

# **The Land of the Changing Sun**

by

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## Chapter 1

The balloon seemed scarcely to move, though it was slowly sinking toward the ocean of white clouds which hung between it and the earth.

The two inmates of the car were insensible; their faces were bloodless, their cheeks sunken. They were both young and handsome. Harry Johnston, an American, was as dark and sallow as a Spaniard. Charles Thorndyke, an English gentleman, had yellow hair and mustache, blue eyes and a fine intellectual face. Both were tall, athletic in build and well-proportioned.

Johnston was the first to come to consciousness as the balloon sank into less rarefied atmosphere. He opened his eyes dreamily and looked curiously at the white face of his friend in his lap. Then he shook him and tried to call his name, but his lips made no sound. Drawing himself up a little with a hand on the edge of the basket, he reached for a water-jug and sprinkled Thorndyke's face. In a moment he was rewarded by seeing the eyes of the latter slowly open.

"Where are we?" asked Thorndyke in a whisper.

"I don't know;" Johnston answered, "getting nearer to the earth, for we can breathe more easily. I can't remember much after the professor fell from the car. My God, old man! I shall never forget the horror in the poor fellow's eyes as he clung to the rope down there and begged us to save him. I tried to get you to look, but you were dozing off. I attempted to draw him up, but the rope on the edge of the basket was tipping it, and both you and I came near following him. I tried to keep from seeing his horrible face as the rope began to slip through his fingers. I knew the instant he let go by our shooting upward."

"I came to myself and looked over when the basket tipped," replied the Englishman, "I thought I was going too, but I could not stir a muscle to prevent it. He said something desperately, but the wind blew it away and covered his face with his beard, so that I could not see the movement of his lips."

"It may have been some instructions to us about the management of the balloon."

"I think not--perhaps a good-bye, or a message to his wife and child. Poor fellow!"

"How long have we been out of our heads?" and Johnston looked over the side of the car.

"I have not the slightest idea. Days and nights may have passed since he fell."

"That is true. I remember coming to myself for an instant, and it seemed that we were being jerked along at the rate of a gunshot. My God, it was awful! It was as black as condensed midnight. I felt your warm body against me and was glad I was not alone.

Then I went off again, but into a sort of nightmare. I thought I was in Hell, and that you were with me, and that Professor Helmholtz was Satan."

"Where can we be?" asked Thorndyke.

"I don't know; I can't tell what is beneath those clouds. It may be earth, sea or ocean; we were evidently whisked along in a storm while we were out of our heads. If we are above the ocean we are lost."

Thorndyke looked over the edge of the car long and attentively, then he exclaimed suddenly:

"I believe it is the ocean."

"What makes you think so?"

"It reflects the sunlight. It is too bright for land. When we got above the clouds at the start it looked darker below than it does now; we may be over the middle of the Atlantic."

"We are going down," said Johnston gloomily.

"That we are, and it means something serious."

Johnston made no answer. Half-an-hour went by. Thorndyke looked at the sun.

"If the professor had not dropped the compass, we could find our bearings," he sighed.

Johnston pointed upward. Thin clouds were floating above them. "We are almost down," he said, and as they looked over the sides of the car they saw the reflection of the sun on the bosom of the ocean, and, a moment later, they caught sight of the blue billows rising and falling.

"I see something that looks like an island," observed Thorndyke, looking in the direction toward which the balloon seemed to be drifting. "It is dark and is surrounded by light. It is far away, but we may reach it if we do not descend too rapidly."

"Throw out the last bag of sand," suggested the American, "we need it as little now as we ever shall."

Thorndyke cut the bag with his knife and watched the sand filter through the bottom of the basket and trail along in a graceful stream behind the balloon. The great flabby bag overhead steadied itself, rose slightly and drifted on toward the dark spot on the vast expanse of sunlit water. They could now clearly see that it was a small island, not more than a mile in circumference.

"How far is it?" asked Thorndyke.

"About two miles," answered the American laconically, "it is a chance for us, but a slim one."

The balloon gradually sank. For twenty minutes the car glided along not more than two hundred feet above the waves. The island was now quite near. It was a barren mound of stone, worn into gullies and sharp precipices by the action of the waves and rain. Hardly a tree or a shrub was in sight.

"It looks like the rocky crown of a great stone mountain hidden in the ocean," said the Englishman; "half a mile to the shore, a hundred feet to the water; at this rate of speed the wind would smash us against those rocks like a couple of bird's eggs dropped from the clouds. We must fall into the water and swim ashore. There is no use trying to save the balloon."

"We had better be about it, then," said Johnston, rising stiffly and holding to the ropes. "If we should go down in the water with the balloon we would get tangled in the ropes and get asphyxiated with the gas. We had better hang down under the basket and let go at exactly the same time."

The water was not more than forty feet beneath, and the island was getting nearer every instant. The two aeronauts swung over on opposite sides of the car and, face to face, hung by their hands beneath.

"I dread the plunge," muttered Thorndyke; "I feel as weak as a sick kitten; I am not sure that I can swim that distance, but the water looks still enough."

"I am played out too," grunted the American, red in the face; "but it looks like our only chance. Ugh! she made a big dip then. We'd better let go. I'll count three, and three is the signal. Now ready. One, two, three!"

Down shot the balloonists and up bounded the great liberated bag of gas; the basket and dangling ropes swung wildly from side to side. The aeronauts touched the water feet foremost at the same instant, and in half a minute they rose, not ten feet apart.

"Now for it," sputtered Johnston, shaking his bushy head like a swimming dog. "Look, the shore is not very far." Thorndyke was saving his wind, and said nothing, but accommodated his stroke to that of his companion, and thus they breasted the gently-rolling billows until finally, completely exhausted, they climbed up the shelving rocks and lay down in the warm sunshine.

"Not a very encouraging outlook," said Johnston, rising when his clothing was dry and climbing a slight elevation. "There is nothing in sight except a waste of stone. Let's go up to that point and look around."

The ascent was exceedingly trying, for the incline was steep and it was at times difficult to get a firm footing. But they were repaid for the exertion, for they had reached the

highest point of the island and could see all over it. As far as their vision reached there was nothing beyond the little island except the glistening waves that reached out till they met the sky in all directions. High up in the clouds they saw the balloon, now steadily drifting with the wind toward the south.

"We might as well be dead and done with it," grumbled Thorndyke. "Ships are not apt to approach this isolated spot, and even if they did, how could we give a signal of distress?"

Johnston stroked his dark beard thoughtfully, then he pointed toward the shore.

"There are some driftwood and seaweed," he said; "with my sun-glass I can soon have a bonfire." He took a piece of punk from a waterproof box that he carried in his pocket and focussed the sun's rays on it. "Run down and bring me an armful of dry seaweed and wood," he added, intent on his work.

Thorndyke clambered down to the shore, and in a few minutes returned with an armful of fuel. Johnston was blowing his punk into a flame, and in a moment had a blazing fire.

"Good," approved the Englishman, rubbing his hands together over the flames. "We'll keep it burning and it may do some good." Then a smile of satisfaction came over his face as he began to take some clams from his pockets. "Plenty of these fellows down there, and they are as fat and juicy as can be. Hurry up and let's bake them. I'm as hungry as a bear. There is a fine spring of fresh water below, too, so we won't die of thirst."

They baked the clams and ate them heartily, and then went down to the spring near the shore. The water was deliciously cool and invigorating. The sun sank into the quiet ocean and night crept on. The stars came out slowly, and the moon rose full and red from the waves, adding its beams to the flickering light of the fire on the hill-top.

"Suppose we take a walk all round on the beach," proposed the Englishman; "there is no telling what we may find; we may run on something that has drifted ashore from some wrecked ship."

Johnston consented. They had encompassed the entire island, which was oval in shape, and were about to ascend to the rock to put fresh fuel on the fire before lying down to sleep for the night, when Thorndyke noticed a road that had evidently been worn in the rock by human footsteps.

"Made by feet," he said, bending down and looking closely at the rock and raking up a handful of white sand, "but whether the feet of savage or civilized mortal I can't make out."

Johnston was a few yards ahead of him and stooped to pick up something glittering in the moonlight. It was a tap from the heel of a shoe and was of solid silver.

"Civilized," he said, holding it out to his companion; "and of the very highest order of civilization. Whoever heard of people rich enough to wear silver heel-taps."

"Are you sure it is silver?" asked the Englishman, examining it closely.

"Pure and unalloyed; see how the stone has cut into it, and feel its weight."

"You are right, I believe," returned Thorndyke, as Johnston put the strange trophy into his pocket-book, and the two adventurers paused a moment and looked mutely into each other's eyes.

"We haven't the faintest idea of where we are," said Johnston, his tone showing that he was becoming more despondent. "We don't know how long we were unconscious in the balloon, nor where we were taken in the storm. We may now be in the very centre of the North Polar sea--this knob may be the very pivot on which this end of the earth revolves."

The Englishman laughed. "No danger; the sun is too natural. >From the poles it would look different."

"I don't mean the old sun that you read so much about, and that they make so much racket over at home, but another of which we are the original discoverer--a sun that isn't in old Sol's beat at all, but one that revolves round the earth from north to south and dips in once a day at the north and the south poles. See?"

The Englishman laughed heartily and slapped his friend on the shoulder.

"I think we are somewhere in the Atlantic; but your finding that heel-tap does puzzle me."

"We are going to have an adventure, beside which all others of our lives will pale into insignificance. I feel it in my bones. See how evenly this road has been worn and it is leading toward the centre of the island."

In a few minutes the two adventurers came to a point in the road where tall cliffs on either side stood up perpendicularly. It was dark and cold, and but a faint light from the moon shone down to them.

"I don't like this," said Johnston, who was behind the Englishman; "we may be walking into the ambush of an enemy."

"Pshaw!" and Thorndyke plunged on into the gloomy passage. Presently the walls began to widen like a letter "Y" and in a great open space they saw a placid lake on the bosom of which the moon was shining. On all sides the towering walls rose for hundreds of feet. Speechless with wonder and with quickly-beating hearts they stumbled forward over the uneven road till they reached the shore of the lake. The water was so clear and still that the moon and stars were reflected in it as if in a great mirror.

"Look at that!" exclaimed Thorndyke, pointing down into the depths, "what can that be?"

Johnston followed Thorndyke's finger with his eyes. At first he thought that it was a comet moving across the sky and reflected in the water; but, on glancing above, he saw his mistake. It looked, at first, like a great ball of fire rolling along the bottom of the lake with a stream of flame in its wake.



## Chapter 2

The two men watched it for several minutes; all the time it seemed to be growing larger and brighter till, after a while, they saw that the light came from something shaped like a ship, sharp at both ends, and covered with oval glass. As it slowly rose to the surface they saw that it contained five or six men, sitting in easy chairs and reclining on luxurious divans. One of them sat at a sort of pilot-wheel and was directing the course of the strange craft, which was moving as gracefully as a great fish.

Then the young men saw the man at the pilot-wheel raise his hand, and from the water came the musical notes of a great bell. The vessel stopped, and one of the men sprang up and raised an instrument that looked like a telescope to his eyes. With this he seemed to be closely searching the lake shores, for he did not move for several minutes. Then he lowered the instrument, and when the bell had rung again, the vessel rose slowly and perpendicularly to the surface and glided to the shore within twenty yards of where the adventurers stood.

"Could they have seen us?" whispered Thorndyke, drawing Johnston nearer the side of the cliff.

"I think so; at all events, they are between us and the outlet; we may as well make the best of it."

The men, all except the pilot, landed, and a dazzling electric search-light was turned on the spot where Thorndyke and Johnston stood. For a moment they were so blinded that they could not see, and then they heard footsteps, and, their eyes becoming accustomed to the light, they found themselves surrounded by several men, very strangely clad. They all wore long cloaks that covered them from head to foot and every man was more than six feet in height and finely proportioned. One of them, who seemed to be an officer in command, bowed politely.

"I am Captain Tradmos, gentlemen, in the king's service. It is my duty to make you my prisoners. I must escort you to the palace of the king."

"That's cool," said Johnston, to conceal the discomfiture that he felt, "we had no idea that you had a kingdom. We have tramped all over this island, and you are the first signs of humanity we have met."

He would have recalled his words before he had finished speaking, if he could have done so, for he saw by the manner of the captain that he had been over bold.

"Follow me," answered the officer curtly, and with a motion of his hand to his men he turned toward the odd-looking vessel.

The two adventurers obeyed, and the cloaked men fell in behind them. Neither Johnston nor Thorndyke had ever seen anything like the peculiar boat that was moored to the rocky shore. It was about forty feet in length, had a hull shaped like a racing yacht, but which was made of black rubber inflated with air. It was covered with glass, save for a doorway about six feet high and three feet wide in the side, and looked like a great oblong bubble floating on the still dark water. As they approached the searchlight was extinguished, and they were enabled to see the boat to a better advantage by the aid of the electric lights that illuminated the interior. It was with feelings of awe that the two adventurers followed the captain across the gang-plank into the vessel.

The electric light was brilliantly white, and in various places pink, red and light-blue screens mellowed it into an artistic effect that was very soothing to the eye. The ceiling was hung with festoons of prisms as brilliant as the purest diamonds, and in them, owing to the gently undulatory movement of the vessel, colors more beautiful than those of a rainbow played entrancingly. Rare pictures in frames of delicate gold were interspersed among the clusters of prisms, and the floor was covered with carpets that felt as soft beneath the foot as pillows of eider-down.

As he entered the door the officer threw off his gray cloak, and his men did likewise, disclosing to view the finest uniforms the prisoners had ever seen. Captain Tradmos's legs were clothed in tights of light-blue silk, and he wore a blue sack-coat of silk plush and a belt of pliant gold, the buckles of which were ornamented with brilliant gems. His eyes were dark and penetrating, and his black hair lay in glossy masses on his shoulders. He had the head of an Apollo and a brow indicative of the highest intellect.

Leaving his men in the first room that they entered, he gracefully conducted his prisoners through another room to a small cabin in the stern of the boat, and told them to make themselves comfortable on the luxurious couches that lined the circular glass walls.

"Our journey will be of considerable length," he said, "and as you are no doubt fatigued, you had better take all the rest you can get. I see that you need food and have ordered a repast which will refresh you." As he concluded he touched a button in the wall and instantly a table, laden with substantial food, rare delicacies and wines, rose through a trap-door in the floor. He smiled at the expressions of surprise on their faces and touched a green bottle of wine with his white tapering hand.

"The greater part of our journey will be under water, and our wines are specially prepared to render us capable of subsisting on a rather limited quantity of air during the voyage, so I advise you to partake of them freely; you will find them very agreeable to the taste."

"We are very grateful," bowed Thorndyke, from his seat on a couch. "I am sure no prisoners were ever more graciously or royally entertained. To be your prisoner is a pleasure to be remembered."

"Till our heads are cut off, anyway," put in the irrepressible American.

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