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CHAPTER VIII. (Continued.)
The Englishman was at once troubled over having been so rudely rebuffed. Thoughtfully he strode away from the bathers into a great picture gallery. Here hung on the walls and stood on pedestals some of the rarest works of art he had ever seen. He passed through this room and was entering a study retreat where plants, flowers and umbrellas were growing thickly, when he heard a step behind him and the rustling of a silk skirt against the plants.

"We can be understood here," she said, taking off her thick veil and arranging her luxuriant hair. "I hasten back. The king thinks, so my maid tells me, that I am asleep in my chamber. He is busy with an audience of police from a neighboring town and will not think of us."
She sat down on a sofa upholstered in leather, and he took a seat beside her. "I am glad that we can talk alone," he said, "for I have much to ask you. First, tell me where we are. Is there this strange country is on the map of the world?"

"It is a long story," she replied, "and it would greatly increase the king if he should find out that I told you, for one of his chief pleasures is to note the surprise and admiration of newcomers over what they see here, but if you will promise to gratify my vanity in this particular I will try to explain it all."
"I promise, and you can depend on my not getting you into trouble," replied Thorndyke. "I never was so puzzled in my life with that sunken sky overhead, the wonderful, changing sunlight and the remarkable atmosphere. I am both bewildered and entranced. Every moment I see something new and startling. Where are we?"

"Far beneath the ocean and the surface of the earth. I only know what the king has let fall in my hearing in his conferences with his men of science and inventors, but I shall try to make you understand how it all came about."
"It was a long time ago, 200 years back, I suppose, that one of my ancestors discovered a little island in the Atlantic ocean. He was forced in a storm to land there with his ship and crew to make some repairs to his vessel. In wandering about over the island he discovered a narrow entrance to a cave, and with two or three of his men he began to explore it. When they had gone for a mile or two down into the interior of the cavern, which seemed to lead straight down toward the center of the earth, they began to find small pieces of gold. The farther they went the more they found, till at last the very cavern walls seemed lined with it.

"They were at first wildly excited over their sudden good fortune and were about to load their ship with it and return to Europe at once, but the better judgment of my ancestor prevailed. He explained that if the world were informed of the discovery of such an inexhaustible mine of gold the value of the precious metal would decline till it would be worth little more than some grosser metal, and that if they would only keep their secret to themselves they could in time control the finances of the world. So, acting on this suggestion, they only dug out a few thousand pounds and took part of it to Europe and part of it to America and turned it into money."

"Then, to curtail my story, they elected my ancestor as ruler, and with ships loaded with every available commodity that inexhaustible wealth could procure and a colony of carefully chosen men, they returned to the island."
"After the men and their families had settled in the great, roomy mountain of the cavern my ancestor supplied himself with several strong men and food and lights and sought to explore the entire cavern."
"To their astonishment, they found that it was practically endless. When they had gone down about 60 or 70 miles below the sea level, they found themselves on a vast, level plain, the soil of which was dark and rich, with the black roof of the cavern arching overhead like the bottom of a great, inverted bowl. And when they had traveled about ten days and reached the other side my ancestor calculated that the cave must be over 100 miles in diameter and almost circular in shape. But what elated and surprised them most was the remarkable salubrity of the atmosphere. In all parts of the cave it was exactly the same temperature, and they found that they scarcely felt any fatigue from their journey, and that they had little desire to eat the provisions with which they were supplied. Indeed, the very air seemed permeated with a subtle quality that gave them strength and energy of mind and body.

"Finally, when after a month had passed and they returned to their anxious friends, these people overwhelmed them with exclamations of surprise over their appearance. And in the light of day the explorers looked at one another in astonishment, for in the dim light of the lanterns they had carried they had not noticed the great change that had come over them. They had all become the finest specimens of physical health that could be imagined. Their bodies had filled out; they were remarkably strong; their skins shone with healthful color and their eyes sparkled with intellectual energy, and their minds, even to the humblest burrow carrier, were astonishingly acute and active."
"My ancestor was a remarkable man,

and he had hitherto shown much inventive ability; but that month in the cave he had developed into an intellectual giant. After mature deliberation he proposed a prodigious scheme to his followers. He explained that while they might, by using the utmost discretion, hold the financial world in their power by means of their inexhaustible wealth, the laws and restrictions of different countries prevented men of vast wealth from really enjoying more privileges than men of moderate means. He spoke eloquently in speaking of the underground atmosphere and proposed that they light the great cavern from end to end and make it an ideal place where they could live as it suited them.

"I see that you guess the end. My ancestor was a great student of the sciences and had already thought of putting electricity to practical use. You are surprised? Yes, it has been applied to one purpose for 200 years, while your people have understood its use such a short time!"
"Great heavens!" exclaimed the Englishman. "I see it all. The sun is an electric one."
"Yes."

"And it runs mechanically over its great course as regularly as clockwork."
"More accurately, I assure you, but there probably never was a greater mathematical problem than they solved in deciding on the size the sun should be and the amount of light necessary to fill all the recesses of the great cavern. It was all very crude at the start. For years a great electric light was simply suspended in the center of the cavern's roof, and the light did not vary in color. A son of the first king suggested the plan of giving the sun diurnal movement and the changing light. The moon and stars were a later development. They found, too, that the light could not be made to reach certain recesses in the cavern where the roof approached the earth, so they finally built a great wall to keep the inhabitants within proscribed boundaries and to prevent them from understanding the machinery of the heavens."

"Wonderful!" exclaimed Thorndyke. "But the temperature of the atmosphere—how does that happen to be so delightful and beneficial?"
"I believe they do not themselves thoroughly comprehend that. The heat comes from the internal fires and the fresh air from without in some mysterious way. At first in a few places the heat was too severe, but the scientific men among the first settlers overcame this difficulty by closing up the hottest of the fissures and opening others in the cooler parts of the cavern."
"And the people—where did they come from?"
"From all parts of the earth. We had agents outside who selected such men and women as were willing to come and who filled all the requirements, mentally and physically."

"But why do they desire to live here instead of in the world, when they have all the wealth that they need to assure every advantage?"
"They dread death, and it is undoubtedly true that life is prolonged here. Our medical men declare that the longevity of every generation is improved."
"Is it possible? But tell me about the man. When it sets, what becomes of it?"
"It goes back to its place of rising through a great tunnel beneath us."
"Thorndyke's deep thought for a moment; then he looked so steadily and so admiringly into Bernardino's eyes that she grew red with confusion. "But you, yourself—are you thoroughly content here?"
"I know nothing else," she continued. "I have heard little about your world except that your people are discontented, weak and insane, and that your changeable weather and your carelessness regarding marriage and heredity produce perpetual and immasurable diseases; that your people are not well developed and beautiful; that you war with one another, and that you tear down what another builds. I have, too, always been happy, and since you came I am happier still. I don't know what it means. I have never been so much interested in any one before."

"It is love on the part of both of us," replied the Englishman impulsively, taking her hand. "I never was contented before. I ever roving over the earth, trying to end my life at sea or in balloon voyages, but now I only want to be with you. I have never dreamed that I could be so happy or that I would meet any one so beautiful as you are."
Bernardino's delight showed itself in blushes on her face, and Thorndyke, unable to restrain himself, put his arm around her and drew her to his breast and kissed her.

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"I beg your pardon most humbly," said the contrite Englishman. "It was all on account of my ignorance of your customs and my impetuiveness. It shall never happen again, I promise you."
Her face brightened a little, and the color came back slowly. She sat down again, but not so near Thorndyke, and seemed desirous of changing the subject.
"And you love the man my father has transported?" she questioned.
"Yes. He is a good, faithful fellow, and it is hard to do so far away from friends."
"We must try to save him, but I cannot now have time for a safe plan. The police are very vigilant."
"Where was he taken?"
"Into the darkness behind the sun, beyond the wall of which I spoke."
A flash of shame came into Thorndyke's face over the remembrance that he had made no effort to aid poor Johnston and was sitting listening with delight to the conversation of Bernardino. He rose suddenly.
"I must be doing something to aid him," he said. "I cannot sit here inactive while he is in danger."
"Be patient," she advised, looking at him admiringly. "It is near night. See

it is the gray light of dusk. The sun is out of sight. Tonight, if possible, I shall come to you. Perhaps I shall approach you without disguise if you are in the throne room and my father does not object to my entertaining you, but for the present we must separate. Adieu!"
He bowed low as she turned away and joined the throng that was passing along outside. An officer approached him. It was Captain Tradmos, who bowed and smiled pleasantly.
"I congratulate you," he said, with suave politeness.
"Upon what?" Thorndyke was on his guard at once.
"Upon having pleased the king so thoroughly. No stranger, in my memory, has ever been treated so courteously. Every other newcomer is put under surveillance, but you are left unwatched."
"He is easily pleased," said the Englishman, "for I have done nothing to gratify him."
"I thought he would like you, and I felt that your friend would have to suffer, but I could not help him."
"He shall not suffer if I can prevent it."
"Sh—be cautious. Those words, implying an inclination to treason, if spoken to any other officer, would place you under immediate arrest. I like you; therefore I want to warn you against such folly. You are wholly in the king's power. Another thing I would especially warn you against—"

"And that is what?"
"Not to allow the king to suspect your admiration for the Princess Bernardino. It would displease the king. She is much taken with you. I saw it in her eyes when she danced for your entertainment."
Thorndyke made no reply, but gazed searchingly into the eyes of the officer. Tradmos laughed.
"You are afraid of me."
"No, I am not. I trust you wholly. I know that you are honorable. I never make a mistake along that line."
Tradmos bowed, pleased by the compliment.
"I shall aid you all I can with my advice, for I know you will not betray me, but at present I am powerless to give you material aid. Every subject of this realm is bound to the autocratic will of the king. It is impossible for any one to get under his power."
"Why?"
"The only outlet to the upper world is carefully guarded by men who would not be bribed."
"Is there any chance for my friend?"
"None that I can see. But I must walk on. There comes one of the king's attendants."
"The king has asked to speak to you," announced the attendant to Thorndyke.
"I will go with you," was his reply. And he followed the man through the crowded corridors into the throne room of the king. Thorndyke forced a smile as he saw the king smiling at him as he approached the throne.

"What do you think of my palace?" asked the king after Thorndyke had knelt before him.
"It is superb," answered the Englishman, recalling the advice of Bernardino. "I am dazzled by its splendor, its architecture and its art. I have seen nothing to equal it on earth."
The king rose and stood beside him. His manner was both pleasing and sympathetic. "I am persuaded," said he, "that you will make a good subject and have the interest of Alpha always at heart, but I have often been mistaken in the character of men and think it best to give you a timely warning. An attendant will conduct you to a chamber beneath the palace, where it will be your privilege to converse with a man who once planned to get up a rebellion among my people."
There had come suddenly a stern harshness into the king's tone that aroused the fears of Thorndyke. He was about to reply, but the king held up his hand. "Wait till you have visited the dungeon of Nordoskyne. Then I am sure that you will be convinced that strict obedience in thought as well as deed is best for an inhabitant of Alpha."
Speaking thus, he signed to an attendant, who came forward and bowed.

"Conduct him to the dungeon of Nordoskyne and return to me," ordered the king.
Thorndyke's heart was heavy, and he was filled with strange forebodings, but he simply smiled and bowed, and the attendant opened a door at the back of the throne room, and they were confronted by darkness. They went along a narrow corridor for some distance, the darkness thickening at every step. There was no sound except the sound of the guide's shoes on the smooth stone pavement. Presently the man released Thorndyke's arm, saying:
"It is narrow here; follow close behind, and do not attempt to go back!"

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