of that luminary and stationed behind the ridges of rock which formed the extinct volcanoes, so that they might be to some extent defended from the artillery of the enemy. Ambushes were posted in all the most suitable spots, and mines were laid strong enough to destroy half a dozen ships. The Anglo-Saxon admirals were labouring with untiring energy to prepare a good stronghold that would enable them to keep the enemy in check while the fortifications at London were being strengthened. The result was that in a few weeks the moon was very strongly fortified.

As the defending lines were gradually contracted, the headquarters of the Anglo-Saxon fleet were removed from Mars to London, so that the progress of the contest could be more easily watched and its movements controlled. The main body and headquarters of the Sirian fleet were established near Jupiter, but a considerable detachment was occupied near the moon in observing the position of the Anglo-Saxons. The moon soon became the theatre of a bloody and desperate contest. The Anglo-Saxon ships lay behind their bulwarks of rock, and committed frightful havoc among the Sirians. The latter approached them, but they fell to pieces under the terrible fire. They tried to entrench themselves behind rocks in the same manner as their enemies, but the positions of the latter had been so skilfully chosen that there were no suitable ridges in the neighbourhood. Sometimes the mines blew up with terrible explosions under their advancing lines, hurling the fragments of ships far and wide. The contest lasted for days and weeks without either party gaining any advantage. Hundreds of vessels lay on the dark side of the moon ready to destroy any adversary that came near them with the rays of Ednogen. When the crews were thoroughly tired out, the ships retired to the shadow for a few hours and then came forth again with renewed energies for the struggle.

The surface of the moon was soon strewn with wreckage and the mangled and disfigured bodies of human beings, while around the fighting ships there was a continual shower of dust and pieces of rock, and clouds of smoke rolled over mountain and plain, almost obscuring everything from view. When the combats took place at some distance from the moon, the ships which had their antigravitation apparatus destroyed sank with swiftly increasing velocity either to the moon or the earth, to be dashed to pieces on the former, or vaporized in the atmosphere of the latter. To lose control over the vessels in these battles meant certain death and destruction for officers and crew; there was no way of escape.

The proportionate loss which the Sirians now suffered far exceeded that of the former battles. For every ship of the Anglo-Saxons which they destroyed they lost at least two of their own. Reinforcements were continually being sent up from the main body to satisfy the jaws of destruction, but still the cry of the admirals was 'More! More!' The Admiral-in-Chief turned pale as he thought of the hundreds of ships that were being sent to disappear for ever in those terrible valleys of death, where smoke rolled and guns flashed night and day without ceasing. Then he almost despaired

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of ultimate victory as he thought of the amount of resistance he would probably yet meet with when he had advanced as far as the earth.

The contest continued night and day. Ramming from above was impossible, and it was difficult to fire straight on account of the movements of the moon, so both fleets crawled along over the ground, fighting desperately behind whatever shelter might be afforded. The Anglo-Saxons were being slowly driven from position to position. As soon as one ridge was rendered untenable they hastily moved their ships to the next, and only left the enemy the bare ground covered with shot and fragments of rock. Slowly the enemy's lines advanced, belching forth flame and smoke, but they left numbers of battered wrecks and thousands of dead men behind them. More vessels came up and took the places of those that were lost, and still the fight went on. The barren rocks were splintered, melted, shattered; they were scorched under the intense heat of the sun. Fleets were hidden in the craters of volcanoes, and suddenly sprang out and consumed unwary vessels. Ships chased one another round mountains, thirsting for destruction. They pursued one another deep down into clefts and caverns. Often the clouds of smoke and sheets of flame pouring out of the ground told of some deadly combat taking place far down in the bowels of the moon. Sometimes the combatants were shut in by the rocks their firing had precipitated, and they all perished together of slow starvation in the dark rocky depths. The giant forces which they had at their disposal were incapable of moving the thousands of tons of rock that were piled up on them, and so they met their death when the turmoil of battle had ceased, friend and foe lying side by side in their useless vessels.

Numbers of ships belonging to both sides were kept constantly employed in exploring the dark side of the moon to see what ambushes there might be lurking there. These wandered slowly through the darkness, cautiously flashing their search-lights hither and thither. But their endeavours led to nothing, for both nations equally disliked operating in those dark rocky regions, where, in searching for enemies, every ship was obliged to reveal its own presence.

And so the fighting went on; but even in the twenty-third century there were limits to human endurance. The gunners were utterly exhausted by hard work, the incessant detonations of the guns, and the fearful heat. Numbers fell down at their posts, and there was no one to replace them. The Sirian ships retreated to the main body, and others came to take their places, but the Anglo-Saxons could not do this. At last the men were so overpowered that many of the ships could hold out no longer. This was notified to the admiral, and he telegraphed to the headquarters at London for orders. At last a retreat to the earth was ordered, and the remnants of the Anglo-Saxon fleet proceeded to London to join the fourth line of defence. But they had fought bravely and well, for they had destroyed more than double their number of the Sirian ships. The Sirians delayed at the moon for some days to reorganize their fleets and arrange their plans for the future; then they dashed across the intervening space, and prepared to break down the last line of defence that was left to the Anglo-Saxons.

CHAPTER XIII

THE BOMBARDMENT OF LONDON

WHILE the fighting had been going on at the moon, London was the scene of a frightful panic. The Government had declared war, and sent the first fleet into space with the confident expectation that there would be great victories, followed by fresh acquisitions. But, to their horror, after months of anxious waiting, a message was flashed from Neptune stating that the vast fleet had been totally annihilated. The news could not be kept secret, so in a few minutes it was telegraphed to every quarter of the globe. Horror and consternation were seen everywhere; there was a complete panic. Nearly every house was in mourning for a father, son, or friend who would return no more. Those who had lost no one were groaning at the fate that probably awaited themselves, for no quartet was asked for or given by these terrible metal-clad fighting machines and their scientist officers. Thousands watched the sky night and day, expecting every minute to see the victorious Sirian fleets come dashing down through the air, and dreading to be burnt up by the rays of the terrible force Ednogen. However, as days passed by and no fleets appeared, the Government gradually gained their ascendancy, and the people put away their blind, unreasoning fear; but, nevertheless, the shame of defeat had entered deep into their souls.

Meanwhile, strenuous exertions were being made in all the dockyards to build and equip new fleets. All through the day and night the machinery continued to clatter and clang without intermission, and nearly every day a new war-ship took the air to make its trial-trip. Dockyards were set up deep underground and in the hearts of mountains, so that the building could be carried on if the earth happened to be invaded. The entrances to these were guarded by numerous forts cut out of the sides of the rock and faced with metal plates, so that any hostile vessels which might come near could be pierced through and through by the heavy cannon with which they were armed. Forts bristling with every terrible weapon that science had invented for the purpose of offence grew up all round London. Levies of officers and men were made, and retired veterans were called out and distributed among the new ships. By degrees, the panic caused by the first disaster wore away, and an enthusiasm for resistance to the utmost spread all over the globe. The great Anglo-Saxon Empire was determined not to perish without struggling to the last gasp. If it fell, there should be mourning and woe all through the victorious Empire of Kairet.

After some months had gone by, a message was flashed from planet to planet, stating that the Sirian fleet had met the second line of defence at Neptune, and was about to fight it. Later on the battle areas could be seen around Neptune with the aid of a powerful telescope as they glowed with the fire of artillery. Then a nebulous cloud sprang up at Jupiter, showing that the hostile fleets were growing ever nearer and nearer. Soon afterwards the moons of Jupiter collided, and many brave men felt their hearts stand still with fear when they saw those flames leap out into space and the glowing sky cast lurid, threatening shadows over the earth. No one had any idea of what had happened. Many thought that the end of all things was about to come to pass; others mistook the dazzling light for a fleet just outside the earth's atmosphere. Soon, however, a message was sent from Jupiter stating what had really happened and describing its own woes. But this only increased the terror, for many began to dread lest the moon should be hurled down to the earth amidst the wreck and din of war. There was no time for thinking now, for events began to follow one another in a terribly rapid succession. A message was sent to the War Bureau stating that the ships which formed the second line of defence were so few and so heavily outnumbered that they must retreat to the moon, and a groan went to the ends of the earth when the people saw the tide of battle, destruction, and death rolling ever nearer and nearer towards them.

But no one gave way. Not a man abandoned the idea of self-defence to the very last. More dockyards and magazines were constructed deep down underground, and the machinery and munitions of war were removed to them from the old ones. Tunnels were excavated under the earth for the purpose of transport. The newly-constructed fleets were hidden away in safe places till they were ready to issue forth to battle. Disused mines were turned into ammunition factories, and the War Bureau took up its station in a coal-mine in the north of England. Soon hundreds of ships ready armed and equipped were lying in wait in the dark depths of mines, ready to take to the air at a moment's

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notice. In spite of the near approach of the enemy, every detail of the interstellar ship administration was admirably organized. The people of Kairet should suffer bitterly for daring to invade the earth.

Vast as the losses had been on both sides, there was not a moment's inter-mission in the deadly combat. A few days after the second line of defence had collapsed, the people on the earth could see the struggle recommencing at the moon. Whenever the moon was visible, its course through the sky was followed by thousands of telescopes. They could see the lines of ships slowly crawling along the surface pouring out fire and smoke, and the fragments of rock blown about by the explosions. Night after night they saw the lines of fire moving hither and thither, and sometimes melting away altogether before the storms of shot. Then, in the dark space round the moon, were the glimmering lights from the main body, that was only waiting for the third line to break down before it advanced to the earth. Agonizing messages were continually being flashed down to the Bureau of War, stating that the gallant defenders could not hold out much longer.

It was now that the earth itself, and even London, had its sanctity violated for the first time by the horrors of war. Stray shot and shells came whistling down through the atmosphere, often exploding high up, but sometimes dropping on to buildings, crowded streets, or the solitary mountains and valleys of the country. Often, too, entire wrecks and huge fragments of metal came rushing down without the least warning, destroying great buildings and killing hundreds of people. The affrighted Anglo-Saxons gazed in horror at the ghastly remains of what were but a few moments before living beings. These accidents told them what they must expect when the outer lines of defence had given way, and the Sirian fleets were free to come and shell them in their homes. It was with a sickly sensation of an unknown horror that they gazed night after night at the far-off defenders of their homes, still keeping up a losing contest on the rocky deserts of the moon.

At last it was announced that the third line of defence had given way, and but one fleet interposed between London and the victorious hosts of Kairet. Some days were passed in suspense and anxiety, and then, in the middle of the night, long flashes of fire some miles from the surface of the earth announced that the fourth and last line of defence was being attacked. Hither and thither the flashes and streams of fire darted across the sky, now overhead, now low down on the horizon, but never ceasing for a moment. Not a sound came from the battle area; its progress could only be ascertained by observing the movements of the lines of fire. Sometimes the ships were so crowded together in one spot that the sky was illuminated by a frightful glare; then they would spread out, darting their lights all over the heavens. Soon the refuse of battle began to fall down on to the earth : mangled bodies, burnt wrecks, and clouds of thin hazy smoke. When daylight arrived the ships were invisible, but the horrid rain still fell. Night came on, and the long luminous streaks made by the searchlights and the flashes of white and purple flame from the guns reappeared. Huge battleships came dashing along glowing like meteors, singly, in lines, in columns. They were met by other lines of light, and then the surrounding space scintillated like a fine display of fireworks, and in a few minutes the rain of battle came pouring down on to the terrified spectators.

Days and nights passed by, and the fighting still continued without intermission. Sometimes the contending fleets came down into the air, and then the earth re-echoed with the terrific roar of combat. The huge battleships could then be seen quite plainly moving hither and thither, with their flags waving in the breeze and a few sailors like little black ants clustering along the bulwarks of the upper-deck. Sometimes terrific combats took place within a few hundred yards of the surface of the earth, and the air was rent by the thunder of the guns, the explosion of torpedoes, and the clashing together of the waves of Ednogen, while all surrounding objects were obscured by clouds of vapour. Then the victors would dash away and leave the ground beneath strewn with dead bodies, heaps of mangled frameworks, and metal sheathing half buried in the ground. But the Sirians had to pay dearly for their success; numbers of their finest war-ships were strewn about on the violated Anglo-Saxon soil.

A continual stream of half-wrecked monsters was descending from the battle area and making for the various dockyards. Huge first-class battleships with yawning rents in their sides and riddled by shot, with hardly a quarter of their crews left, could only just reach a place of safety. Their outsides bore the ghastly traces of the terrible contest. The twisted metal-work was covered with blood, human bodies were lying about in the pierced compartments torn almost to ribbons, and arms, legs, and headless trunks were squashed between bent metal plates and rods, or rammed up between the machinery. Other war-ships staggered along with great pieces shot off the bows or stern, and a whole side blown completely away. A few that came were mere heaps of battered metal, with only a few men left alive. A

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few heroic men brought back the shattered remains of their torpedo-boats with no other living man on board and not an ounce of ammunition or a torpedo left. The ships of Kairet could bear witness of the mischief the latter had done.

But the final act of the great drama was fast approaching. The Anglo-Saxon fleet, again heavily outnumbered by the Sirians, was rapidly dwindling down on account of the number of vessels that had either been destroyed or sent to the docks for repairs. The rest of the fleet was engaged with a detachment of the Sirians, while the main body of the latter, under the eye of the Admiral-in-Chief, began to mass itself over London. Although invisible to the eye, the government was soon informed of this concentration by their indicators. No one now had any doubt as to what was to follow. The hostile fleets might begin at any moment to rain their deadly showers on to the capital of the Anglo-Saxon Empire.

The whole of England was a scene of frightful panic. Crowds of people left London and the other great cities in the hope of finding shelter from the deadly hail in disused coal-mines or in caves in the mountains. Others preferred to remain by their possessions and dare the approach of death. But in the midst of all the confusion the dockyards continued to build more ships and manufacture fresh supplies of shot and explosives.

It was not long before the storm burst over the devoted city. One night the sky above London was quite bright from the flashing of innumerable searchlights, and the dark forms of battleships covered it in every direction. Then, about mid-night, there was a blinding flash of light high up in the sky, followed by a terrific roar. It was the signal from the Admiral for the bombardment to begin. A moment afterwards flames darted from the sides of a hundred ships, followed by roar after roar. The air shook with the reverberation. A moment afterwards the metal shower came crashing down on to the city. Torpedoes, shell, and shot fell down in an increasing stream. Houses were dashed to pieces, towers staggered and were overturned, domes were pierced and battered down. Huge blocks of granite were wrenched away from their places and thrown down, crashing and breaking everything in their way. Walls tottered and fell; pavements and roads were torn up by the bursting shells. Huge public buildings, churches, hotels, museums, factories, and picturesque rows of private houses were soon reduced to heaps of shapeless stone. Hundreds of thousands of human beings were crushed to death beneath their homes. Clouds of dust and smoke rose into the air and hovered over the city like a funeral pall. The gardens and parks were ploughed up by the shot, and the flowers scorched by the terrible rays of Ednogen; trees were uprooted and torn to pieces. Bridges folded up and fell into the Thames, blocking up its bed with their ruins. And still the deadly hail kept falling, pitiless, irresistible. After two hours there was scarcely a building left untouched.


The guns at the forts returned the fire, but they did little damage on account of the continual movements of the fleets. Waves of Ednogen were sent up into the air and produced vivid flashes of light, but they did not do much harm to the enemy. The apparatus which produced them was soon destroyed by a few well-directed shells, and the guns ceased to fire when the gunners saw that they could do nothing to stop the ruin.

The air soon became so thick with dust and smoke that the hostile fleets had to cease firing for awhile until the light breeze that was blowing had cleared it away. Then they descended much lower, and carefully levelled their guns at every building that was left entire, until it was beaten down to the ground. They fired shells onto the roads, into the parks, the gardens, every spot where the face of the ground had not yet been torn up, until there was not a square yard of flat surface left. Waves of Ednogen ran over the grass, burning it up and setting fire to any woodwork that happened to lie among the ruins, and soon columns of fire and clouds of smoke rose up from what had, but a few hours before, been the fairest and most splendid city of the Universe. When day dawned it was but a shapeless heap of smoking ruins.

There was a slight pause in the destruction after the bombardment of London, while the hostile fleets retired to the transports for fresh supplies of ammunition, and then they divided into small squadrons and bombarded in turn most of the great cities of the earth. But their course of victory was now nearly run, and they were soon to be overtaken by the terrible vengeance of the enemies whom they thought they had conquered. They were already making preparations to land their soldiers from the transports to take possession of the conquests which their fleets had won, when the charm of victory was broken. An obscure Anglo-Saxon scientist had just achieved a discovery that would overtop all those that had already been made in that age of science. This discovery was destined to entirely revolutionize the art of interstellar war.

CHAPTER XIV

SCIENCE TO THE RESCUE

N the second night after the bombardment of London, James Tarrant, the unknown scientist, was talking earnestly with several admirals, politicians, and cabinet ministers, who crowded round him in the temporary quarters of the Bureau of War. The room they were in was a cave dug underground in the solid rock and lighted by the Menling light, that sparkled from gold lace, cocked hats, and epaulets. Far down as they were in the depths of the earth, the booming of the cannon from a neighbouring fort made the walls of the cavern shake; for the war was still raging all over the face of the earth. Piled up on a number of tables were several strange-looking instruments. These were composed of an intricate mass of wheels and wires, and a long cone-shaped reflector projected from the middle of each. The admirals were carefully examining these instruments, while the Admiral-in-Chief, clad in full uniform, was talking to James Tarrant.

‘The trial has been quite satisfactory, Dr. Tarrant,’ said the former. ‘You have proved that the Electro-Ednogen machine you have invented is capable of doing what you claim for it; that is to say, it will throw out waves of force that will stop the working of the antigravitation apparatus and cause the war-ship on to which it is directed to fall to the ground. Now, how many of these machines did you say you have ready for use?’

‘There are thirty here,’ replied Tarrant, ‘and there are twenty more in my laboratory. That makes fifty altogether. We might manage to get another fifty constructed in a few days.’

‘Now, about the size of the ships which are to carry these,’ continued the Admiral-in-Chief, while the other officers came crowding round. ‘Does it matter how large they are?’

‘The smaller they are, the better,’ replied the scientist; ‘for then they would be less easily noticed by the enemy, and could move about much quicker. Torpedo-boats would be just the thing. If you gave me fifty, I would undertake to destroy or render useless every one of the Sirian ships by the end of a week.’

A murmur of approval ran through the circle of officers when they heard these words.

‘One instrument on each torpedo-boat, to be worked by the captain, and a good supply of Ednogen, are all that is necessary,’ continued Tarrant. ‘I should experiment with one of the torpedo-boats first myself, to see that everything worked properly, and then I should send out the others to work independently.’

Very well,’ said the Admiral. ‘There are fifty torpedo-boats in the dockyard in the Kentucky cavern ready for action. These shall be placed at your disposal, and two officers shall go with you to help you in the navigation. There is a small air-ship that I will order to be in readiness to convey you and the fifty instruments to Kentucky.’

The Admiral-in-Chief went to a telephone and transmitted a few orders, while James Tarrant’s eyes gleamed with a strange bright light.

‘Now about the reward,’ continued the Admiral. ‘In the name of our Empire, I promise that what you ask for will be granted. That is—

‘That in case of success I have the title of Prince of Kairet, and have the supreme government of one of their planets if we conquer them, together with the absolute disposal of its revenues.’

‘We agree,’ said the Admiral, and the other officers bowed their assent.

A moment later a file of men entered the cave and took up the instruments that were lying on the table and carried them up a sloping passage to a ship that was waiting outside. It was now midnight, but the sky was lighted up by the flashes of the cannon, and the air shook with the continual explosions. Then James Tarrant and the officers went on board, and the captain held his hand on the lever ready to start.

‘Mind you come back as Prince of Kairet,’ said the Admiral-in-Chief, as he waved his cocked hat. ‘The safety of the Anglo-Saxon Empire rests with you.’

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The other officers waved their hats and cheered, and the captain pulled the starting-lever. The ship dashed forward into the air, its bows pointing to the West. A moment later it was rushing along like the wind, taking care, however, not to run foul of any of the enemy's ships. But the latter were engaged in trying to batter to pieces a rocky fort, so they did not pay much attention to the long dark object that dashed along beneath them. One gunner aimed his gun at it, but the shot plunged into the ground some distance behind. The enemy little guessed what that insignificant-looking boat contained, or they would have sent every vessel they possessed in pursuit of it.

Half an hour later James Tarrant was in his laboratory directing the shipment of the rest of the instruments. Then they all got on board again, and dashed into the air once more, for there was not a moment to be lost. They ascended right up to the limits of the atmosphere to avoid the enemy's ships as much as possible, and to lessen the resistance offered by the air. The ship dashed along at a terrific pace, the air shrieking as it rushed through the wire apparatus outside. The hatches were fastened down, and everybody went inside to avoid being swept away by the wind, which blew fiercer than a hurricane. They were soon careering over the Atlantic Ocean, which gleamed indistinctly thousands of feet beneath. Every now and then the searchlights of a war-ship could be seen flashing below, but they were soon left far behind.

James Tarrant stood at one of the windows, and gazed at the Ocean with glittering eyes, while his pale face glowed with excitement.

'My wildest schemes are realized at last!' he murmured. 'I am the foremost scientist, I am the conqueror of the power of the Sirian system, I am Prince of Kairet, and I am husband of— of—'

The name stuck in his throat, for he suddenly remembered that he had yet the most dangerous part of his business to perform, and must lead his fifty torpedo-boats to victory before he could return and claim his promised reward. He remained at the window for a long time, resting his head on his hand, and thinking over the best way of disposing his fleet so as to destroy the Sirian ships without any unnecessary loss.

Meanwhile the ship sped rapidly on, and daylight returned. A few hours after sunrise the Atlantic was crossed, and then the captain let the ship down on to a small uninhabited island off the coast of America, so that it might lie hid during the daytime, for the scouts had brought news that hostile ships infested these parts. Many a mind cursed the tedious hours of the day, and many an anxious eye watched the passage of the sun through the heavens. At last night came, and the ship sped forward again, taking care, however, not to run into the enemy. An hour after dawn it was let slowly down on to the ground at the entrance to the Kentucky cavern.

Tarrant showed his commission to the commanding officer, and immediate preparations were made to get the fleet of torpedo-boats ready for action. An Electro-Ednogen instrument was fitted on to each boat, and an abundant supply of Ednogen stored away in the reservoirs. The outside of the hulls was painted white, so that they would be almost invisible when high up in the air.

Meanwhile, James Tarrant took possession of a torpedo-boat named the *Scorpion*, and, accompanied by two others, set out to test the efficacy of his invention on the Sirian ships. They went very slowly and carefully, so as to avoid getting too close to their antagonists, the inventor standing on the outer deck by the great cone-shaped tube, with his hand on the wheel that turned on the force. After some time they saw a great battleship drifting along some thousands of feet below them, with the Sirian flag dangling at its stern.

'Now we shall see if the *Scorpion* can sting,' said Tarrant, as he aimed the tube at the ship and turned the wheel round.

Nothing occurred; there was no smoke, no explosion. The eager looks of the crew died away, for they did not understand the working of this new implement of war; but a moment afterwards they were undeceived. The great battleship began to descend rapidly towards the earth; then it fell faster and faster, and crashed against the ground with terrific force, making a noise like an explosion, and lay inert on the ground.

'There!' exclaimed Tarrant, as he looked round at the group of astonished officers and men. 'What do you think of that? The *Scorpion* can sting from some distance. There is not a person left alive on that ship now.'

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There was a tremendous burst of cheering as a reply; then the captain moved the starting-lever, and the torpedo-boat started again on its errand of destruction. Another Sirian ship was soon found and destroyed in the same manner, and another after that, until the *Scorpion* had hurled altogether twelve to the earth. Some fell down and were simply crushed, others blew up from the concussion, and their fragments were hurled far and wide. The other two torpedo-boats also committed terrible havoc among the enemy's ships, and then all three returned to the Kentucky cavern, where Tarrant was hailed with deafening cheers, and saluted as the saviour of the Anglo-Saxon Empire.

Tarrant explained the method of using the Electro-Ednogen apparatus to the captains, and then the fleet of fifty torpedo-boats was scattered over the four quarters of the globe to destroy every hostile ship they could meet with. The result was that in a few hours the destruction was appalling. High up in the air, and almost invisible, the terrible little torpedo-boats darted hither and thither, sending down their invisible waves wherever they could find a target. Calm and immovable, the captains stood by the shining cone-shaped tubes, aimed them at their prey, turned the wheel, and saw the stricken ship fall like a log to the earth. Then the propellers revolved, and they rushed on to find and destroy another ship. They demolished thus in a few minutes whole fleets that were bombarding cities, hurling them down on to the ruins they had made. For a long time the Sirians could not understand what made their ships sink to the earth one after another. At last they obtained an inkling of the truth, but they could do nothing to avert the evil, for they did not know the nature of the secret. Their victorious fleets gradually melted away by tens and by hundreds, until there was not a tenth of their number left. In the pride of their victory they were gradually being consumed by a new implement of destruction that the conquered had devised. Their splendid fleets soon vanished, and nothing was left of them but a few wandering war-ships, that tried to hide away among the smoking ruins of the cities and towns they had wrecked. The great transports, that had been waiting for the battleships to clear the ground before they landed the soldiers, were chased among the clouds from hemisphere to hemisphere until they were run down and, with their living freight, hurled to the ground.

James Tarrant had established his head-quarters at the Kentucky cavern, and all the torpedo-boats occasionally came there to report progress. The news of the success of his invention was flashed across to England, and roused the slumbering energies of resistance and the thirst for vengeance. Hundreds of new Electro-Ednogen instruments were constructed and fitted on to the battleships, cruisers, and torpedo-boats that were just finished at the dockyards. The former cruised over every square mile of land and sea, and searched out and beat to death every enemy's ship they could find. Cordons of torpedo-boats hung in space outside the earth's atmosphere ready to destroy every ship that attempted to escape, and there were several exciting chases that lasted as far as the moon, but hardly a ship got away. The blood of the Anglo-Saxons was up, and they destroyed their enemies without remorse. Soon the earth was literally strewn with wrecks and many vessels that were unable to make any way against the terrible vessels that destroyed them. The few Sirians who survived the fall of their vessels and managed to escape from them were soon made prisoners. The victory of the Anglo-Saxons was complete. They had totally destroyed their enemy's enormous fleets, and at the cost of not more than fifteen torpedo-boats and a few battle-ships.

CHAPTER XV

THE END OF THE WAR

AS soon as the invaders were prostrated, the Anglo-Saxons began to make preparations for revenge. New dockyards were erected among the heaps of blackened ruins, and thousands of men worked day and night building new interstellar war-ships. The enemy's ships that had been thrown to the ground by James Tarrant's Electro - Ednogen apparatus were taken possession of. The dead were cleared out, and such hulls as were still serviceable were repaired and refitted. Besides these, several ships were collected together from the planets, and new ones were being daily turned out at the dockyards, so the Anglo-Saxons very soon had a formidable fleet at their disposal. Every ship was fitted with the new Electro-Ednogen apparatus, so that when near a planet or other attracting body they were practically invincible.

Hardly any of the ships belonging to the people of Kairet had been able to escape beyond the radius of the moon; and those that did manage to get away were so battered about and their energies so exhausted that their progress through space was necessarily very slow. Hence the Sirians remained for a long time in complete ignorance of the catastrophe that had overtaken their fleet. But the avenging enemy was making vast preparations to invade their system, and soon a huge fleet consisting of battleships, cruisers, torpedo-boats, and transports filled with soldiers was in readiness to start.

The scene was very different to that which had witnessed the departure of the first fleet for space. Beneath the crowd of vessels were the heaped-up ruins of the great capital of the Universe, while all around as far as the eye could reach were strewn uprooted trees, ruined buildings, and the wrecks of battleships. But the scorched and burnt ground was covered with an enthusiastic crowd of men and women, who cheered frantically when the Union Jack was displayed as the signal for departure. Then James Tarrant arrived, accompanied by the Admiral-in-Chief, and was received with frantic cheers and saluted as the saviour of his country. A moment later they were on board the flagship. Handkerchiefs and cocked hats were waved in the air, swords glistened in the sunlight, and the mighty fleet swept away into space.

Nothing of any importance occurred on the voyage. They did not meet with a single hostile war-ship all the way. The moon was soon passed and left far away in the distance. The orbits of Mars and Saturn were passed in quick succession, and finally that of Neptune, at the end of the first month. Then they rushed into the darkness of space, every ship's head being turned in the direction of Sirius, while the sun gradually diminished and faded away like a star. Months rolled by while they dashed along through those dark unknown depths, with no difference between night and day, and nothing to break the dull monotony of the voyage. The propellers flew round and the machinery whirled and sparkled incessantly. And so they dashed on and on, eager to fulfil their mission of vengeance, the gunners lounging round their guns impatient at the delay, and the officers restlessly pacing the decks. Forward and forward they dashed towards the distant star that was growing ever brighter and larger.

'Vengeance! vengeance!' was the cry in the officers' quarters and between the decks, while the soldiers on the transports clashed their arms together in their impatience.

At last they approached Nanius, the outside planet of Sirius. The cruisers were sent on in front to find out the whereabouts of the enemy's ships, but they went forward without any opposition; they did not even encounter a single war-ship. The fact of the matter was that the Sirians had been so elated by their victories that they had sent the fleet which had been previously stationed in these regions to help in conquering the earth. Besides this, the few of their ships that had escaped from the earth had only as yet performed half of their journey, so the people of Kairet were still quite in ignorance of the sudden reversal that had taken place in their fortunes.

So the Anglo-Saxon fleets passed the orbit of Nanius without striking a single blow. The next planet whose orbit they passed was on the further side of Sirius, so they advanced some distance into the Sirian system without their presence being noticed, or even suspected. But they found a fleet of war-ships close to the next planet, and preparations were made for an engagement. The Anglo-Saxons manoeuvred so that they enticed their adversaries quite

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near to the planet before they came to close quarters. Then the fight commenced in real earnest, but the Electro-Ednogen apparatus was turned on, and ship after ship was hurled down to the planet. In vain the Sirian commanders fired their enormous guns and used all the weapons with which science had provided them; they found themselves slowly drifting towards the ground, then faster and faster, until they fell with a crash that dislocated their machinery and killed all their men. Nothing could check the unseen force that hurled them to destruction; for each war-ship was armed with dozens of the great cone-shaped reflectors, so that if one were damaged by a cannon-shot, the rest could still destroy. Some of the Anglo-Saxon vessels were torpedoed and otherwise shot about, but they were very few; for all the captains used such tactics as kept them well away from the enemy's ships, so that they could use their destroying apparatus without receiving much damage themselves.

In a few hours the Sirian fleet was destroyed, only a few ships escaping. Then the Anglo-Saxon ships made straight for Kairet, but the news of their arrival had already preceded them, and a fleet was being concentrated close to that planet to oppose them. In a few days they arrived at Kairet, and a furious battle commenced, in which the Anglo-Saxons suffered heavily. The Sirian ships fought with obstinate bravery, and pierced their assailants in many places before they were hurled to the ground. But, in spite of their bravery, they could not withstand the terrible Electro-Ednogen apparatus, and their fleet gradually dwindled away, until its remains were dispersed and chased all over the planet by the cruisers. Then the Anglo-Saxon fleet formed into line with exultation, and the order was given to bombard the capital of Kairet. What followed was but a counterpart of what had previously happened at London. Drawn up in long lines, the ships hovered among the clouds, and crossed and recrossed over the terrified city, raining down death and destruction, while the lightning flashed and the thunder rolled through the air. It lasted for hours, and then the fleets withdrew from the smoking ruins and sent an envoy to demand the surrender of all the fortresses, dockyards, and important cities, and informing the Government of what had happened to their own fleet at the earth. The Government, after a short deliberation, refused to surrender. Thereupon the fleet sailed away and began to wreck the other cities. The Government was powerless to do anything to save the planet, for its fleets were all destroyed, and its energies and resources prostrated by the incredible exertions it had been making during the war. The forts kept up a desultory fire, but they could do little damage to the fleets that floated in the air far above their heads. Almost invisible, the ships went hither and thither, and, whenever they saw a group of inhabitants or buildings, a shell was hurled down into the midst of them. But the people soon had enough of the slaughter and destruction, which they had no means whatever of preventing, for they had been taken totally unawares, and so the Government sent envoys demanding conditions of surrender. The Admiral-in-Chief replied that they must surrender unconditionally. This demand was complied with after much debating.

The Anglo-Saxon fleets now descended to the ground, and the soldiers were disembarked from the transports, accompanied by all the panoply of war, to take possession of the cities and forts. Meanwhile the commanders and diplomatists of both sides met to discuss the question of peace. The Anglo-Saxons demanded the evacuation of the planet that had been the original cause of the war, the surrender of another planet called Maikat, that belonged to the Sirian system, the payment of a huge war indemnity, and the limitation of the Sirian war-ships for the future to their own planetary system. The principal forts were to be occupied by the Anglo-Saxon troops until the indemnity had been paid. These conditions were hard, but, as the people of Kairet lay at the mercy of their conquerors, they were at last accepted, and peace was signed between the two great Powers of the Universe more than six years after the commencement of the war.

CHAPTER XVI

CONCLUSION

WHEN the Solar System was cleared of the Sirian war-ships, Alec Brandon was sufficiently recovered to be able to journey back to the earth in an ordinary passenger interstellar ship. He performed this journey for two reasons. He wanted to set his affairs in order before taking the step of marrying, and he was going to break off his engagement with Flora Houghton. The long time that he had spent with no other company but that of Celia, and the great personal attractions of that young lady, had made a complete conquest of his heart, and he had proposed to her and been accepted. The image of Flora Houghton had altogether vanished from his mind, being effaced by time and by the influence and presence of another beauty. Being a man of honour, he was going to tell Flora of the change that had taken place in his intentions towards her; and this was all that the rules of politeness and good breeding required him to do in our time. In the old days of the nineteenth century there used to be some kind of unpleasantness known as a breach of promise case on such occasions, but that has now become one of the curious antiquities of a bygone age. A man or a woman is allowed to break off an engagement of marriage at pleasure, and is thought none the worse of for that; and no girl would dream of telling the story of her disappointed love to the world.

On his arrival at London, which was already rising from its ruins, Alec wrote to Flora, telling her of his adventures at Neptune and of the change that had taken place in his feelings towards her, and asking for an interview, that he might say farewell to her, as he would soon be leaving for Neptune.

She opened his letter with eagerness, while her cheek was tinged with love's fairest colours. But as she read on, her cheek turned pale, and she tottered on to a sofa. There she remained for hours, gazing far out into the country with a vacant, hopeless expression in her eyes, but not a tear fell. Later on she collected her senses somewhat, and wrote a note to him in which she wished him every happiness and success in his new life, and expressed a wish to see him on the following day. He came, and she received him with a calm stateliness that awed him. They talked for some time about the war and its results; then she gave him her hand and they parted—for ever. As soon as the door had closed upon him, she threw herself on to a couch and burst into an uncontrollable fit of weeping. Two and a half centuries of science and all the advances and changes that had been made in manners and morals could not alter the nature of that gem of creation, the heart of a trusting woman.

Later on Flora Houghton found a consolation for her wounded feelings. James Tarrant had always admired and loved her in the days of his intense scientific labours, and now he laid his fame and his heart at her feet. At the conclusion of the war he made a triumphant return to London at the head of the fleets to which he had given victory. All classes vied with one another in doing him honour. He was made Prince of Kairet, Duke of England, Admiral of the Fleet, Field-Marshal of the Anglo-Saxon Empire, and the President of hundreds of scientific and learned societies. But loaded as he was with the honours of the Universe, he felt that there was one thing wanting, and that was a woman whom he might hold dearest of all. He loved Flora the best of all the women he had ever known, and she returned his love; for the girls of the twenty-third century were too practical to pass all their lives in sighing for a worthless man. Their nuptials were celebrated at London with unheard-of splendour, and were attended by all the chief dignitaries of the Anglo-Saxon Empire. Later on they departed for his planet, accompanied by a guard of honour of war-ships, and now Flora reigns with him as Princess of Kairet.

THE END

THE
STRUGGLE FOR EMPIRE
A STORY OF THE YEAR 2236

BY

ROBERT WILLIAM COLE

1900

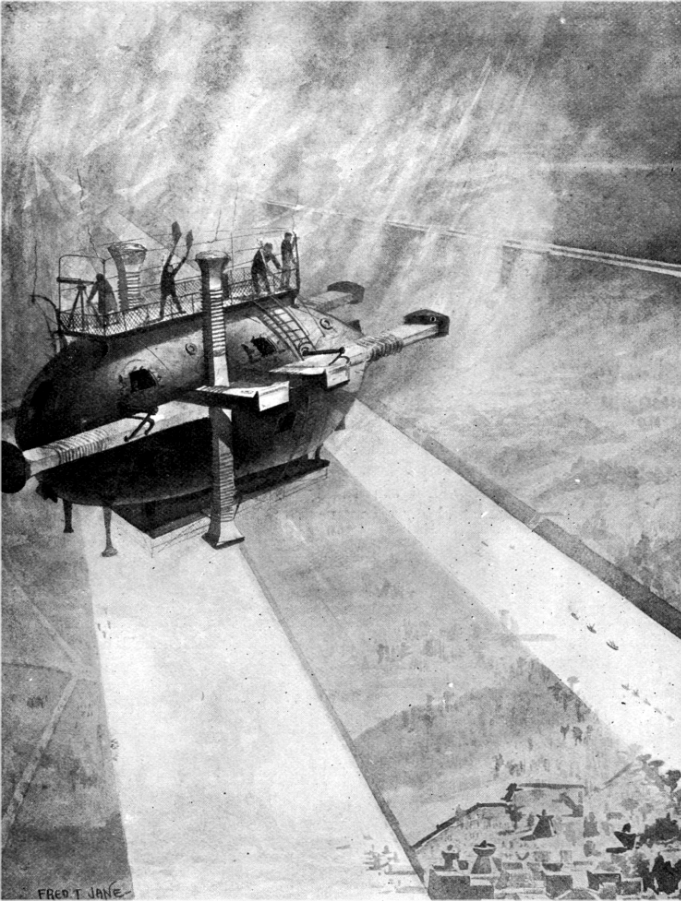


Illustration by Fred T. Jane for *Guesses At Futurity*, a series in *The Windsor Magazine*, 1894

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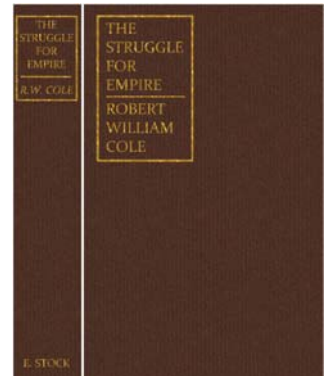
The Struggle for Empire is Robert William Cole's long-forgotten novel of interstellar warfare, in which the Anglo-Saxon and Sirian Empires clash in an apocalyptic series of space battles.

While every effort has been made to remove OCR and other errors it is likely that some remain. Please inform me of any you find! For best results print the front and rear covers single-sided on card stock, the remainder of the book double-sided

This book was originally intended to be part of the source material of a supplement for *Forgotten Futures*, my shareware role playing game, but for various reasons that never happened. All files for the game, including this book, are now FREE downloads – please ignore anything that asks you to register as a user. Contributions to support the site are welcome, of course!

Marcus L. Rowland
September 2022

Forgotten Futures: The Scientific Romance Role-Playing Game
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Approximate appearance of the book's original binding, as seen at the British Library.