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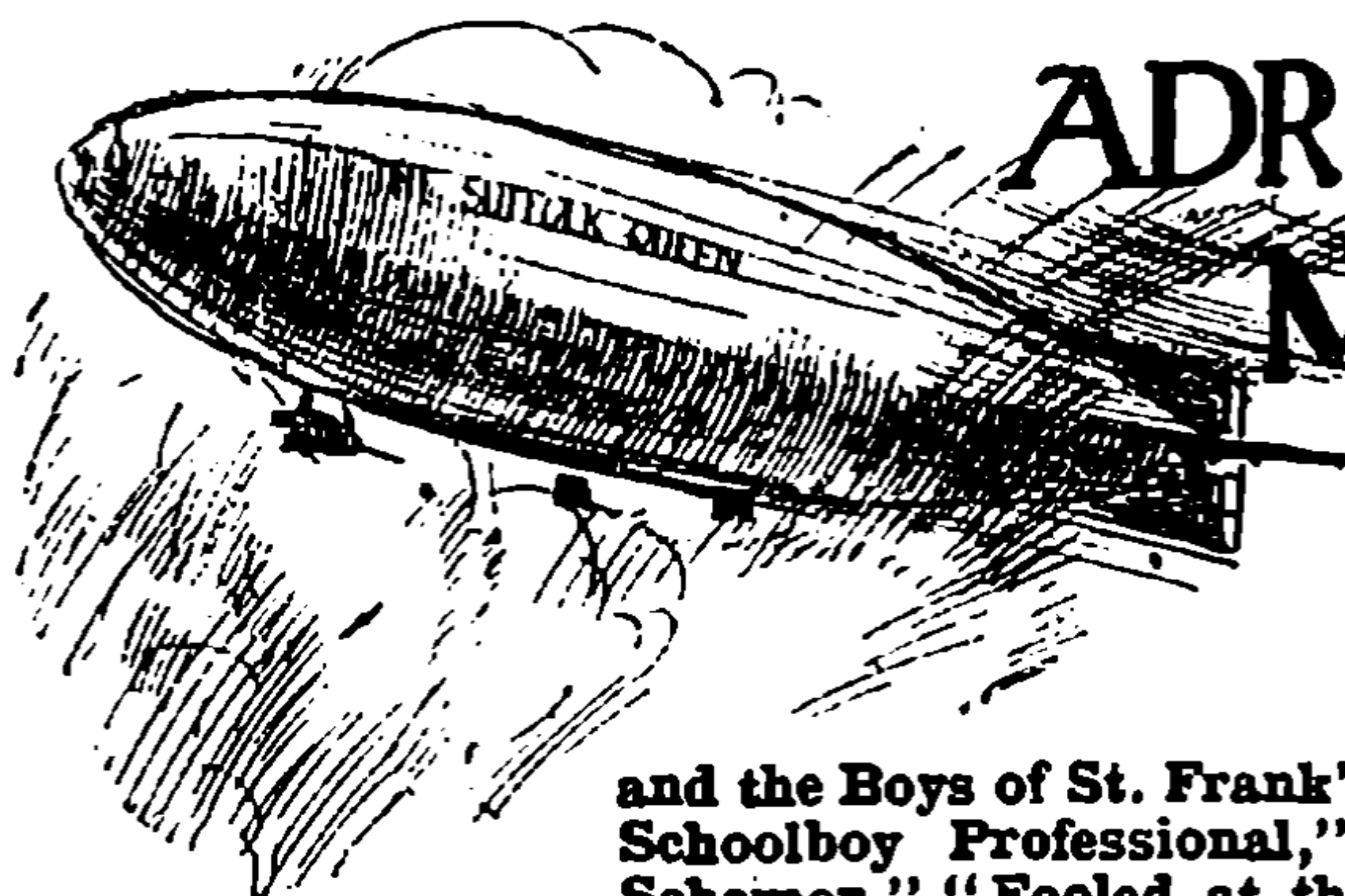
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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

A FIERY ADVENTURE.

TOMMY WATSON shook his head gloomily.

"Good times always come to an end too quickly!" he remarked with a sigh. "We've been having a ripping holiday here, as Lord Dorrimore's guests, but it'll soon be over. And then we shall have to go back to St. Frank's—back to the same old grind of lessons, and all the rest of it. Why the dickens can't the holidays last longer?"

I grinned, and slapped Tommy on the back.

"Cheer up, old son!" I said. "These are only the Easter holidays, you know, and we can't expect them to last for weeks. Let's be thankful that we're having a jolly good time, and I don't suppose there'll be any lack of adventure when we get back to St. Frank's. We generally manage to find something to occupy our attention!"

But Watson refused to be cheered up.

"We've been at Dorrimore Hall about four days now," he said thoughtfully. "That means we've only got about another three left!"

"Well, dear old fellow, there's no need to look miserable about it!" put in Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "Don't pull those frightfully long faces, bogad! What are you grumblin' about? Ain't you havin' a good time down here?"

"A good time!" echoed Watson.

"My only hat! It's the best time I've ever spent anywhere! I'm not growling about that, Montie. I'm just a bit off colour because it'll soon come to an end, and then we shall have to return to St. Frank's. Dorrie is a brick, and he's giving us a glorious holiday."

"Well, be cheerful, and don't worry," I said. "Good times can't last for ever, you know."

But Tommy Watson's feelings were shared by many of the other juniors. They had all enjoyed themselves immensely, but now they were beginning to think of the following week, when it would be necessary to go back to St. Frank's. The prospect was not an alluring one, for the fellows were having a royal time at Dorrimore Hall, near Stowmarket, in Suffolk. The St. Frank's party consisted of twenty-five fellows, all belonging to the Remove. Fifteen of them were Ancient House boys, and the other ten hailed from the College House, and, without a doubt, the fellows were fairly revelling in their holiday.

Dorrie was an ideal host. He kept his guests alive all the time; he was always cheerful, light-hearted, and full of jokes. Never for a moment did he allow any of his guests to be idle. There was something doing in the amusement line all the time.

And we were all treated at Dorrimore Hall as though we were royal princes. There was every conceivable variety of luxury, to be had at will. As regards the food, Fatty Little declared that he

had never tasted such glorious grub in all his life before. And a recommendation of this type from such an expert as Patty Little was the last word necessary.

And now, on this particular afternoon, a party of us were strolling through the green lanes some little distance from the Hall. It was a lovely April afternoon, with the sun shining brightly, and with the blue sky flecked with fleecy white clouds. The weather, in fact, had been glorious all along.

There were about a dozen of us in the party, and we were just rambling along idly, and with no particular object in view. But we were enjoying ourselves hugely. Handforth and Co., the heroes of Study D, were somewhere in the rear, fighting out an argument.

This, of course, was nothing new. Handforth and Church and McClure were generally arguing from morning till night—not that they had anything to argue about. It was a habit with them. Handforth was the chief culprit, and Church and McClure the hapless victims.

"The fact is, you chaps don't know what you're talking about!" Handforth was saying. "You needn't think you can teach me!"

"Oh, of course not!" said Church sarcastically. "You know everything!"

"You're a walking dictionary!" added McClure.

Handforth glared.

"I don't want any of your nerve!" he said grimly. "But if you tell me that a pilot of an aeroplane can loop the loop without being strapped in his machine, then all I can say is you're dotty!"

"Rats!" said Church. "Many a pilot has looped the loop without being strapped in his seat!"

"I tell you it's impossible!" argued Handforth. "It stands to reason that it's impossible. Imagine the pilot in his seat. Imagine him going up into a loop, until he's practically upside down. If he isn't strapped in, what's going to happen to him? Why, you asses, he'd fall out!"

Church laughed derisively.

"That's all you know!" he sneered. "What about the momentum?"

"The which?"

"What about the laws of gravity?" went on Church. "If the aeroplane

goes over in a complete loop, there's no danger for the pilot, whether he's strapped in or not. The force of gravity will keep him in his seat."

"Rubbish!" said Handforth curtly.

"Oh, have your own way!" growled McClure. "But you're only exhibiting your giddy ignorance. What happens to a bucket of water if it's swept round in a complete circle?"

"Why, the water comes out, of course!" said Handforth.

"No, it doesn't!" put in Church. "The water sticks there, by force of gravity. It's just the same with a man in an aeroplane. If he doesn't hesitate at the top of the loop, the pilot is as safe as houses!"

The argument had been occasioned by the sight of an aeroplane in the distance, performing various evolutions. It had looped the loop several times, and Handforth had remarked that the pilot must have been strapped in very strongly. Church and McClure insisted that he was not necessarily strapped in at all, and then the argument had started.

"Oh, there's no sense in jawing like this!" said Church, at length. "We can easily prove it. The aerodrome isn't far away, and we can ask one of the men there whether pilots ever go up to loop the loop without being strapped in."

"By George!" said Handforth grimly. "We will prove it, too; and then I'll make you asses eat your giddy words!"

As he was speaking a roar which had been subdued for some time now became more apparent, and suddenly a small aeroplane of the single-scater biplane type, came into view over the tree tops. It was travelling at a terrific pace, and all the juniors paused in the lane to watch it.

They had grown accustomed to seeing aeroplanes flitting hither and thither during the past few days, for quite close by were the private aerodromes of the East Anglian Aircraft Company, Limited. This concern was a big one—a very important business, in fact; and it was just on the point of developing in many directions. The company was full of enterprise, and had any amount of money behind it. One of its chief aims was to establish passenger services over the whole of East Anglia. The company was also preparing to carry mails and merchandise.

The juniors stood in the lane, watching with interest.

The hedges were low, and their view was not obstructed by anything. And as they watched, the aeroplane proceeded to climb rapidly; then, at a height of about fifteen hundred feet, the pilot commenced a series of awe-inspiring evolutions and stunts.

He looped the loop several times, he slid down tail first, he nose-dived, he rolled in an alarming way; but, after every fresh stunt the machine regained its equilibrium.

"My hat!" said Watson. "He's a jolly daring chap, the pilot of that machine. If he's not careful, he'll come a cropper!"

I grinned.

"Don't you believe it, my son," I said. "This stunt game isn't half so difficult or dangerous as it seems. I've done some of those myself, and I know. And that type of machine can do almost anything; it's got enormous engine power, you know."

Sir Montie shook his head.

"Really, dear old boy, I fail to agree with you," he said, adjusting his pince-nez, and gazing up at the aeroplane once more. "This chap seems to be shockin'ly reckless, begad! Loopin' the loop is all very well if it is carried out at a good height; but this machine is near the ground——"

"Well, I'll admit that the pilot is a bit foolhardy in that respect," I said. "If he must do these hair-raising acrobatics, he ought to go to a higher level."

Once again the machine proceeded to loop the loop. It went over quite slowly, and seemed to hover in the air before completing the circle.

"And you tell me that the pilot isn't strapped in!" said Handforth with disgust. "What absolute rot! Why, he'd have been down here minutes ago, mangled to bits, if he hadn't been fastened in his seat!"

"It's quite likely that the pilot is strapped in," said Church. "Clurey and I were only saying that a man can loop the loop in safety even if he isn't strapped in——"

"Great Scott!"

"Look—look at him!"

"The awful idiot! He'll have an accident in half a minute!"

For coming out of the loop the aeroplane was at a much lower level, and,

instead of proceeding along smoothly—instead of climbing up to a higher level again—the machine was now zig-zagging across the meadows at a terrific speed, and only about eighty feet up.

It came roaring towards the boys, and gave a lurch just as it came opposite. Then it was over them and across another field.

"Begad!" gasped Sir Montie. "I received quite a fright—I did, really!"

"And no wonder!" said Christine. "The rockless ass!"

We all stared at the aeroplane, with our hearts in our mouths—to tell the truth, I was feeling rather queer now. And then it happened.

The whole thing was over in a flash.

At the farther end of the adjoining field the pilot attempted to turn. The biplane banked over steeply, and the tip of the lower left wing just touched against the topmost branch of a tree. The aeroplane spun round, fluttering like a shot sparrow; then it dropped to the earth tail first, vanishing from view behind the trees.

We held our breaths.

Crash!

The sound came to us distinctly—a prolonged, horrible crashing noise. And we stared at one another with pale faces and startled eyes.

"He's down!"

"Oh, my goodness—crashed!"

"He must have been killed on the instant!"

"Great Scott!"

The disaster had been so sudden and unexpected that the juniors did not know what to do. They simply stood there in the lane, momentarily helpless.

Only a bare minute before they had been looking up rather carelessly at the airman performing his daring stunts, and now, almost before the juniors could draw a breath, the machine was down on the ground, a mass of wreckage. And the pilot——

I realised that this was no time for hesitation—no time for delay.

"Come on, you chaps!" I rapped out quickly. "We'll lend a hand!"

"Good idea!" shouted Handforth. "We can't stand here like dummies, anyway!"

"Gee whizz!" exclaimed Farman, the Western American boy. "I guess we'll need to get real busy. Say, I'll allow that machine was going some when it hit the ground. There's no

sense in standing here, handing out hot air. We've got to get busy!"

Still pale and shaky, the juniors hurried after me through a gap in the hedge, and then we went tearing across the field for all we were worth. We passed through the trees on the other side, and then came within sight of the wreckage.

The aeroplane lay upside down, its wings crumpled up, the fuselage smashed to atoms. Of the pilot there was no sign. Everything was still and deadly quiet.

I ran forward, with dreadful forebodings.

And then my heart leapt into my mouth.

For steam was rising from the front part of the aeroplane—a hazy kind of vapour. And then, as I was running, there suddenly came a flash of light and a puff. The next second the front part of the aeroplane was blazing furiously, the flames leaping up to a tremendous height.

"Heaven help the poor chap now!" I muttered grimly.

I knew what had happened. That steam which I had seen had been really oil vapour, and, for some inexplicable reason, it had caught fire. And now the wrecked aeroplane was blazing fiercely. Within a minute it would be one roaring mass from end to end.

I ran as I had never run before, and at last I arrived at the fallen machine. Reginald Pitt and Christine came panting up just behind me.

"There's just a chance!" I panted. "The flames haven't reached this part of the machine yet, and the pilot doesn't seem to be smashed up!"

"Oh, my goodness!" gasped Pitt. "We shall have to drag him out!"

The flames were roaring and crackling, and the heat swept over in suffocating waves. And a thought came into my head which filled me with dread. I knew well enough that the flames would soon reach the petrol tank, which was probably half full, in spite of the leakage. When that happened the tank would explode with tremendous violence, throwing burning petrol in every direction.

I looked at the pilot. Strangely enough, he was sitting huddled up in his seat, apparently uninjured, although he was unconscious. The body of the machine lay on its side, and it would

be quite an easy matter for us to pull the pilot clear, once we got a good hold. There were no obstructions in the way, and the man was not pinned down by wreckage. The seat and its immediate vicinity had escaped unharmed.

"Quick! Come on!" I said huskily.

Handforth came up at that moment, and he helped strenuously. Two or three of us grabbed hold of the pilot, and we pulled for all we were worth. He was not strapped in, and we dragged him out fairly easily. He gave a little sigh, opened his eyes, and looked round dazedly. But I gave him no opportunity to speak.

"Now then, we've got to lug him away!" I shouted. "If we stay here we shall all be killed! Come on!"

"But—but he may be badly hurt —"

"We can't help that; this is no time for gentle measures!" I rapped out.

And, not knowing whether there were any bones broken, or whether the man was badly injured, we proceeded to drag him along the grass, roughly and without ceremony. We hauled him as far from the burning aeroplane as possible.

"This'll do!" I panted at last. "He'll be safe here."

I glanced up, and saw that one or two juniors were dangerously near to the wrecked machine.

"Stand back, there!" I roared, in alarm. "Do you want to get killed, you idiots? Stand back!"

The juniors, startled, ran back quickly. And they were only just in the nick of time, for at that very moment there was a loud booming explosion. A blinding flash of light rushed up into the sky, and then we could see nothing of the aeroplane at all—only a fiercely burning mass of wreckage remained.

"My hat!" I gasped. "That was a near thing, if you like!"

Somehow I felt rather weak, and I knew that the other fellows were experiencing the same sensation. It was the reaction. We had not exerted ourselves so very much, but we had gone into grave danger. All the fellows knew that; but, in the excitement, we had not had time to think of any danger. Our sole thoughts had been for the pilot—to get him clear—to save his life. And, mercifully, we had succeeded.

But had we saved his life? Was he mortally injured already? Would he die without recovering consciousness?

Apparently, no.

"Thanks awfully, you kids!" said a drowsy voice. "Jolly decent of you to drag me out like that! I thought I was done for. By Jove, the old 'bus makes a decent bonfire, doesn't she?"

I looked down quickly, and saw that the pilot was attempting to sit up. A youngish man, with a clean-shaven, fair-skinned face, he was attired in the customary airman's get-up.

"Don't move, sir!" I said quickly. "You might have broken some bones, or have internal injuries—"

"Don't you believe it, young 'un!" said the pilot, sitting up. "There's nothing wrong with me now. Broken bones! I rather fancy I should know if I'd snapped a strut or two. As for interior trouble, there's no fear of that."

"But—but it's amazing, sir!" said Church. "You came a terrible crash—"

"I suppose it seemed terrible to you," interrupted the pilot. "As a matter of fact, it wasn't such a bad one. You see, one of the wing tips touched a branch, and I sort of turned a catherine wheel. Everything on the outside was smashed up; but the main portion of the body—where I was sitting—escaped without any injury at all. That's why I'm still in one whole piece."

"But you were unconscious, sir," said Pitt.

"Yes, I believe I was," admitted the airman. "Infernally silly of me, what? But, you see, the sudden jar kind of knocked me sideways, and I didn't know what I was doing. I'm much better now."

We were all astonished. The pilot proceeded to rise to his feet. He was very shaky and unsteady, but, after a minute or two, he was able to stand without being supported. And it was a great relief to us all to find that he was practically unharmed; except for a severe shaking up, there was nothing wrong with him. And he made light of his bruises, which, no doubt, were many.

He looked at the blazing aeroplane, and then he transferred his attention to us. And there was a warm light in his eyes.

"I don't know who you are, boys, but I want to thank you heartily, with all my gratitude," he said quietly. "I know well enough that you saved my life, at a great risk. It was a splendid piece of work. I should never have recovered in time, and I should have been blazing up by now—"

"Don't, sir!" put in Pitt hurriedly.

"Well, it's hardly pleasant to think about," said the airman. "You boys displayed wonderful pluck, and I shall never really be able to thank you for having saved my life."

"It was Nipper's doing, sir," put in Pitt. "This chap here—he was the first to reach you, and without him we shouldn't have done anything—"

"Oh, rot!" I broke in quickly.

"Don't take any notice, sir!"

The pilot shook hands with us all round.

"Well, boys, I dare say you're wondering who I am—and how many varieties of an idiot I happen to be?" he said. "My name is Mason—Captain Mason—"

"Captain Mason, V.C., of the Royal Air Force?" asked Christine, with interest.

"Late of the Royal Air Force," corrected Captain Mason, V.C. "Yes, that's right, my boy. I'm not in the Service now. And it's an extremely lucky thing that I'm alive at all. I suppose you thought I was quite mad when you saw me careering about near the ground?"

"Well, I thought it was a bit reckless," I admitted. "I've piloted an aeroplane myself, and—"

"You've piloted an aeroplane?" repeated Captain Mason, staring at me.

"That's quite right, sir," put in Tommy Watson. "This chap is Nipper—the assistant of Mr. Nelson Lee, the famous detective. He is a fully certified pilot."

"By Jove, that's deucedly interesting!" said Captain Mason, looking at me again. "Nipper, eh? I've heard of you, young man, and I'm confoundedly pleased to meet you. You see, one of the controls became jammed, and I couldn't do anything with it. And before I had time to draw in my breath, I hit that tree top!"

"I thought it was something like that," I said, nodding. "I knew you couldn't deliberately have flown so low,

and so erratically. Thank Heaven you're not hurt, sir!"

"There's somebody coming!" said De Valerie, glancing across the field.

A big motor-car had just pulled up in the lane, and now several men came running pell-mell across the field. They wore expressions of alarm and consternation; but these expressions changed when they caught sight of Captain Mason. They looked extremely relieved. I guessed immediately that they had come from the aerodrome, near by. They had probably heard the crash—or, at least, they had seen the machine fall, and they had come to make investigations.

"It's all right," said Captain Mason. "There's nothing wrong with me—thanks to these boys. They saved my life, and—"

"You'd better go home and have a good rest, sir," I suggested. "You'll feel better after that. I can't understand why you haven't got any broken bones!"

The captain laughed.

"Oh, I'm a tough beggar!" he said lightly. "But look here, boys, I want to see you again, when I'm feeling better. Come along to the aerodrome to-morrow, or the next day, if you can. I shall be delighted to see you."

"Thanks very much, sir!" said all the juniors, in one voice.

And very shortly afterwards, Captain Mason, V.C., went away in the motor-car, with two or three of the mechanics; two others remained near the wreckage, looking gloomily at the charred, burning mass.

And we strolled away, too, still talking animatedly on the subject of the accident and Captain Mason's extraordinarily narrow escape.

"About the nearest thing I've ever seen," said Church. "And, by the way, what have you got to say for yourself now, Handforth?"

"Eh?" said Handforth. "What do you mean?"

"Didn't you see Captain Mason looping the loop before the crash?"

"Of course I did you ass!"

"He looped the loop several times, didn't he?"

"Yes, but—"

"Very well, then," said Church, with an air of triumph.

"Was Captain Mason strapped in his

seat, or was he not?" continued Church.

"He was not!" I replied. "If he had been strapped in, there would have been no Captain Mason at all by this time!"

Handforth grunted, but he wasn't going to admit himself beaten.

"I knew you chaps were dense!" he said witheringly. "Couldn't you see that I was only trying to test you?"

"Eh?" said Church and McClure blankly.

"I was just trying to test you!" said Handforth, with supreme coolness. "Just as if I didn't know that a chap needn't be strapped in if he wants to loop! Oh, you make me tired!"

Church and McClure opened their mouths, but words did not come.

To tell the truth, speech failed them.

CHAPTER II.

SIR GREGORY TWEED'S INVITATION.

LORD DORRIMORE chuckled. "Yes, Lee, old man, I'm enjoying myself immensely!" he said. "These youngsters are making things a bit lively, eh? But they're revelling in it, and I like to see that. I shall be infernally sorry when the holidays come to an end and you go back to St. Frank's. I shall be like a lost sheep."

"My dear Dorrie, you are an extremely lucky man," smiled Nelson Lee. "You have everything you wish for—a delightful home and perfect health. What more does a man require? And yet you are grumbling—yet you complain that you will be like a lost sheep after I have departed from your hospitable roof."

"Well, that's quite right," said Dorrie. "What can I do with myself, alone in a huge place like Dorrimore Hall? I shall be grey in a week, and be in my coffin within a fortnight!"

Nelson Lee laughed outright.

"It's about time you settled down, old man," he said pleasantly. "You ought to look about and find yourself a nice wife—"

"Oh, for mercy's sake, stop!" groaned Dorrie. "A wife—for me! Nothing doing, professor! I admire

the ladies tremendously—Heaven bless 'em!—but, at the same time, it wouldn't be fair for me to marry any woman. I'm away in the wilds half my time—either in Africa, or Borneo, or Timbuctoo—it doesn't matter much where. For me to think of settling down is impossible. I think I'd rather serve a term of penal servitude!"

"Dorrie, I'm afraid you're incorrigible!" said Nelson Lee, with a shake of his head. "I've given you up long ago, and I won't attempt to argue with you now. You'd better be careful with that steering, too, or you'll have us in the hedge!"

Both Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were seated in a low racing car, and they were driving along a country road not far from Stowmarket. It was the morning after Captain Mason's accident, and, as a matter of fact, Dorrie was on his way to the aerodrome to inquire how the captain was getting on. Many of the juniors had requested him to do so.

"How can I steer straight when you talk about wives, and all that rot?" asked Dorrie, with a grunt. "If you give me shocks like that, Lee, you must expect to go headlong into the ditch!"

Just then another car came into sight—a big, open touring car, with a chauffeur in livery behind the wheel. In the tonneau sat a big individual with a genial face. He was a man of about fifty, well fed, and evidently prosperous. And suddenly he raised his hand, and shouted some instructions to the chauffeur.

The car immediately began to pull up, and the big man rose in his seat.

"Lord Dorrimore!" he shouted. "By gad, I'm glad to see you, sir! Pull up—pull up, and have a word or two!"

Dorrie was already applying the brakes, and he leaned over towards Nelson Lee.

"Sir Gregory Tweed," he said confidentially.

"A neighbour?" asked Lee.

"Well, hardly a neighbour," said Dorrie. "He lives about twenty miles away. Tons of money—business man. Knows me fairly well. I'll introduce you."

The two cars came to a halt. Sir Gregory Tweed got out, and came across to Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore. He shook Dorrie's hand warmly.

"By gad, sir, it's a pleasure to see you about here again!" he exclaimed heartily. "You're mostly away in some other odd corner of the world. I see you've got quite a party at the Hall!"

"Just a little gathering," said Dorrie, with a smile. "By the way, Sir Gregory, let me introduce you to Mr. Nelson Lee."

Sir Gregory was delighted to know the famous detective, and he shook hands with much warmth. He was, in fact, a vigorous man—he did everything heartily. His voice was like the roar of a lion, and it could be heard for half a mile.

"I understand that you've got some boys staying with you?" he said after a while.

"Yes, that's quite right," said Dorrie. "A little party of St. Frank's juniors."

"Splendid lads—plucky lads, by gad!" said Sir Gregory. "They deserve the highest praise—the very highest praise, sir! Undoubtedly they saved Mason's life yesterday!"

"Yes, so I gather," said Dorrie. "A remarkable piece of work on Nipper's part. All the boys, in fact, proved that they were level-headed."

"They must have known that that petrol was liable to explode at any minute," went on Sir Gregory. "I feel that I'd like to meet the boys personally, by gad! They deserve some reward—I'm hanged if they don't! What we should have done without Mason, Heaven only knows! Our best man—wonderful pilot. By the way, perhaps you'd like to come and have a look round the aerodrome now?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, we're just on our way there, to inquire after Captain Mason's health," put in Nelson Lee. "I gather, Sir Gregory, that you are connected with the aerodrome?"

Sir Gregory Tweed stared, and puffed out his cheeks.

"Connected with it?" he repeated. "By gad, that's rather good—devilish good, in fact! Considering that I happen to be the chairman of the East Anglian Aircraft Company, Limited, I should rather say that I am closely connected with the firm! What do you say, Dorrie?"

"Well, I don't think there's much chance of your getting the sack!" replied Dorrie.

"Oh, good -- beautifully good!" chuckled the baronet. "Yes, Mr. Lee, I'm the chairman of the company. We're launching out, eh? Going to do big things soon. Just you wait, sir--just you wait. You'll see! Big things, did I say? Huge things--stupendous things!"

"I am glad the company is so successful," said Nelson Lee.

"Successful!" repeated Sir Gregory. "By gad, sir, it's positively soaring! You haven't seen our airship, eh? Ah, she's a beauty--one of the finest crafts you could wish to see. We paid the Government a stupendous price for her, but she's worth every penny of it--and dirt cheap, too!"

"Do you happen to know if Captain Mason is well this morning?" asked Lee.

"Well! Why, he's as right as anything!" said Sir Gregory. "Nothing wrong with him, except a few bruises. And Mason isn't the kind of man to take any notice of a bruise! We should have been lost without him--positively lost. One of the best airship pilots in the country--nerves as steady as a rock, and with fine judgment."

"A bit reckless, isn't he?" asked Lord Dorrimore.

"Reckless?" replied the baronet. "One of the most careful men we've got. I'll admit he doesn't seem to set much value upon his own life when he's up in one of those single-seater machines. He's rather fond of stunts, and looping, and all the rest of it. But that's only when he's alone. If he's got a passenger, he's as safe as houses. And when he's in charge of the airship, everything goes all right. I'd trust my life with Captain Mason any day. The company wouldn't lose him for a ransom!"

It was evident that Sir Gregory held a very high opinion of Captain Mason, V.C. It was also evident that the East Anglian Aircraft Company had purchased an airship from the Government, which was to be used, presumably, for commercial flying. Sir Gregory, at all events, seemed highly delighted with the purchase.

"We needn't stand talking here," said the baronet briskly. "I'll turn my car, and we'll go up to the aerodrome together. I'd like to show you round, Dorrimore--and you, too, Mr. Lee.

I'll open your eyes, by gad! Sleepy place, Stowmarket; but we're not sleepy at the aerodrome. No, sir! I rather fancy I shall give you a surprise!"

He climbed back into his own car, and it was soon turned about, and the two vehicles went along at a fair pace until the aerodrome came within sight. It was a large, flat tract of land, covered with short grass, and ideal for the purpose for which it was intended. At all events, there were many big sheds, or hangars.

And one of these was a formidable structure--a huge, towering mass of woodwork and metal. The shed was an enormous size, and the men walking about near it were like insects. It was obviously the home of the newly acquired airship.

"I tell you that we have sunk millions in this enterprise," said Sir Gregory, as they walked along. "We've got an enormous capital behind us, and we mean to make this thing a huge success. If you want to make a lot of money, you've got to spend a lot of money--that's one of my principal maxims, by gad! It's no good doing a thing by half measures. By next month we shall have Air Services open throughout the whole of East Anglia, both in Suffolk, Essex, and Cambridgeshire. And our passenger and goods rate will compare with those of the railways, and, moreover, we shall deliver the things in half the time. I can tell you, Dorrimore, we're going to open the eyes of some people!"

There was no doubt that the company was a huge one, and it had an ambitious programme. Already there were dozens of aeroplanes in the sheds--aeroplanes of all types: two-seaters, three-seaters, and many of the giant passenger-carrying aeroplanes of the Handley-Page type.

Sir Gregory took Nelson Lee and Dorrimore round with much pride. He did all the talking, taking them from shed to shed, and describing the various machines. There was no doubt that Sir Gregory was extremely pleased with the way things were going. But whether gigantic aerial schemes would succeed or fail, remained to be seen; only time would prove that.

Nelson Lee had known that great activity existed at this big private aerodrome; but he was rather surprised at what he saw. There were hundreds of

men employed, all bustling about their business in an energetic fashion; and near the aerodrome a small town had sprung up, mainly composed of picturesque little wooden houses, where the mechanics and other workpeople lived.

This particular site had been chosen, Nelson Lee gathered, because it was central, and the aerodrome would be a recognised halting place for all cross-country aircraft. The scheme in view was a highly interesting one.

Lee and Dorrie could easily understand why Sir Gregory was so pleased that Captain Mason's life had been saved, for Mason was the chief pilot of the company—the most valuable airman of all.

"And now I am going to show you our biggest treasure," said Sir Gregory, rubbing his hands softly together. "She's a beauty, gentlemen, and she's going to do big things!"

"You mean the airship?" asked Nelson Lee.

"I do, sir—I do!" replied Sir Gregory. "Practically brand new, she is; we took her from the Government almost before she had completed her trials. Perfect in every part, and as thoroughly airworthy as any aircraft that ever flew. She's far safer than railway trains, I can assure you. We've christened her the Suffolk Queen—an appropriate name, I think."

"Originally, she was a Service dirigible?" asked Lord Dorrimore.

"Exactly," said the baronet. "She used to be the R.T. 5—the initials standing for 'Rigid Type.'"

"And I suppose you're going to use her for passenger carrying?" asked Nelson Lee.

"For passenger carrying, mails, merchandise, anything you like!" said Sir Gregory. "We've made great alterations in her. The central cabin, for example, is now a luxurious Pullman coach, so to speak. It is resplendent with armchairs, tapestries, and will accommodate over thirty passengers. At a squeeze, other passengers can be got into the rear cars, but, normally, they are for the crew only. And, of course, there is plenty of space for luggage, and all that kind of thing. But come inside, and have a look!"

They found themselves at the doorway of the gigantic shed. It towered above them in an overpowering fashion, like some man-constructed mountain

and, entering the doorway, they found themselves within the shed. In the roof there were many skylights, and there was plenty of light within.

And there, lying passively at ease, lay the Suffolk Queen. She was a huge, rigid airship, practically new, and Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore looked up at her with great interest. The airship was a monster, and Sir Gregory was justly proud of her.

The outer fabric covering was of a bright aluminium colour, and in the sunlight she probably glistened like silver. The gigantic nose was painted a brilliant red, and on the mouth the name had been painted in great black letters.

"Well, what do you think of her?" asked Sir Gregory.

"She's a splendid airship," said Nelson Lee, nodding his head. "One of the finest I have ever seen, Sir Gregory. When do you make your first trip?"

"Well, not for a week or two," said the baronet; "but, as a matter of fact, the airship is to be taken for an unofficial trial to-morrow—a flight to London and back, returning by coast. Mason, of course, will pilot her."

"Are you going on this trip?" asked Dorrie.

Sir Gregory shook his head somewhat gloomily.

"Unfortunately, no," he said. "I wanted to—I'd give anything to be able to go, but I have some business appointments in London which I cannot possibly miss. However, I sha'n't lose the chance. This trip will just be an unofficial one—providing, of course, that the weather is favourable. According to present indications, to-morrow will be a glorious day."

"What time will she start?" asked Dorrie, with interest.

"Oh, quite early—not later than ten o'clock," replied Sir Gregory. "Being a kind of test trip, she will carry a good deal of ballast."

They stood looking up at the monstrous aircraft, rather awed by its size. At a distance, an airship of that type seemed quite normal; but standing here, practically beneath it, its size had an overpowering effect upon a mere human being.

"Roughly speaking, she is about six hundred and fifty feet long," said Sir Gregory, with the air of a lecturer

addressing a crowd. "The vessel has a lifting capacity of thirty tons. Think of it, gentlemen—thirty tons! Her normal officers and crew number sixteen. This is a distinct improvement on the old rigid aircraft, for they required practically thirty men to control them."

"And what is she made of?" asked Dorrie interestedly. "Aluminium?"

"No," replied Sir Gregory. "The hull is built of duraluminium girders, in sections, and each section contains a gasbag. These bags are fitted with automatic and hand-worked valves for releasing the gas. Safe? My dear sirs, she is as safe as an ocean-going liner—and a deuced lot safer, by gad!"

"Is it possible to get from one car to the other?" asked Dorrie. "I'm a child in these matters, you know, and you mustn't mind my questions, Sir Gregory. I'm frightfully interested, you know."

The baronet rubbed his hands together.

"My dear sir, I am only too delighted to give information," he said. "Yes, of course, it is possible to move from one cabin to another. There's a keel along the centre line, and this serves as a girder structure and distributes the load. Do you understand? This girder acts as a gangway for the crew to move freely about the vessel just as they wish. The passengers, of course, will be obliged to remain in the central cabin. Passengers will not be allowed to move about the ship as they choose."

"That is a very necessary precaution," smiled Nelson Lee. "It would never do to allow the public to wander about as they wished."

"The cars, as you see, are four in number," went on Sir Gregory. "The forward car contains the control, where the captain is in full charge. The central car is for passengers only, and contains no engines of any kind. And at the rear are two cars, side by side. All the movements are controlled from the forward cabin—which also is an engine-room. The rearmost cars are in direct communication with the control cabin all the time, and there is no possibility of orders being misunderstood. But come inside, gentlemen—you will be greatly interested, I am sure!"

"Of what power are the engines?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Altogether, the airship has engines of one thousand five hundred horse-

power," replied the baronet. "This represents three five-hundred horse-power engines—one forward, and the other two aft. It is not necessary to have more than three engines, providing they are of sufficient power. The balloon fabric of this airship is of a totally different type to the usual, and the vessel has hardly lost one cubic foot of gas during the last week. She is extremely economical, and, with careful handling, she will prove to be a very profitable investment. Before her commercial flights actually commence, a great tower will be built—very much the same as the Government type—to which the airship is moored in rough weather, when it is impossible to get her into her shed. But come along into the control cabin!"

They passed along the shed, and presently mounted a ladder. And then they stepped into the foremost car of the airship. It was not particularly large; there were metal girders on either side and overhead. There was a confusion of dials and levers, which, to the uninitiated, were extremely bewildering; and in front the car was quite open—that is to say, the daylight streamed in. Thick glass covered the front of the cabin, and altogether the place looked very comfortable.

"I rather wish that Mason was here," said Sir Gregory. "He would be able to explain all these levers to you. I know nothing, by gad! But Mason is the captain of this vessel, and he is acquainted with every inch of it. What he doesn't know is hardly worth learning."

"I suppose he has had a good deal of experience with this type of craft?" asked Dorrie.

"Bless your life, yes!" replied Sir Gregory. "It is child's play for him to control this airship!"

The next move was an interesting one. After Lee and Dorrie had thoroughly examined the control chamber—and with great interest—they passed up a ladder into the keel of the airship, and now they found themselves in a long, curious passage, which stretched away for apparently an unending distance.

Sir Gregory Tweed came puffing and blowing behind them, explaining all sorts of unnecessary details at a rapid-fire rate. The passage was comfortably large, and it was possible to walk along it in an almost upright position.

"One needs to be thundering careful in comin' along here when the ship is in flight," remarked Dorrie. "One false move, by gad, an' a fellow would be off this bally plank an' through the fabric. An' that wouldn't be very pleasant if the ship happened to be up a few thousand feet."

"One needs to be careful, of course," said Sir Gregory; "but only authorised members of the crew are allowed to use this gangway. But if you imagine there is any difficulty in negotiating this passage while the ship is in motion, you are quite mistaken, Dorrimore. She flies as steadily as a house, by gad!"

Presently the baronet led his two companions down into the central cabin, and this was indeed a place of luxury. The ladder by means of which they gained admittance into the cabin, led down into what appeared to be a kind of miniature kitchen. This was, in fact, the end section of the great car—a section where the passengers would not be allowed. It was for the use of the two stewards on duty. Light refreshments, etc., would be prepared here, and served to the passengers as required.

Passing through this unique little buffet, they found themselves in the cabin proper—and this, indeed, was a revelation. This part of the airship had completely lost its Service character—it was a place of ease and luxury.

The car was of enormous size, beautifully appointed and decorated, with any amount of easy chairs, lounges, and side-seats. There were thick windows all round, through which the passengers would be able to see the countryside below; and there were many cunningly contrived curtained recesses, which could be converted into sleeping quarters should the airship be aloft at night.

Nelson Leo and Lord Dorrimore were greatly interested, and they were just about to leave the cabin, in order to examine the rear power cars, when Captain Mason, V.C., made his appearance. Sir Gregory introduced him at once.

"I trust you have fully recovered from the effects of your nasty mishap yesterday?" said Nelson Lee, after a while.

"Oh, absolutely!" replied the captain lightly. "As a matter of fact, I only sustained a few bruises—and I don't

take any notice of that kind of thing. By the way, Mr. Lee, I understand that Nipper is your assistant?"

"That is so," replied Nelson Leo, smiling.

"Well, I don't hesitate to say that I owe my life to the lad's quick-wittedness," said Captain Mason. "The other boys helped wonderfully—they displayed great pluck; but Nipper was the first to realise the danger, and to take the necessary action. I shall never cease to be grateful to the boys for what they did."

"It is very fortunate that you were not knocked about yesterday, Mason," said Sir Gregory; "but you always seem to have astonishing luck. Any ordinary man would have been killed; but your life is charmed, by gad!"

Captain Mason smiled.

"I hardly think so, Sir Gregory," he replied. "You see, the crash itself wasn't so bad, although I dare say it sounded pretty awful," he replied. "As for the machine, it was an old 'bus, and my own property—so the loss is mine."

"You think you'll be fit for the test to-morrow?"

"Fit?" smiled the captain. "Why, my dear sir, there is nothing wrong with me at all. I suppose Sir Gregory has told you children that we are taking this little midget up for a trial trip to-morrow?" added Mason, addressing Leo and Dorrie. "Just a jaunt to London and back to see how she behaves. Perhaps you'd care to come?"

Lord Dorrimore grinned.

"Nothin' would suit me better," he said smoothly. "As a matter of fact, I was just on the point of bein' rude enough to invite myself. I accept your invitation with pleasure, Captain Mason."

"Splendid — splendid!" said Sir Gregory, beaming. "Quite a good idea of yours, Mason. And you will take the trip, too, Mr. Lee?"

"I shall be quite delighted to take advantage of your offer," said Nelson Lee gracefully.

Captain Mason rubbed his chin.

"We can do with quite a lot of passengers," he said musingly. "We shall need 'em, as ballast. I was thinking of taking up a crowd of the mechanics, and so forth, to give them a treat. But I can't do that now; we must find some fit company for Mr. Lee and Lord Dor-

rimore. By Jove! Why not give those youngsters a joy ride?"

"There are about twenty-five in the party," said Dorrie doubtfully.

"All the better; we need a good number," said Mason. "Have you any objection, Lord Dorrimore?"

"Good gracious, no!" said his lordship. "An' I don't suppose the boys will have any objection, either," he added with a chuckle. "They'll be half dotty with delight. A trip to London an' back in the Suffolk Queen! It is very decent of you to suggest this, Captain Mason, an' on behalf of the boys I accept."

"And why not?" exclaimed Sir Gregory. "Why not, indeed? The youngsters will be well looked after; they will be safer than if they were travelling by the railway, by gad! And it will be some slight reward for their great service to Mason."

"That is just what I was thinking," said the captain. "Very well—that's fixed, then. You'll all have to be here not later than seven o'clock, because, weather permitting, we shall make an early start. What do you think of the craft, Mr. Lee?"

"I am quite impressed," replied the famous detective.

He and Dorrie were shown over the aft power cars, and then, after a further chat with their hosts, they shook hands, and departed in their car. Lee was rather thoughtful on the way back to Dorrimore Hall.

"You think this will be quite all right?" he asked. "I mean, about the boys going on this trip to-morrow?"

"All right? Of course it will be all right!"

"Well, the responsibility will be yours—that is what I mean," said Nelson Lee. "These youngsters are in your care, Dorrie, and it is up to you to look after them. But I hardly consider there is any danger——"

"Danger!" laughed Dorrie. "Why, my dear old man, what the deuce are you talking about? The boys will be absolutely safe, and I sha'n't even take the trouble to communicate with their various people. To do so would be an unnecessary bother. After all, it will only be a short spin."

And, when Dorrimore Hall was reached, the juniors were informed of the invitation. Personally, I was overjoyed, and full of enthusiasm. I had

been up in an aeroplane many times, but it would be a new experience to sail aloft in a huge, modern dirigible, and I looked forward to the experience with delight.

And the other fellows were so excited that they could talk of nothing else. They had never expected a treat like this; and for the remainder of the evening the sole topic of conversation was connected with the Suffolk Queen, and its forthcoming flight to London.

To London?

If I had only known at that time what the airship's ultimate destination was to be, I should have opened my eyes very wide indeed!

CHAPTER III.

THE WEATHER CLERK'S TREACHERY.

"**T**IME to turn out, my sons!" said Dorrie briskly. "Show a leg!"

His lordship marched into one of the luxurious bedrooms at Dorrimore Hall. It was occupied by eight or nine of the St. Frank's juniors, including myself. The time was just six o'clock, and the early morning sunlight was streaming through the windows.

Dorrie paused just as he got inside the door, for, contrary to his expectations, everybody in the room was already half-dressed. I had awakened at ten minutes to six, and had called the other fellows. Sleep after that was impossible. This was a morning of mornings!

"By the Lord Harry!" ejaculated Dorrie. "You're gettin' up! Amazin'! Hadn't you better write this down somewhere as a record?"

His lordship grinned, and left the apartment. And he found the same conditions in the other bedrooms. All the juniors were displaying an extraordinary burst of energy, and were not objecting in the slightest degree to getting up at such an early hour.

"Glorious morning!" said Tommy Watson, glancing out of the window. "A bit chilly, but that's only to be expected in April. Who said it would be raining?"

"I did," replied Handforth. "It generally does rain when something especially decent is planned. But this

time everything seems to be O.K. The sky is clear, the sun is shining, and there's hardly a breath of wind. That's the stuff to give 'em! And what's the matter with you, Trotty?" he added abruptly.

Nicodemus Trotwood was looking very thoughtful.

"There's nothing the matter with me," he replied. "But, somehow, I don't much care for the idea of going on this trip."

"What?"

"You don't care for it?"

"You—you ass!"

"I don't want you to think I'm funky, or anything like that," said Trotwood uncomfortably; "but I've never wanted to go up in the air on anything. Somehow, it doesn't appeal to me. I'd rather stay on the ground."

"What the dickens are you afraid of?" asked Handforth, staring.

"I'm not afraid of anything."

"But you just said——"

"You can think what you like, but I don't want to go," said Trotwood firmly. "My brother is just the same. So we're staying behind."

"Rats! I don't believe it," said Handforth. "I say, Corny, you duffer, is it true that you don't want to go on this airship trip?"

Cornelius Trotwood blinked. He knew that Handforth was addressing him, because he could see it. But he was somewhat deaf, and very simple. In face and figure he was the exact counterpart of Nicodemus, but there the resemblance ended.

"I beg your pardon?" he said mildly.

"Don't you want to go on this airship flight?"

"Really, Handforth, I fail to understand," said Cornelius. "I can assure you that I have received no fright whatever——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you dummy!" roared Handforth. "I didn't say 'fright'—I said 'flight'! Nicodemus says you don't want to come—is that true?"

The deaf junior looked out of the window.

"Yes, wonderfully so!" he said, nodding.

"Eh?"

"You were remarking that the sky is blue——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Give it up. Handy!" grinned Church. "The only possible way to make him hear is to use a megaphone!"

But it was evident, a moment or two later, that Cornelius shared his brother's views, for he made some remark to that effect.

"Well, they're at liberty to do what they please," I remarked. "Perhaps some of the other chaps will stay behind. I know for a fact that Somerton isn't coming. His guardian made him promise that he'd never go up in anything, and he simply can't do it. I suppose he's regarded as being precious, happening to be a duke. But some of the chaps may decide not to come of their own accord—not because they're afraid, or anything of that sort, but simply because they don't care for the trip."

It was inconceivable to Handforth that any sane fellow could possibly hold such a view; but it was soon discovered that several juniors would prefer to remain behind. In addition to the Trotwood twins and Somerton, Tom Burton and Dick Goodwin of the Ancient House elected to remain at home.

Clapson, of the College House, whose home was near Stowmarket, had rushed home on the previous evening to ask his parents' permission; but, greatly to Clapson's chagrin, they had put the veto on the idea.

And Nation, Page, and Harron, also of the College House, decided of their own accord to remain on Mother Earth. Thus there would be sixteen juniors in the party—quite a good crowd, too.

In addition, Nelson Leo and Lord Dorrinore would be with us, and the airship would carry the captain and at least three other officers, to say nothing of engineers and men, numbering twelve or fifteen. The whole ship's company, therefore, would be something like thirty-five souls.

When we got downstairs we found that an early breakfast had been provided, and it did not take us long to dispose of this. Appetites were not of the keenest, for excitement is apt to take away one's hunger. The only fellow who really did the breakfast justice was Fatty Little. Earthquakes and volcanic eruptions would not have affected his appetite.

"I'm not at all sure about you, young man," remarked Dorrie, looking at Fatty, and shaking his head. "I think we ought to leave you behind."

The fat boy gulped, and gasped with dismay.

"Great doughnuts!" he ejaculated. "L-leave me behind, sir?"

"Well, I hardly think it's right to endanger the whole ship's company by taking you with us," said Dorrie, winking at the rest of us. "This airship was designed for carrying normal persons, and not for human elephants! I'm afraid you'll strain the girders!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Fatty Little grinned, and proceeded with his breakfast. He knew that his leg was being pulled, and he was exceedingly good-natured, and never resented any allusions to his bulk; in fact, he was decidedly proud of his size.

"Well, boys, we shall have to be making a move," said Nelson Lee. "Seven o'clock is the official time for starting, and we mustn't keep our hosts waiting. Hurry up!"

Ten minutes later the whole party set out in two motor-cars. The morning air was keen, but the sun was shining with great brilliance, the sky was clear, and hardly any wind disturbed the young leaves of the trees.

And, when the aerodrome came into sight, a good many shouts went up from the juniors, for the monster airship was now lying out in the open, well clear of the shed. Her great gas envelope glistened like silver in the sunshine, and she presented a noble spectacle—her very appearance gave one confidence. The ship looked so safe, strong, and businesslike that the possibility of danger never entered into anybody's head.

How could there be any danger in this monster of the air—this liner of the skies?

It was ridiculous to think of such a thing.

The juniors were probably the only excited people present; everybody else was cool and calm. The preparations were practically completed, and the Suffolk Queen was ready to start just when her skipper gave the word.

Most of the juniors were amazed at the number of men who occupied the aerodrome—scores of them, all clinging

to ropes. And the airship was held in position by these human anchors.

Captain Mason, who was busy giving final instructions to his officers, found time to come forward and greet Lord Dorrimore and Nelson Lee.

"So here you are, gentlemen—prompt to the minute!" he said genially. "Splendid! The weather couldn't be better, and I'll guarantee we shall have a perfect flight to London and back. All the boys here?"

"Not all of them, captain," replied Nelson Lee. "A few have elected to remain at home; but I think sixteen will make quite a nice little party."

Captain Mason grinned.

"Rather!" he replied. "Well, they'd better get aboard as soon as possible. We shan't lose any time in starting now. I'd like you to come into the control cabin with me, Mr. Lee—and you, Lord Dorrimore. The view from there is excellent, and I am sure you would be interested in the mechanism and in the controlling of the airship."

"By gad!" said Dorrie. "That's rippin' of you, Mason. I was rather wonderin' if I should be able to see how things went."

"Come along, then!" smiled the captain. "Of course, you are not compelled to remain in the forward car all the time. It will be quite a simple matter for you to go along the keel and reach the central cabin; in fact, you can dodge about the airship just as you please, once we get up into the air."

"That's deucedly interestin', by gad!" said Dorrie. "We can dodge about the airship, eh? I suppose we shall have to do some frightful acrobatic feats, with the earth miles underneath us!"

"My dear Dorrie, you need have no fear of that," smiled Nelson Lee. "It will be quite safe to move from one part of the ship to the other, as you will presently find."

I was rather disappointed because I was not invited to go into the control cabin with the gov'nor. However, I did not complain, but got into the central saloon with all the other juniors. In fact, we had the place completely to ourselves, as Nelson Lee and Dorrie were not there; it just contained the sixteen juniors, including myself.

The captain, officers and men were in different parts of the ship—in the rear

power cars, in the control cabin forward, etc.

"My only hat!" said McClure, looking round. "What a gorgeous place!"

"Top-hole!"

"Whoever would have thought that a whacking great car like this could rise thousands of feet into the air?" said Tommy Watson, in rather an awed voice. "Why, it's more luxurious than a Pullman car or an express train!"

"Rather!"

The juniors were inspecting their quarters with great interest. And, undoubtedly, the saloon of the airship was a palatial place—a large, long cabin, with numerous unbreakable glass windows. Upon the floors our feet sank into a soft pile carpet. There were easy-chairs, lounges, and comforts of every description; and the whole cabin was decorated and upholstered in the most artistic manner possible. The paintwork was superb, and the man who had designed these decorations was an artist.

On two or three occasions I had been in the cabin of a giant aeroplane, of the Handley-Page type; but the largest aeroplane cabin was a handbox compared with this great saloon.

The juniors eagerly collected against the windows, looking out. We had, of course, mounted a ladder in order to get into the cabin, and now we looked down upon the ground at the dozens and scores of men who were holding the airship in position.

Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were already on board, in the control cabin, and everything was going without a hitch. We became aware of a low, droning noise, and we knew that the engines had been started. And then, almost before we were prepared for it, we suddenly became aware of the fact that the ground was receding far away from us, steadily and slowly.

"We're off, my sons!" I said calmly.

"Good!"

"Hurrah!"

"We're off!"

The ground was now not only receding away from us, but flying past, and the great airship, mounting higher and higher as it rose in a graceful semi-circle, kept a perfectly even keel. The motion was hardly felt in our big cabin, which was situated centrally. There was no vibration and no overpowering noise just a murmur, a drone.

The Suffolk Queen made a complete circle of the aerodrome until at length she was well over a thousand feet high. Everything on the ground now looked small; the crowds of men appeared to be mere insects, crawling on a green tablecloth. And even the gigantic airshed only looked the size of a dwelling-place.

"My word!" exclaimed Church. "Isn't it great?"

"Great isn't the word!" said Handforth. "Why, this is travelling in luxury, if you like! We're going at about seventy miles an hour, and yet we don't seem to be moving at all! There's no sensation of movement, no vibration, no anything! When I grow up, I shall have one of these giddy things for myself!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I don't see anything to cackle at!" said Handforth, glaring round.

"No?" I smiled. "You don't seem to realise, Handy, old son, that an airship of this size costs something like half a million, or even more!"

Handforth shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, they'll be cheaper then?" he said carelessly.

We were all looking out of the window with great interest, and below we could see the little town of Stowmarket. We were right over the place now, and people in the streets were standing quite still, staring upwards. The Suffolk Queen by this time was now between two and three thousand feet high, and travelling rapidly and steadily. She was making straight for Ipswich. This, perhaps, was slightly out of her bee-line course, but Captain Mason had a mind to travel over Ipswich, Colchester, Chelmsford, and so on over Brentwood and Romford to London. On the return trip he would follow the Thames down to Gravesend, and then up the coast past Clacton-on-Sea and Harwich, and then arrive at Stowmarket once more after crossing Ipswich for the second time. That was the programme, and it appeared to be quite an admirable one.

But a certain mythical person—the clerk of the weather, to be exact—would have something to say before so very long.

Up to the present, however, everything was going smoothly. In the forward cabin, Nelson Lee and Lord Dorri-

more were greatly interested in everything they saw.

Captain Mason had very little to do, since the air was calm, and the giant ship was behaving herself excellently. Now and again Mason would consult the ballast chart, and touch a lever or two. It was only seldom that he found it necessary to use the engine-room telegraph, for the Suffolk Queen was now skimming through the air at a speed of about seventy miles an hour, and everything was going well.

Another officer, in the very front of the cabin, was manipulating the elevator control; whilst at his side another officer was controlling the vertical rudders, by which the ship was steered. "Not much trouble, eh?" smiled Captain Mason, strolling over to where Nelson Lee and Dorrie were standing.

"Why, hang it all, it's easier than driving a bally motor-car!" said Dorrie. "There's nothin' in it!"

"Don't you be quite so sure, Dorrie," smiled Nelson Lee. "There may appear to be nothing in it at the moment, but you must remember that everything is now favourable. But what if the wind springs up? What if a mishap occurs to one of the aft cars? It is then that the captain of a ship like this is called upon to show his skill."

"Exactly!" put in Mason. "Not that I'm anticipating anything particularly nasty to-day. I have had one or two pretty rotten experiences during the night, in bad weather; but this is only a pleasure cruise, and I am not anticipating any trouble."

Just then the steersman glanced round.

"I don't like the look of the clouds ahead, sir," he said doubtfully.

"Eh?" exclaimed Mason. "Clouds? I'll come and have a look."

Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore looked, too, and they quite agreed with the officer who was steering. The clouds in the distance ahead were not at all prepossessing. Overhead the sun was shining gloriously, and there were only one or two fleecy white clouds to be seen; but, away in the distance, and low on the horizon, lay a bank of heavy, purple-black clouds. These clouds looked ominous—they were rising rapidly, and were inky in aspect.

"A thunderstorm?" murmured Dorrie. "What do you say, Lee? Thun-

derstorms don't usually come in April—"

"Nevertheless, thunderstorms are quite likely to occur during this month," said Nelson Lee. "And a sudden atmospheric disturbance like a thunderstorm is not generally recorded on the weather instruments. The disturbances are purely local—"

"By gad!" interrupted Captain Mason. "The glass is falling—tumbling, in fact. This is sudden. I was anticipating a fine day, but it seems that we are to have some rough weather, after all. If there is the slightest possibility of any wind, I shall turn back at once."

"That will certainly be the best thing you can do," said Lee, nodding—and thinking of the juniors in the central cabin.

There was an anxious look on Mason's face now. He stared ahead at those clouds, and his brow was wrinkled with worry. The airship was now approaching Ipswich. The big Suffolk town could be seen in the distance ahead—a grey smudge. And above hovered the inky black clouds, now much more apparent.

The clouds, in fact, were rising with appalling speed, and there was not the slightest doubt that storms were about, for now and again brilliant flashes of lightning appeared in the clouds. The airship was steering straight towards the storm centre.

Captain Mason came to a decision.

He gave brisk instructions, and operated the engine-room telegraph. Then, slowly and gracefully, the huge airship commenced turning.

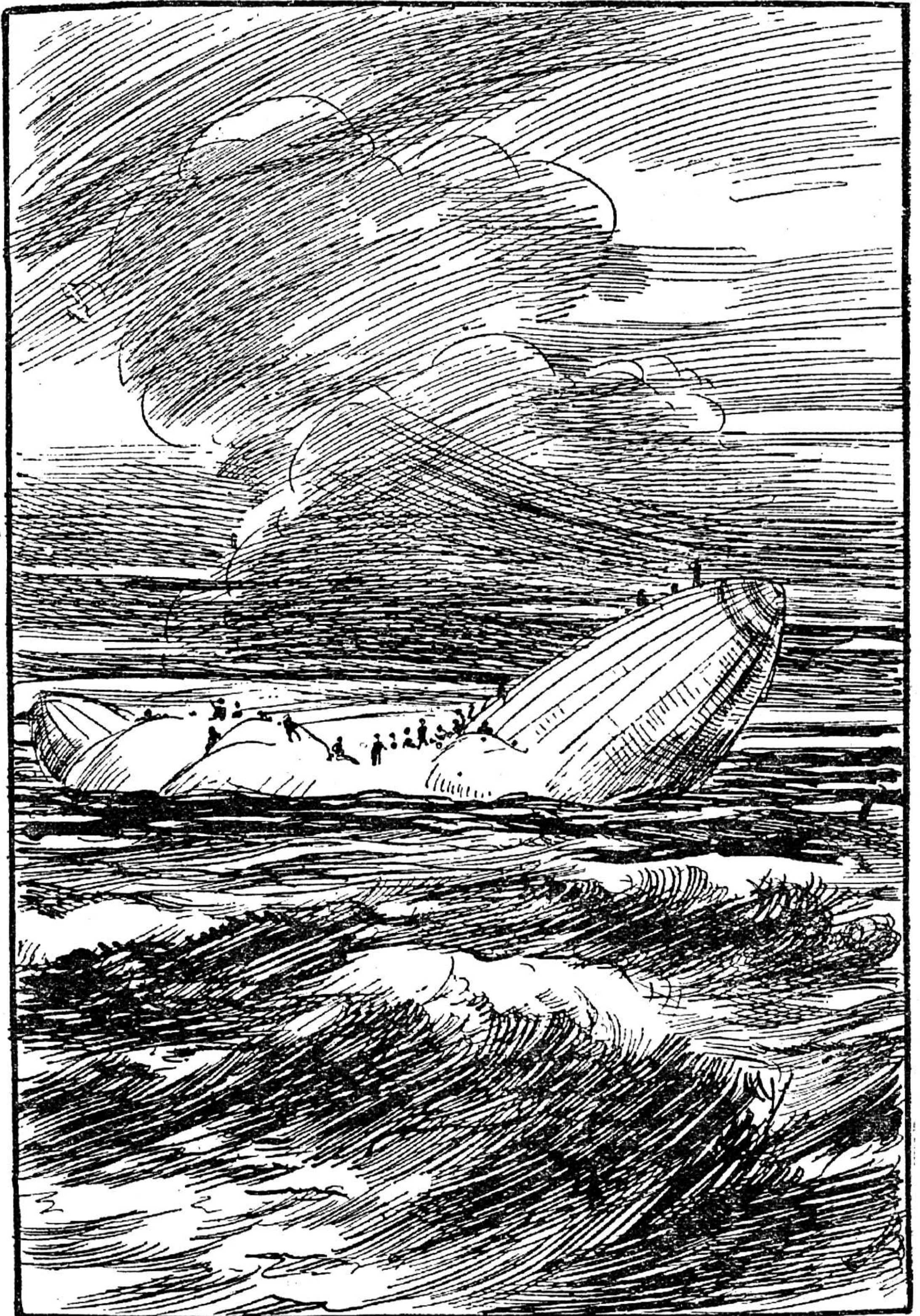
She was going back to Stowmarket—back to her shed.

And now, with her nose pointing homewards, the sky ahead was quite clear and bright. There was no sign of any storm—no black clouds. One could hardly have thought that the weather conditions were likely to be unfavourable; but Captain Mason knew what he was doing, and he rather regretted leaving it for so long.

In the central cabin, the juniors were talking excitedly.

"What's the idea of this?" demanded Handforth indignantly. "We're going back! Who said we were making for London, and then home by way of the coast?"

"That's what we all understood," said Church. "But we're going back all right; there's no doubt about that."



The Suffolk Queen, which only a few short hours before had been a proud and airworthy craft, now lay a broken and pitiable wreck. Sooner or later it would disappear into the sea and then the end would come swiftly for us.

"I think I know why," I put in. "Didn't you notice those black clouds ahead, before we turned? I dare say the captain was not very favourably impressed by their appearance, and he thought it better to get home without any delay."

"How rotten!" said Pitt. "Our trip is spoilt, then!"

"What a shame!"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "What's the good of an airship if it can't weather a storm? And what kind of a storm would it be, anyhow? Just a little bit of a squall, perhaps, with a cloud or two. I thought Captain Mason had more pluck. He must be dotty to turn back because of a little bank of black clouds!"

"He knows more than you do, Handy," I said. "It's not right to criticise the skipper. He's got our safety to think about, and he's not taking any risks."

The sudden change in the weather conditions was causing great anxiety in the control cabin. There had been no indication that storms were about. When the airship had started off, the atmosphere had been clean, clear, the glass high, and there was no wind; but now, with remarkable rapidity, a complete change had come about.

Captain Mason was called upon to exercise all his skill in controlling the giant ship. Wind had come—a curious, puffy wind, which was far more trouble than a steady breeze. It caught the airship unexpectedly at short intervals, and the steersman was called upon to exercise all his skill.

But at length Stowmarket came into sight, with the aerodrome just beyond.

Mason had already wirelessly to have all hands ready, and when the airship was over the aerodrome it was seen that scores of men were waiting, all prepared to seize the anchor ropes when they came within reach.

The journey back had not taken long—less than twenty minutes, in fact. But now a complete change had come over the sky. Black clouds were overhead, and rain was falling, hissing down in blinding sheets. Peals of thunder rolled out now and again, and those on the ground were filled with anxiety. The airship was making a landing in the thick of a violent thunderstorm. Nothing of this nature had been anticipated.

But, fortunately, there was no wind

yet—there was no strong wind, that is; only an occasional puff. But Captain Mason knew very well that this state of affairs would not last for long. The wind would arrive soon, and it would come unexpectedly—it would sweep down like something solid.

Lower and lower came the airship, and Captain Mason was called upon to use all his skill and cunning. With rare cleverness, the airship was manoeuvred into position, and then brought lower and lower. At last the numerous trailing ropes were seized by the ground party, and then, held firmly, the Suffolk Queen was brought lower and lower, nearer to the ground. Everything was going well, and then, in a flash, came the disaster.

The airship was in exact position, her nose facing the great opening of the shed. She was now almost on the ground, but Captain Mason did not intend to waste valuable time by unloading his passengers; they could alight after the airship was safely under cover. It is always a ticklish business getting a huge airship into its shed, and particularly perilous when there is wind about. And not a moment was to be lost.

The rain still pelted down, and the thunder crashed, but the air was calm.

"Oh, we shall do it all right," said Handforth. "What a rotten shame! We're diddled completely—dished out of our trip to London!"

"Beastly luck!" said De Valerio, with a grunt.

"Still, you must admit it's the only thing that could be done; we couldn't very well go through this storm!"

"You needn't look worried," I put in. "We haven't lost the chance; the trip will probably be made to-morrow."

Yard by yard the airship was dragged nearer and nearer to the shed. Captain Mason, in the control cabin, did not look quite so worried now. He brought the airship to the ground with great skill, and within a few minutes she would be safely in her shed, independent of all storms and winds.

"By Jove!" said Mason. "I don't mind admitting that I was anxious not long ago, but I think it's all serene——"

As he was speaking the squall came.

Those on the ground noticed it first. Where they were standing all was calm, but some distance away the trees bent

before it, their branches lashing about wildly. Then, like something solid, the squall struck the airship. The result was appalling.

The men held on to the ropes for dear life, for they knew what was going to happen. In spite of the great number of human anchors, the nose of the airship was lifted as though by some giant hand. It rose in the air staggeringly, lifting dozens of men with it. Then it descended again—not gently, but with considerable force.

Crash!

She struck the ground heavily. Nelson Lee, Dorrie, Captain Mason, and the others were flung to the floor. The metal girders snapped apart like pistol shots. One wall crumpled up; the floor buckled alarmingly. Fortunately, nobody was hurt.

"Good heavens!" gasped Mason hoarsely.

He could do nothing. The telegraphs were put out of action, and the car was a wreck; and there was no time to do anything, in any case. The airship was swaying about drunkenly. The men from the rear cars were swarming to the ground, slithering down ropes—some even jumped. They were filled with alarm, for they realised that disaster had now come, and that further disaster was near at hand.

Within half a minute not a soul was left in the rear cars. All the men succeeded in getting safely to the ground. And it was singularly fortunate that they did so, otherwise they would all have been killed. For, as the last man touched the ground, the wind increased, the squall howled over the ground, lifted up the rear of the airship, and reared it on high. The giant gasbag was completely out of control now.

It really seemed as though the airship had made up its mind to stand on its nose; but, at the critical moment, the wind changed its tactics. Down came the rear of the airship—down, with terrific force.

Crash—crash!

She struck the ground with so much force that the whole vessel shivered from stem to stern. Girders and bolts groaned aloud in anguish, and the two rear cars were wrecked beyond hope. They were smashed to atoms—shattered to matchwood and scrapiron.

Fortunately, the central car was absolutely untouched. It was only the nose

and the rear which had suffered, and the juniors in the saloon were safe; but, at the same time, they were considerably alarmed. For they know what had happened, and they feared that it would be their turn next, and they knew well enough that there would be no hope for them.

They clung to anything. As for myself, I said nothing. I stared out of the window, clutching at a brass rail. I instinctively knew that something worse was to happen, but I did not guess what that something was to be!

By a miracle of luck nobody had been killed by this disaster. One or two men were hurt, certainly, but not seriously. And the crowd on the ground was doing its utmost to hold the airship in position. They were heaving at the ropes. Every hand was called upon to assist. Crowds of people who had come to look on were urged to help. They did so willingly—eagerly.

But, in spite of all this, the wind triumphed.

There came a sudden overpowering squall. It swept along the ground, and underneath the airship, lifting it as though it were a feather. She rose, nose first, shivering and fluttering like a piece of paper. To those on the ground it was an awe-inspiring spectacle to see that gigantic envelope lifted up as though it weighed only an ounce or two. The ropes were torn from the hands of the men on the ground. The airship swept along, missing the roof of the shed by only a foot or two. Then, completely free—for it had been impossible to hold her—she rose, driven before the wind, her great, rigid body in almost a vertical position.

Up she swept, carried on the bosom of the wind, higher and higher, with the crowd below looking on horror-struck. Then, in a moment, the airship was swallowed up in the clouds; she vanished completely—helpless and at the mercy of the wind!

CHAPTER IV.

ADRIFT IN MID-AIR.

"S TILL alive!"
 "Thank goodness!"
 "Oh, my only hat! What an adventure!"
 "Begad!" exclaimed Sir Montie Triggell-West. "I thought we were all

goin' to be killed, dear old boys—I did, really! Ain't it frightful? Ain't it truly shockin'?"

"And there's no telling what'll happen, even now!" said Tommy Watson gloomily. "We shall probably come to the ground before long, and all be dashed to bits!"

"That sounds awfully cheerful!" remarked Reginald Pitt. "It's no good talking like that, Watson. Don't make the worst of things—they're bad enough already, goodness knows! We ought to be jolly thankful that we're still whole, and that nobody has come to any harm!"

"Rather!" I said quietly. "And all we can do now is to hang tight, and hope for the best."

As a matter of fact, I was not very cheerful. Only a few minutes had elapsed since the great airship had been dragged out of the hands of the ground party. And now we were among the clouds, drifting along helplessly—drifting with the wind. Nothing could be seen through the windows of the saloon, for we were in the thick of the clouds, and it appeared as though we were traveling through a dense fog.

But we were moving rapidly—I could tell that. The silence was strange, after the monotonous purr of the motor. Nothing could be heard except the creaking of the girders as they were strained by the wind and by the motion of the airship.

The motion was a very queer one. Not for one moment were we upright. The floor of the saloon kept heaving, from side to side and from end to end. Sometimes we were tilting upwards at an alarming angle, then, the next moment, we would be shifted completely about, and the whole cabin would roll drunkenly.

The airship, in fact, was being tossed about in the clouds, just as the wind chases. For there was no control now; we could tell that easily enough.

We knew that the two rear cars were smashed to atoms; we had seen that with our own eyes. And the forward car was probably in a similar condition. And, inwardly, I was wildly anxious, although I did my utmost not to show this.

How had Nelson Lee fared? He had been in the forward cabin. I knew that, and I was anxious about him. Had he been killed, or maimed, when the air-

ship dashed its nose to the ground? And what about Lord Dorrimore? How had he fared?

We knew nothing; we were absolutely helpless. In fact, I had never before felt quite so helpless in all my life. All we could do was to remain there, and wait for the next thing to happen. And, meanwhile, the airship continued her blind course through the clouds.

Forward, in the control cabin, Captain Mason was looking pale and shaken, but he was quite calm. Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were calm, too. There was no sense in getting excited or flurried; in an emergency of this kind it was necessary to keep one's wits well on the alert. There were two other officers in the cabin, but they were in a similar plight to the skipper; they could do nothing.

All the controls were out of action; even the vertical rudders would not answer to the helm. The elevator controls were useless; this had easily been ascertained at the first. The double crash had put the entire mechanism out of action, and now the airship was sailing along at the mercy of the winds—in exactly the same manner as an ordinary spherical balloon.

"Gentlemen, this is a terrible position, and there's no sense in mincing matters," said Captain Mason grimly. "Thank Heaven we are safe so far—and thank Heaven those boys have come to no harm. But how long will it last? What shall we do when the critical moment arrives? Sooner or later we shall come to earth, although goodness knows when that will be! But, when we do come down, there will undoubtedly be a crash, for we shall be unable to lift a finger to help ourselves."

"Well, there is no sense in worrying, Mason," said Nelson Lee quietly. "We must hope for the best. Possibly the storm will drive itself out before long, and we shall come into clear, still air; then we shall descend, and trust to luck. If the air is quite calm, it is likely that we shall be able to effect a good landing. I see no reason for pessimism."

Lord Dorrimore nodded.

"Same here," he remarked. "Hang it all, we're lucky to have got out of the mess so clearly. I thought we were all going to Kingdom-come, by gad! Do you know how far we are up, captain?"

"Well, according to the instruments, we are about three thousand feet, and rising higher every minute," said Captain Mason. "But I do not know whether the instruments are accurate, after the battering they have received. In any case, we are high above the clouds, and travelling at quite a high speed—probably eighty miles an hour. The wind up here is very strong. If we could only get one of the engines going, it would be better; we might be able to check the drift somewhat. I intend to make an examination without any loss of time."

The skipper walked to the rear of the control cabin, and passed through a narrow doorway into the engine-room, for, at the rear of this car, one of the five hundred horsepower engines was installed. It did not take long to ascertain that the engine was completely out of control.

When the car had struck the ground, the huge propeller had been shattered to atoms. And, not only this, but the shaft had been put out of the true. To run the engine was an impossibility.

The motor itself was perfect—unharmful in any way; and it was extremely galling to know that nothing could be done. The two engineers who were within the cabin shook their heads doubtfully, and explained the situation. Even if there had been a spare propeller handy, there was always the difficulty of the bent shaft. And there was no propeller, either.

"Well, there's no sense in being idle," said Captain Mason briskly. "We've got to do the best we can under the circumstances. I propose going along to the rear, and seeing exactly what damage has been done. And there might be one or two injured men there who require attention."

Considering everything, Captain Mason was very calm; but, although he did not say anything, his worry was intense. He knew better than the others, perhaps, what this disaster was to lead to. Completely out of control, the airship was at the mercy of the winds, and would drift wherever the freaks of the weather happened to take it. Steering was gone, and there was no possible way of putting things right.

Both Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were amazed that the airship had not met with complete disaster at the out-

set. They had been fully expecting the giant dirigible to be dashed to fragments in front of the shed. And at that moment death had seemed very near; in fact, death had been near. It was only by a miracle that those on the airship had escaped.

Climbing up a little ladder, the captain led the way into the keel of the airship. This keel extended right along the vast length of the vessel, forming a complete passage-way, along which it was possible to walk.

The gangway, however, was not the kind of place for a person who was unsteady on his feet. One false step, perhaps, and one would go plunging off the gangway on to the fabric beneath. This fabric was not made for bearing the weight of a human being; and, in all probability, the luckless one would burst right through, and go dashing down to the earth, thousands of feet below.

It was necessary, therefore, to walk with extreme caution.

Up here, too, built inside the giant envelope, was the mess-room for the crew, and sleeping quarters. At the moment they were deserted, for everybody had been on duty.

And Captain Mason and Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore walked along the keel until they came opposite a little manhole; another iron ladder led downwards. Captain Mason paused.

"This leads down into the central saloon," he said. "We needn't disturb the boys now—they are quite all right. My chief anxiety concerns the rear cars. I want to see whether they are smashed beyond hope."

They continued their way along the keel, exercising great caution, for every now and again the airship would lurch and shoot upwards, sway sideways, and perform all manner of other unexpected movements.

But at last the little party reached another iron ladder—the third one. At least, these ladders appeared to be made of iron; they were probably composed of a much lighter metal.

Captain Mason made the investigation, and he was soon back.

"No good at all!" he announced, shaking his head. "Both the cars are wrecked beyond hope. They are simply matchwood, and the rudders and the steering gear are also smashed about. The elevators are completely jammed.

and now I can understand why the controls are useless. Gentlemen, we are in a pretty tight pickle—and that's putting it mildly."

"Do you know if anybody still remains in either of these cars?" asked Nelson Lee.

"No; I fancy not," said Mason. "The crew jumped to safety while they had the chance. And I do not blame them; they could see what was coming. Not only the engines in the rear power cars are out of action, but the cars themselves are smashed to smithereens. I am afraid we can do nothing. We are more helpless than one of those ridiculous sausage balloons!"

Lord Dorrimore shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, the only thing we can do is to hope for the best, as I said a little while ago," he remarked. "There's no sense in cryin' over spilt milk, or anticipatin' trouble. We shall probably find quite enough before long. At the moment I am hungry, and I vote we rake up some grub!"

Dorrie was not hungry at all, but it was his way to be cheerful and light-hearted, even when the prospects were black. And while Captain Mason returned to the control car, Nelson Lee and Dorrie passed down into the big saloon.

Nelson Lee was the first to enter, and as he came in I ran forward, breathing hard with relief.

"Oh, gov'nor!" I shouted. "I'm awfully pleased to see you—and Dorrie, too! I didn't know what had happened to you!"

"It's all right, Nipper; you needn't be alarmed," said Nelson Lee. "Fortunately, Dorrie and myself are not even scratched, although I will confess we had a very narrow escape. Our car was smashed to the ground, and I really cannot understand how it is that we came out unharmed."

"Oh, it takes more than a puff of wind to kill us!" put in Lord Dorrimore calmly.

"But do you think we shall escape, sir?" asked Church eagerly.

"Do you think we shall get out of this hole?"

"Shall we be able to land somewhere?"

"How long will it be before we come down?"

"Where shall we land, sir?"

Nelson Lee raised his hand.

"Boys—boys!" he protested. "Really, I cannot answer all these questions at once; I cannot even answer them separately. We do not know when we shall come down, or where we shall alight. It is a matter which rests with Providence. The airship is helpless—powerless to defeat the wind. All the engines are out of action, and the elevators and the rudders are jammed."

"Oh, my only hat!"

"Great pip!"

"Begad!"

"I thought something like that had happened, sir," I said quietly. "We're in a pretty cheerful position, by the look of things!"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"They might have been worse, my boy; but I will admit that our present prospects are not exceedingly encouraging," he said. "There is no sense in mincing matters, and I might as well tell you the exact truth."

"It's the best way, sir," said Bob Christine.

"Well, boys, the position is quite simple, and I can put it to you in a few words," said Nelson Lee. "By a miracle, it seems, we were saved from destruction when the airship got out of hand at the aerodrome. But, although no lives were lost, the damage to the ship was considerable."

"Are we completely wrecked, sir?" asked Talmadge.

"Well, Talmadge, the fact that we are now afloat proves that we are not a total wreck," replied Nelson Lee.

"But the rear power cars, with their enormous engines, are shattered beyond repair. The forward power car is equally helpless, since the propeller of the engine is smashed, and it is impossible to run the motor. The rudders are jammed, and the elevators in a similar plight. In short, we are completely at the mercy of the winds; we are adrift in mid-air, and must go where the winds take us."

"Oh, my only hat!"

"What an adventure!"

"Those other chaps knew a bit, didn't they?" asked Yorke ruefully.

"Lucky bounders!"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "Where does the luck come in, you ass? They're missing everything; they aren't enjoying this trip at all!"

"Enjoying it!" repeated De Valerio.

"Dash it all, it can't be called exactly enjoyable, by what I can see!"

"We shall get out of it all right," said Handforth. "We shall have a glorious trip, and come quietly to earth somewhere in Essex, I suppose, after we've been going for an hour or two."

Nelson Lee smiled rather grimly.

"I'm afraid your calculations are sadly at fault, Handforth," he said. "We have already travelled a great many miles—and not in the direction of Essex. I do not wish to unnecessarily alarm you, but it is believed by Captain Mason that we are heading towards the sea!"

"Great Scott!"

"The sea!"

"Oh!"

There was genuine dismay in the tones of the boys. The airship was making for the sea! What would be the result if the vessel came down in the ocean? The fellows did not care to think of the idea.

But it was an idea that had to be thought of and fully considered by Captain Mason. He had the safety of his passengers to think about, and a great responsibility rested on his shoulders.

When the trip had started it had been merely a pleasure cruise, and no thought of danger had entered into anybody's head. But now the whole aspect of things had changed, and Captain Mason keenly felt his responsibility.

Sooner or later the airship would descend. If it happened to come down in the sea, there would apparently be very little hope, for the water was icily cold, and there were a good many lives to be thought of. True, there were a goodly number of lifebelts on board—special rubber suits which could be inflated, and all that kind of apparatus. But, at the same time, the prospect of a fall into the sea did not commend itself to the skipper at all. If at all possible he would bring the airship down on the land.

But, after all, what could Captain Mason do?

With the airship unsteerable, and totally out of control, he could do no more than Handforth himself. All that was possible was to watch—and wait. And, if any skill could be employed, it would have to come to the fore at the critical moment. At the present minute Captain Mason was merely a passenger.

This, of course, is in reference to steering the ship—controlling it, etc. From another aspect, Captain Mason was able to do certain things. By careful manipulation of the ballast controls, which were still in operation, he was able to raise the airship considerably.

And, before long, the Suffolk Queen was rising higher and higher—until, at length, she was drifting with the wind at a height of fully eight thousand feet. She had no particular load, and was thus able to rise to this altitude.

And now she was quite clear of the clouds, and the sun was shining gloriously. But, looking down, those on board were not permitted to see the earth—or the sea. For the clouds lay thick and solid, like mountains of snow in the sunlight.

"My hat! What a grand sight!" I exclaimed, as I gazed down. "I don't think I've ever seen such glorious cloud formations—and I've been up to a decent height in an aeroplane on a good few occasions!"

"But we can't see the ground—that's the worst of it," said Handforth. "And it's getting colder, too—frightfully cold, in fact."

"That's only to be expected, at a great height," I said. "But, so far, we're safe. I can't make out whether we're moving rapidly, or whether the clouds are. It's difficult to tell when there are no engines going."

As a matter of fact, the Suffolk Queen was drifting swiftly along, stern foremost. A few minutes later she had veered round, and was travelling broadside on. Then her nose would come to the front. And thus she would continue twisting, turning and swaying slightly in the wind. And, all the time, she drifted—drifted rapidly.

For she was now in a completely different current of air—and, what was more, a strong wind was blowing—a powerful breeze which took the airship along serenely and sodately. The danger, at all events, was over for the time being. There was no fear of us being dashed to pieces at this height.

"We're not so badly off, you know," said Handforth, turning away from the window. "In an aeroplane it's different. If something goes wrong it's all up—the machine comes down with a slap, and that's the end! But we're all right—this airship is lighter than air, and it

can keep on floating for days. Weeks, perhaps—you never know."

"I'm not so sure about that, Handy," I said. "There's plenty of ballast on board, I darosay, and if the gas bags happen to lose buoyancy, that can be remedied by dropping some of the ballast. And so we can maintain a good height all the time—and the captain will be able to choose his landing ground."

Fatty Little glared.

"And what's going to happen to us?" he demanded warmly.

"Why, we shall have to remain here—in this cabin."

"And starve, I suppose?" roared Fatty.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, it's no laughing matter," said the fat boy. "You don't think of these things—but I do. There's no more horrible death than starvation! It's the most ghastly, blood-curdling death anybody could think of!"

"Well, we sha'n't starve, Fatty," I said. "If that was the only danger there wouldn't be any need to worry. Even if we have to remain in the air for a week, there'll be no question of starvation."

Fatty Little nearly exploded.

"A week!" he howled. "But there's not enough food on board to last us till to-morrow! This was only to be a trip of a few hours, and practically no grub was provided—a few sandwiches and some cakes—that's all. They'll be gone in no time—and then what shall we do to-morrow?"

"Go without, my son."

"Go without!" roared Fatty. "And you say that we could last a week without starving! You must be dotty! Great flying bloaters! I shall be dead by to-morrow—that'll be the result."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Anything's better than starvation," went on the fat junior. "Why, I'd rather jump out of the airship now—and get it over quickly! That would be better than a lingering, ghastly death by lack of food!"

"Well, perhaps it would be just as well," said Lawrence thoughtfully. "That's not at all a bad suggestion, Fatty. You'd prefer it, and it would certainly be better for us—because as soon as you'd jumped overboard, the airship would rise about ten thousand feet. After being relieved of such a weight

"You—you funny, ass!" said Fatty, glaring. "Great currant buns! What a prospect! And I'm starving already!"

And the fat junior gazed sadly out of the window down upon the hills and valleys of snow-white clouds.

What lay beneath? Where were we?

CHAPTER V.

AT THE MERCY OF THE WIND.

"LOOK!—LOOK!"

"A break in the clouds!" Fully three hours had passed, and during all this time the airship had drifted on, quietly, smoothly, and now on a more even keel. The time, to be exact, was just eleven-thirty.

Four and a half hours had elapsed since we had entered the car. It seemed like four and a half days to us. Many of the fellows were convinced that their watches were wrong, and that it must be evening; but the events had been happening so swiftly that much had been crowded into a little time.

And now two or three of the juniors, who were gazing out of the windows, set up an outcry. The clear air was strangely transparent at the great height at which the airship was drifting, and, away in the distance, a big break in the clouds could be distinctly seen.

Less than five minutes later the snowy white banks of vapour far beneath us vanished, and we were gazing down upon a green and charming looking countryside. Loud shouts of enthusiasm went up.

"Oh, thank goodness!"

"We're not over the sea, after all!"

"Still in good old England!"

"Looks like Essex a bit," said Handforth, gazing down. "There you are—I told you I was right. I know we should drift right over Essex."

"Yes, but we can't come down here," put in Pitt. "The wind's too strong, and Captain Mason would never risk it. Before he descends he'll wait for a dead calm, even if he has to wait until we get to China!"

I laughed.

"I hardly think that, old son," I said. "If here is any prospect of us drifting over the sea, Captain Mason will probably descend at once, and

chance it. Otherwise he'll allow us to drift on."

"Yes; he's got a good number of passengers to think about," said Church. "Our lives are in his hands, and he mustn't take any unnecessary risks. Look down there—I can see a town. I wonder if it's Brentwood, or Chelmsford?"

"It's difficult to tell at this height," I replied.

It was, indeed. We could not see that the Suffolk Queen was at a tremendous height, for the earth looked an enormous distance away—green and brown, with red-tiled houses here and there, looking like specks. With the naked eye, it was impossible to distinguish any movement.

The whole countryside was bathed in sunlight, and, while we were gazing down, Lord Dorrimore appeared—he had been in the forward car with Nelson Leo and the skipper. He smiled cheerfully.

"Well, boys, how do you like the look of Holland?" he inquired.

"Holland, sir?" grinned Pitt.

"Exactly."

"You're joking, ain't you, sir?" said Handforth. "We're over Essex——"

"Well, it's no good asking me, because I'm properly puzzled," confessed Dorrie. "But both Lee an' Mason declare that we drifted over the North Sea while we were over that cloud bank. And the country below is Holland!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Holland!"

"But how can the captain be sure?" asked Tommy Watson.

"Well, he ought to know," replied Dorrie. "He says that he's been over the North Sea an' over Holland dozens of times on these airships—an' he recognised the country at once. According to the skipper, we shall soon be over a place called Tilburg—that's not far from the Belgian border."

"Well, I'm jiggered!"

"Over Holland, and drifting towards Belgium!" ejaculated Pitt. "Why, at this rate we shall be over France or Switzerland before the evening!"

Lord Dorrimore nodded.

"It's quite possible," he admitted calmly. "There's no tellin', you know. It's a frightful mess we're in, my sons, but we've got to make the best of it.

There's certainly no sense in kicking up the dust."

"But do you think we shall come down all right, sir?"

"That's a question I shouldn't like to answer," said Dorrie. "It all depends upon the nature of the spot where we land, an' how much wind is blowin' at the time. Even a gentle breeze would do us a great deal of damage."

"Yes, I can quite understand that," I said. "For example, supposing Captain Mason brought the airship down to the ground, it would still be drifting along at ten or twenty miles an hour. There would be nobody there to grab the landing ropes, and we should probably bump with an awful smack, crash the cars to bits, and then they would be dragged along."

"Exactly," said Dorrie. "That's what Mason says."

"But wouldn't it be better to take a chance and land at once, sir?" asked Talmadge.

"Mason doesn't think so," replied his lordship. "According to his observations, there's a heavy wind blowing at a lower altitude—on the ground, in fact. They've been squintin' through telescopes, an' all the rest of it, an' they know. Mason says it would be sheer destruction to land now."

All the juniors were now excited. They had completely got over their original scare. And at the beginning they had been expecting disaster almost at any minute. But as the airship had drifted on, hour after hour, perfectly serene and safe, the juniors had begun to feel a sense of security.

But the knowledge that they were now over Holland interested and excited them. There was no telling when the adventure would come to an end.

Of course, all sorts of ideas were thought of by Nelson Leo and Captain Mason. The wireless was useless, for the aerials had been wrecked during the smash; but Mason thought it possible that signals could be exchanged with people on the ground. If the air had only been calm Mason would have descended, and would have trusted to Providence that a large crowd would collect in order to assist in the landing.

But, with the wind blowing at its present rate, an attempt to land would be madness. And matters were not improved by the knowledge that the glass

was still falling, and that some rough weather was apparently in store.

The afternoon dragged by slowly, and the adventurers in the airship were only permitted now and again to see the earth. For other cloud banks were constantly intervening, and the weather generally was becoming worse.

Great interest was occasioned when a large city was sighted far below in the distance ahead. The juniors could not possibly imagine where they were; but Captain Mason identified the place.

"By gad!" exclaimed the skipper. "We've travelled a good way—and it proves that the wind up here is fairly strong. Unless I'm very much mistaken, that town below is Dusseldorf, on the Rhine!"

"Well, I'm hanged!" said Dorrie. "We're over Germany, then?"

"Evidently," said Nelson Lee. "But how do you know this, Mason?"

"During the war I took part in two or three air raids on Dusseldorf and Cologne," replied Mason. "So this isn't the first time I've seen the place from the air. Yes, it's Dusseldorf right enough!"

The juniors, when they heard the news, were more animated and excited than ever. The airship was travelling swiftly with the wind, and towards evening Frankfort was seen away in the distance—at least, it was supposed to be Frankfort. The country was quite charming to look upon, and, if everything had been all right, the journey would have been of singular interest. According to Mason's calculations, and the drift of the wind, the Suffolk Queen was going straight in the direction of Bavaria and Austria, and would ultimately be somewhere near Vienna in a good many hours' time.

But, of course, it was extremely probable that the wind would change at any moment, and send the helpless craft on a new course. But those on board were not permitted to see much, for the clouds were now general, and the earth was blotted out. The wind was sighing and whistling, and the great craft swung along idly.

And then the evening came, bringing darkness later.

This was the most trying time of all. The darkness was intense, and nothing could be done. It was only possible to trust to Providence. Fortunately, however, many of the instruments were un-

harmed, and it was possible for the navigator—a cheerful young fellow, named Morgan—to calculate the height of the airship hourly.

And never during the course of the night was the vessel allowed to descend below the eight thousand foot level. Captain Mason did not overlook the possibility that the Suffolk Queen might be carried towards the Alps—and the higher the vessel rose the better. But, although the skipper attempted to raise the airship to ten thousand feet, he failed, and he was convinced that she was losing buoyancy.

As for the juniors, they slept. In spite of the excitement and the uncertainty of the situation, they slept like tops. Even Fatty Little, in spite of his hunger, dropped off into a sound slumber.

Nelson Lee had quietly told the fellows to remain calm, and to sleep as much as possible. If any danger threatened, or if there was a possibility of escape, they would be at once awakened.

And so the night passed.

Neither Nelson Lee nor Captain Mason slept a wink. The skipper was on duty the whole time, and Lee kept him company. Lord Dorrinoro dozed off once or twice, but only for a minute or two at a time.

"I'm rather optimistic," said Mason, towards morning. "We've come through safely, so far, Mr. Lee, and I've got an idea that we shall manage to end up without losing any lives—although, of course, there is only a frail prospect of saving the airship. What an infernal shame!"

"Well, my dear fellow, you need not blame yourself," said Lee. "You did your utmost, and no man can do more than that. I am afraid there are many anxious people in England to-night."

"Yes, the relatives of our youthful passengers," said the captain, nodding. "It must be a terrible time for them, Mr. Lee. They have probably received reports that the airship has been seen over various parts of Holland and Germany, and that at nightfall it was drifting towards Austria. This news is bound to have been telegraphed to England—not that it will give the good people much comfort."

"It will probably fill them with greater anxiety," said Nelson Lee gravely. "For they will assume that disaster is certain, and they will be

waiting for the dreadful news, which I sincerely trust will never reach them. For I am hoping that we shall be able to effect a good landing. It doesn't particularly matter where, so long as we get down without any loss of life."

Captain Mason nodded.

"I've done everything possible," he said slowly. "I've been thinking that I ought to have made an attempt to land while we were over the populous districts of Holland or Germany. But, on consideration, I know that I have done right. It would have meant disaster if I had carried out the project."

Dawn came at last—grey and chill; and, below, strange country could be seen. It was totally different to the green fields and towns and villages of Holland and Germany. And the airship was now much lower, being, in fact, only six thousand feet high.

There were many hills on every hand, some of them rising to a greater height than the airship itself; but, fortunately, the great craft was not drifting in this direction.

Both Nelson Lee and Captain Mason came to the conclusion that the airship was somewhere in Austria-Hungary, over a particularly wild and desolate tract of land. It was impossible to be certain as to the vessel's exact whereabouts.

In the central saloon, all the fellows were awake, and keenly interested. Fatty Little, of course, was nearly on the point of death. Food was scarce—only a single sandwich being allowed as the ration.

We were all hungry, but these sandwiches represented the last morsel of food on board, and it was only right that they should be shared out equally. But they only increased our hunger the more—they gave us a greater appetite.

The hours passed slowly—and blankly. For clouds were again obscuring our view; we could see nothing, and had not the slightest idea as to where we were going, or what would be the result of our trip.

And then at last we saw the sea!

The airship, in fact, was drifting right over it, and nothing could be done to avert this. For the ground, where we could see it, was wild and rugged, offering no safe landing spot.

It was easy to understand why we had not seen the sea before, for during

the greater part of our journey we had travelled overland, the North Sea having been crossed above the clouds. We then passed over Holland into Germany, passing right across South Germany, and thus into Austria. After that we were somewhat uncertain; but we knew that the sea was below us now, although what sea this was remained a mystery. Nelson Lee was of the opinion that we were over the Adriatic, and not a great distance from the coast of Italy.

Land was within sight—a dull smudge on the horizon. But, beneath us, and all around, lay the sea—deep blue, and devoid of any shipping in the immediate vicinity. Afar off, however, could be seen one or two tiny specks. Those on board the ships doubtless saw the helpless aircraft, but they were too far distant to be of any assistance.

I had lost count of the time. I only knew that the sun was shining brilliantly, and that the atmosphere was much warmer. And the airship was losing height with every minute that passed. She was gradually sinking lower, and now there was no land visible!

Was it destined that we should fall into the sea?

CHAPTER VI.

THE DESERTED SCHOONER.

CAPTAIN MASON looked rather grim.

"Yes there's no doubt of it, we're sinking—and sinking rapidly, too," he said. "We must be losing a lot of gas."

The navigation officer nodded.

"Seems like it, sir," he said. "Anyway, we can't do anything now. Do you think we shall be able to drift until we come upon some land again?"

"I very much doubt it," replied the captain. "It seems that we are destined to fall into the sea—after travelling this tremendous distance. It's an infernal shame—but we can't help it. The matter is beyond our control."

The airship was now only about one thousand feet high, and all Captain Mason's efforts to raise her were in vain. He did everything in his power—but, instead of the vessel rising, she dropped—slowly and certainly. The airship was getting nearer and nearer to

the ocean—in fact, the sea now only looked a short distance below, with no ships in sight. And the Suffolk Queen was drifting fairly rapidly before a brisk breeze.

Overhead the sun was shining, and the sea below looked gloriously blue and inviting. The captain was relieved in one way—for he knew that there would be no big crash when the end came. In all probability the airship would settle down into the water, and would remain afloat for quite a long time. That, indeed, was the only hope.

Investigations were made at once. The skipper sent two of the officers to make an examination of the various gasbags. And, before long, the report was made.

And it was by no means heartening.

For two of the gas containers had developed serious leaks, and the gas was escaping rapidly. In consequence, the airship was losing buoyancy with every minute that passed, and, naturally, she was getting lower and lower.

“Well, there’s only one thing that we can do,” said Mason briskly. “We shall have to cut away a lot of the stuff that we don’t want—we’ll heave everything overboard. That will give us a certain amount of time, at all events. If we can only keep in the air for a few hours longer, I have no doubt that we shall drift ashore somewhere—and then we shall have to risk a forced landing.”

“That’s about all we can do, sir,” said Mr. Morgan.

And Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore agreed. They were rather pleased that the weather was now sunny and calm. There was every prospect of making a good landing once the land was reached. But, at the present moment, the great airship was over the sea, and no land of any kind was within sight. However, the fickle wind-sprite took matters in hand once more, and left Captain Mason helpless. For, quite suddenly, a miniature squall arose.

It was unexpected and unlooked for. The wind came as though from nowhere, and it beat the airship downwards. Almost before those on board were aware of it, the great vessel was a hundred feet or so above the water, and getting lower every moment. And the wind was carrying her along swiftly. She was not flying on a level keel, but with her nose high in the air.

Captain Mason rapped out some orders rapidly. The only thing was to cut away some heavy stuff without loss of time. In addition, all manner of articles were thrown overboard. But there was no time.

While these operations were being performed, the wind carried the airship down in a sudden swoop. Her rear touched the water, causing a tremendous splashing. The rudders and elevators were torn about like paper. And, at the same time, the massive girders of the ship itself were severely strained. They buckled and twisted—and, in almost less time than it takes to tell, the rear of the airship crumbled up, water-logged and wrecked.

And yet it all happened so calmly—so easily. There was no gale—no violent storm. And the sea itself was smooth, with only a long rolling swell.

But to save the vessel now was impossible.

Her stern was in the water, with the rudders and elevators tangled up and wrecked. But she was still fairly buoyant, and she hung there, with her nose still some distance from the sea. But to get her into the air again was an impossibility. Within a very short time she would settle down—and the central cabin and the forward cars would be submerged.

It was necessary to act quickly.

“Well, there is only one thing to be done,” said Captain Mason briskly. “We must all go up through the ship, on to the gun platform at the top. It isn’t a gun platform now, of course; but the platform itself is still there. And it is easily reached by means of a ladder, which passes straight up through the ship itself. At all events, we shall be safe there for a time—long after the cars have become submerged.”

“Yes, we must lose no time,” said Nelson Lee grimly. “I will look after the boys.”

And without more ado he hurried up into the keel, and passed along the passageway until he arrived at the central saloon. Truth to tell, Nelson Lee was very anxious and worried.

The worst had happened!

The Suffolk Queen was in the sea—and, although she would last a certain amount of time—although she would keep afloat for many hours probably—there was no guarantee that rescue would

come. The slightest sign of rough weather would see the end of everything. But at any moment the saloon and the control cabin might be plunged into the water and submerged. And the chief need of the moment was to get everybody above—on the top of the envelope.

In the saloon cabin the juniors knew what had happened, and they were filled with alarm and excitement. The airship was already in the water, and might become a total wreck at any moment.

"My hat! This is getting hot!" said Pitt. "We're partially wrecked already, and goodness only knows when we shall become——"

"The best thing we can do is to jump out;" put in one of the other juniors huskily. "It's no good messing about like this—we shall all be trapped in here, if this cabin is thrown under water!"

"Don't be an ass!" I put in sharply. "There'll be no jumping out! We shall probably receive instructions soon——"

Even as I was speaking, Nelson Lee appeared, and he quickly told us what we were to do. In calm, cool tones he gave us full instructions.

"And, remember, boys, that there is no need to get alarmed," he said. "I rely upon you not to get into a panic, and to behave yourselves properly. Now then, one at a time—you will all go up the ladder, and pass right through the ship to the platform at the top."

"Hurrah!"

"We shall be safe up there!"

"Good!"

It was a time of bustle and excitement—but there was no panic. One by one the juniors left the saloon, and passed up into the great keel of the giant airship. This was a new experience for them, for they had not been up there hitherto. And they did not pass right along the keel—but presently came to a ladder, where Mr. Morgan was standing on duty. The ladder stretched right up, through a kind of fabric shaft—to the very top of the airship.

Many people have an idea, I believe, that a big airship is completely filled with gas inside—but in this belief they are quite wrong. There are many gas envelopes, it is true—but they are separate. There is a space between, and there are all sorts of surprising things

in the huge outer envelope of a big rigid airship.

Even while we were climbing up, we felt the great aircraft lurching, and swaying dizzily. And, when we finally got to the top, and found ourselves in the warm sunlight, we discovered that the airship had already settled down.

The control cabin and the saloon were submerged—under water!

We had only just been in the nick of time.

And now we could see the full extent of the disaster.

The Suffolk Queen, which only a few short hours before had been a proud and airworthy craft, now lay a broken and pitiable wreck. Her back appeared to be broken, and in more than one place smashed girders were sticking out through the fabric. And the size of that great gas envelope was appalling.

Viewed from the top—from the position in which we were now situated—one got an idea of its true size. We seemed to be standing on an island—a great, heaving island, composed entirely of glittering, shimmering silver. And the wrecked airship swayed to and fro to the motion of the rollers. Little waves lapped against her sides. And we could see that as every moment passed, the great bulk of the airship sank lower and lower.

She was losing gas all the time—and she was becoming a dead weight. Sooner or later the great mass of wreckage would plunge into the sea—and then the end would come swiftly for us. But I did not like to think of this just now. So far we were safe—we were not even wet. Not a single splash of water had touched us.

And as we gazed about in every direction, we saw that the sea was calm and still, and the sunlight was glistening upon the blue water. But there was no ship in sight; no steamer—nothing.

"Well, boys, here we are, and all we can do now is to wait until we are rescued," said Captain Mason cheerily. "You mustn't be despondent, you know. We have come through safely so far, and there's every reason to hope that we shall be rescued."

"Do you think a ship will come along, sir?" asked one of the juniors.

"There is no reason why a ship should not come along," replied the skipper. "We shall probably remain afloat for

many hours yet—throughout the day, and, sooner or later, rescue must come.”

“Hurrah!”

“It’ll be all right,” said Handforth.

“We’re bound to be rescued soon.”

“Rather!”

“And we must be thousands of miles from England!” added Church. “My hat! Just think of it, and only yesterday morning we were in Suffolk!”

A groan came from Fatty Little.

“I sha’n’t last until the evening,” he said weakly. “Just think of it—no grub to-day, and only a couple of sandwiches last night! It’s starvation, and, before the evening, I shall die. I’m growing weaker and weaker!”

“It’ll jolly well do you good to starve for a day or two!” put in Pitt. “We’re all famished, if it comes to that, so there’s no need for you to shout, Fatty. By jings, I could do with a good square meal!”

“Same here!”

As a matter of fact, we were all ravenously hungry. But there was not a morsel of food to be had, and not very much fresh water, either, if it came to that. But there were more important things to think about just then.

Should we be rescued?

Or should we remain on that precarious floating island until its buoyancy gave out—until it plunged into the sea?

Hour after hour passed, and gradually, almost imperceptably, our chance of rescue grew smaller. It was sinking slowly, the sea encroaching over the surface foot by foot, and, by midday, the surface was only half what it had been earlier. Certainly by nightfall the end would have come.

Both Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were silent. They pretended to be cheerful, and Dorrie confessed that he was dying for a smoke; but, of course, he could not indulge in that now, standing on a gas envelope! But both Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were filled with anxiety—not for themselves, but for the sixteen juniors who had been brought on this trip.

And then at midday came a change.

For a ship was sighted, a fairly large sailing ship, which was away on the horizon. Captain Mason and his officers signalled—they did everything possible to attract attention—and, to our joy, we saw that the ship was coming in our direction. She was a schooner, with all her sails fully set, and she came along at a smart pace. At last she was in full view, only a mile or so away, and still she continued her course. But, strangely enough, there were no signals in answer to the signs given by Captain Mason. Not a motion came from the schooner, not a sign. The vessel still came onwards, with sails set, and without any indication of any living soul on board.

It was extraordinary, and we watched with interest and anxiety.

It seemed to us that the schooner was not keeping to a direct course, as though there were no hand to guide her. But, however, it seemed that Providence held the helm, for gradually the vessel came nearer and nearer to the wrecked airship.

And at last, to our joy, the schooner crashed headlong into the half-submerged Suffolk Queen, and there she remained locked, although quite unharmed.

We were safe!

We were not doomed to sink into the ocean, after all!

As we had anticipated, we found the schooner deserted, not a single living soul was on board. This was extraordinary enough, but other extraordinary things were to happen, too, before so very long. It was a ship of mystery that we found ourselves upon. But it was our haven of refuge, for we found food there, food and water, and everything for our comfort.

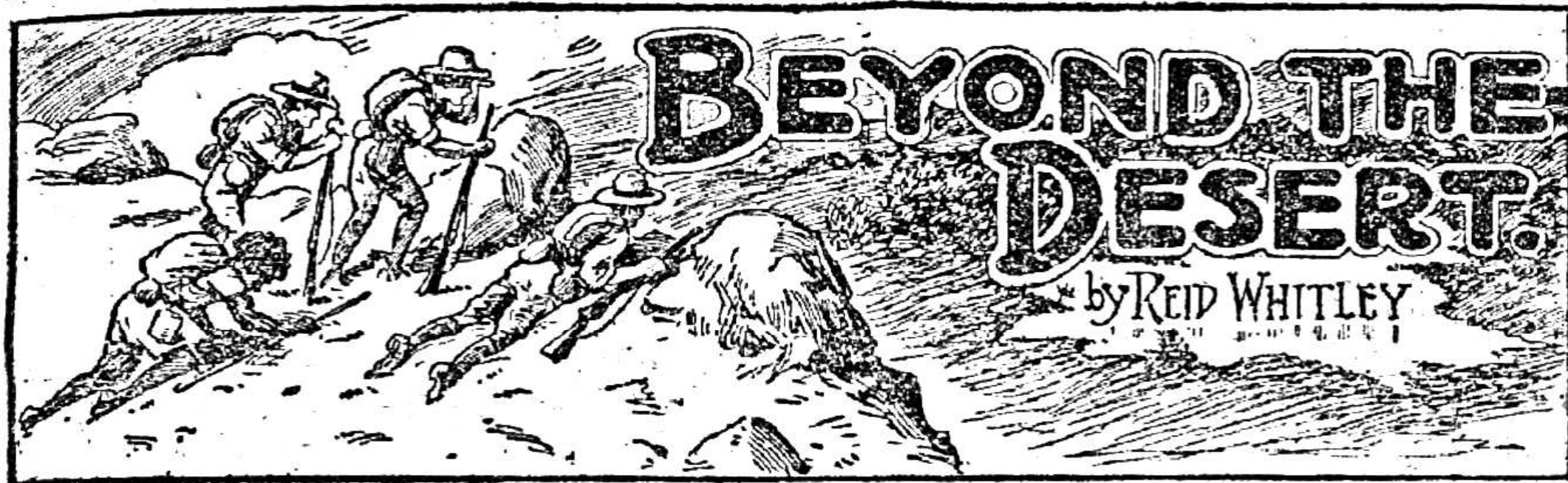
And, had we only known it, this was to be the starting point of our adventures—adventures that would have thrilled us through and through with excitement if we could have but known what they were to be!

THE END.

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(Now read on.)

The Dinosaur's Meal.

"We saw blood," put in Jack. "We feared it was yours."

"No; the Bheels handled me quite gently, though firmly. I was brought here and tied up as you found me. The Worgees had resolved to settle me, I think. I fancy they feared that with the coming of more strangers their reign would be at an end."

"Seems to me that would be no bad thing, anyhow," remarked Anson. "We are surely strong enough to deal with that tribe of fatties. But what are your plans, professor?"

"Firstly, to keep this old brute, Gom, a prisoner. Then to explore the valley and collect some specimens of the strange creatures and plants which are to be found nowhere else on earth. And, finally, to find a way out back to civilisation."

"And leave these poor little chaps to the mercy of these slobbering beasts?" cried Anson, with a glance of contempt at Gom, who, pretending to be asleep, yet watched his captors sharply through half-closed eyes.

"Short of massacring the Worgees, which we can hardly do in cold blood, I can't suggest anything for the moment," replied

Professor Maxwell. "However, we will discuss it. Meanwhile, let us put this place into shape for defence. There are poles over there in the corner with which one can close the doorway. Then let us get food, reserving our preserved supplies. The Bheels will have plenty of fish."

They found that the poles could be slipped into holes cut in the sides of the doorway, effectually barring entrance. They put all but one in place, leaving only a narrow gap for exit. Snaplus being quite content to remain, they left him on guard and went out on to the terrace.

Several Worgees, who had been sneaking round the door, bolted, but paying no heed to them, the professor strode to the big cave and began to speak in fierce, imperious tones. Presently he emerged grinning.

"I have told them that we will spare their lives if they make no attempt against us," he said. "I also added that in case of treachery, Gom would be the first to suffer, and that we would exterminate them. I think they are thoroughly cowed for the present. They're a frightfully degenerate lot. I infinitely prefer the Bheels, smelly though they are. Let us go to them."

The little people were still in a state of panic, but sight of the professor evidently reassured them. They crept out of their dens and flocked around him squealing their pleasure, while their little tails wagged furiously, so that the three young men had much ado to refrain from laughing.

The professor spoke to them, and they responded with shrill speech.

"I have told them they are to obey us and not the Worgees. They will bring fish to our cave in about an hour. Meanwhile, let us walk the other way, that you may see more of the place."

They re-passed the big cave and that where Snaplus lay napping with one eye and both ears open, the professor's revolver in one hand, his hatchet in the other, reassuring him with a word. Then they passed from the broad terrace to the ledge path once again.

"The Worgees must have made this path in the days when they were still energetic.

That curious water-drum—or squirrel-wheel—must be a relic of some ingenious Dutchman; though I fancy it has been rebuilt several times. There are a few other contrivances that suggest brains, but they are all old. It shows on a small scale what laziness and cowardice can bring a race to."

They marched on for some distance, halting occasionally to admire the view spread before them. The valley was nowhere very wide, but it stretched for many miles before them.

"The lake runs for some five miles further, and this path also. I have gone to the end but no further. This is no country for solitary travellers. But now we can explore it together."

"Look! Over yonder!" cried Anson, pointing to the further side of the lake where something grey and large moved leisurely among the thick foliage. "What, in the name of wonder, is it? Not an elephant?"

"No, no!" cried the professor, in great excitement. "It's a reptile! It may be something of the Dinosaur breed; but I cannot say with certainty. If it would only come nearer!"

The creature seemed inclined to respond to this wish for it waddled slowly down to the water, and after rolling in the shallows, swam boldly out across the lake, heading for a point about a mile ahead. At once Maxwell began to run and the others followed him at their best pace. As the creature was in no great hurry it seemed likely that they would be in time to see it at close range if it only held its course, for the water lapped the foot of the cliff for some way beyond the spot.

But though they reached a place from which they should see all they wished, they were doomed to partial disappointment. As they halted they saw the great beast forging towards them, and stooped low lest sight of them should turn it. But it was coming steadily on when from the depths flashed something like a long, silver torpedo.

It flickered up beside the Dinosaur, and the watchers caught a glimpse of terrible jaws armed with rows of saw teeth, which gleamed as they closed on the great reptile's flank. It uttered a strange bleating hiss, ridiculously thin and weak for so huge a beast, but there was nothing feeble about its sudden swing upon the aggressor. Down went its head, to fly aloft again dragging a great fish to the surface—a nightmarish thing, whose gory jaws were a third of its whole length.

As that deadly grip closed upon it the demon of the deep lashed out with a tail armed with razor-sharp, bony ridges, cutting another deep gash in the dinosaur's side, but too late to save itself. Above the splash of tormented waters sounded a tremendous crunch! And when the tossing spray fell, the dinosaur was to be seen calmly swimming back to its haunt on the further shore, trailing the dead fish from its jaws. It had bitten through its backbone.

Professor Maxwell breathed a deep sigh.

"So! We have seen something that no civilised man has ever seen before," he said. "Such scenes must have been frequent in the shallow seas that covered a great part of the earth in days long before the first human thing ever breathed."

"These little Bheels are dashed plucky to venture on the water at all!" exclaimed Anson.

"They are," agreed the professor. "But they never venture this way where the water is deep. Towards the other end—where you saw them—it is mostly shallow, though, indeed, there are dangers enough to be faced there."

The three endorsed this heartily as they strolled back to the cave where they found two Bheels waiting with a great pile of fish. Jack and Anson selected enough for their immediate needs and returned the rest, speaking gently to the little fellows who went away apparently well pleased with these new masters.

For the remainder of the day the adventurers were content to rest and discuss their plans. At sunset they sat on the edge of the terrace watching the Worgees, who, having recovered somewhat from their scare, now squatted at the doors of their cave chattering volubly.

"Talking, eating, and sleeping is all that the majority of these fellows ever do," explained Maxwell. "The younger men set snares for the pigeons which nest in the rocks, and some of the women do a little sewing. But nearly everything else is done by Bheels. If the Worgees had only had to fend for themselves they would have been good savages. As it is they are merely cowardly and useless."

"They need stirring up," said Anson. "A Mills' bomb would do them a heap of good." He rose. "I'll go and let Snaplus have a run," he said, and went into the cave from which the black presently emerged, to disappear along the ledge path.

The sun was dropping towards the rim of the canon. Soon it would be night. The Worgees began to stir, preparing to go into their cave. They feared the dark. Suddenly something long and black came wriggling down a cleft of the rocks and fell among them, hissing and striking furiously to right and left.

"A snake—and a deadly one!" cried Maxwell, leaping to his feet and raising his gun.

He roared at the Worgees who were rolling over each other, kicking and biting in their mad efforts to escape from the reptile, bidding them run to one side so that he might shoot.

But they were so beside themselves with terror that they did not hear, and piled through the doors, each for himself, regardless of his friends, while the snake wriggled and darted amongst their writhing limbs, while howls and shrieks echoed across the lake.

(Continued on page iii of cover.)

Anson came to the door of the further cave, and stood looking on with a sardonic grin of amusement on his bronzed face, but it was Harding who ended the scene by dashing amongst the crowd, grabbing the snake—which seemed only anxious to get away—and slicing it in two with his knife before it could strike.

The head fell clear of the trampling feet close to the professor, who bent down to examine it. He started, then wheeled towards Anson.

"You young villain! I believe you have been putting the black up to this trick. The creature's teeth have been newly knocked out!" he cried.

Anson's grin widened and turned into a chasm as he burst into a roar of laughter.

"That's so!" he chuckled. "I sent Snaplus up the rocks after that chap. Jove! It put the fear into them, didn't it? Stirred them up as they needed. Chuck the head into the water before they have a chance to see that it has been doctored. Now is your chance to play the great medicine-man, professor. Go and wigwag over those who think they're dying, and they may be grateful."

Maxwell took the hint, and went to and fro, laying his hand on what the Worgees believed mortal wounds, telling them that he was healing them. And, just as they fancied they were doomed, they now believed they were saved. However, they did not give him any thanks for his efforts, and he was glad to come out into the evening light again. As he did so Snaplus came down the path.

"Big fellow snake—big fellow frightened," he said, with a chuckle, and went back to his post.

(To be continued.)

To All My Readers.

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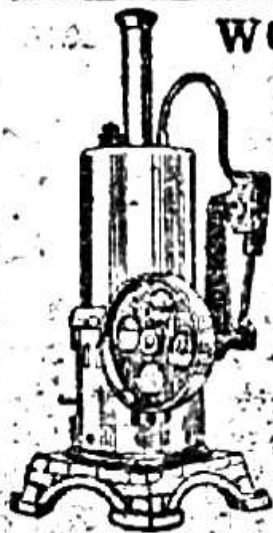


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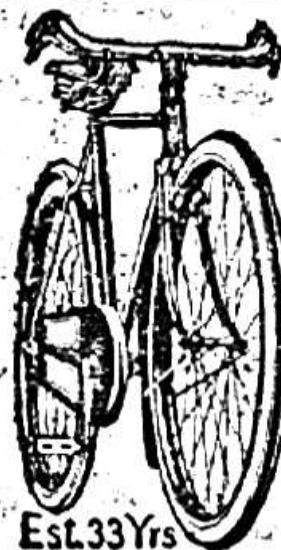
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