

THE SCHOOL IN SPACE

SPACE
BY
REGINALD
BROWNE

SCHOOLBOY
ADVENTURE



BY
REGINALD BROWNE
Whitelands on Venus



THE SCHOOL IN SPACE

By Reginald Browne

Here is a school story with a difference. A party of Whitelands boys, invited on board Professor "Bill" Sylvester's space-annihilating airship, *Asterion*, are suddenly whisked off into Outer Space—and all because of certain dirty work engineered by one Paul Valescu.

In this story you will meet Mr. Reginald Browne's celebrated schoolboy characters—Dick Sylvester and Tim Charters and Will Osborne, of Study No. 3, Stanley Horatio Goodman, Kenneth Pyne and lots of others—in an entirely new setting. At the very beginning of the story they leave the familiar scenes of Whitelands and we are thrilled, even as they are thrilled, as they make a safe landing upon the planet Venus. . . . And from that moment onwards it is one long breathless series of strange and amazing adventures.

Read how a party of the schoolboys are marooned on Venus through the treachery of Paul Valescu—how they are captured by the giant Bat Men and carried off into the weird mountain fastness, where they are rescued in the nick of time by the Great Deluge. . . . Read how they rejoin the airship and travel across the surface of Venus to find the extraordinary city of diamond quartz, with a great and staggering surprise. . . . Read of the grim, mysterious Menace of the Night, which fills the heart of every Venusian with dread—and which the schoolboy-adventurers discover to the accompaniment of even more breath-taking adventures. . . . An exciting and unusual story, this, which will thrill you to the marrow.

SCHOOL
IN
SPACE

REGINALD
BROWNE

GERALD
G. SWAN

SCHOOL IN SPACE

REGINALD BROWNE



SCHOOL IN SPACE

WILLIAM BROWN

GEORGE G. SWAN



LONDON

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REGINALD BROWNE

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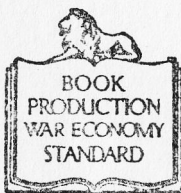


LONDON

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BY
REGINALD BROWNE

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CHAPTER I.

The Flying Miracle

"Why do you keep calling the giddy thing an airship?" asked Tim Charters. "I suppose you mean an aeroplane?"

"No, I don't," replied Dick Sylvester calmly. "I mean exactly what I say—an airship. This invention of Uncle Bill's is different from anything the world has ever seen."

"I'll believe that," remarked Will Osborne, "when I take a look at it with my own eyes."

The chums of Study No. 3 in the Fourth Form were strolling in the picturesque old quad at Whitelands. It was a half holiday and the summer's afternoon was hot and cloudless. From the direction of the playing fields came the attractive sound of bat meeting ball, and white figures could be glimpsed through the trees. But Dick Sylvester, for once in his life, was not interested in cricket; he kept his eyes almost continuously on the sky. He did not notice three white-clad figures which emerged from Mortimer's House and came bearing down upon him. The first white-clad figure was carrying a cricket bat, to say nothing of a ferocious expression.

"Hey, Sylvester!" bawled this individual—who was none other than the aggressive Stan Goodman. "What kind of a cricket skipper do you call yourself? What's the idea of cutting the House match this afternoon?"

Dick reluctantly removed his gaze from the sky.

"It's not an important match, Goody," he replied. "You can do without me for once. I've something more important to do than to play cricket this afternoon."

"Don't be a fatheaded idiot!" snorted Stan Goodman, "Nothing is more important than cricket. What the dickens . . . Oh, I see!" A scornful expression came over his rugged face. "You're looking for that new-fangled air liner of your uncle's? The one you've been telling us about until we're sick!"

Dick flushed a little.

"Sorry you feel like that, Goody," he said, apologetically. "Perhaps I have been gassing too much. The fact is, I'm pretty excited—and I don't mind admitting it. You'll be excited, too, when you see the Asterion."

"The which?"

"Uncle Bill has called his ship the Asterion."

"Some ship," remarked Tim Charters, giving Goodman a wink. "Apparently it flies without any wings."

"That's right," agreed Will Osborne, grinning. "It doesn't need any propellers, either."

Bob Davis and Charlie Hunt, Goodman's chums of Study No. 4, made rude, scoffing noises.

"No wings and no propellers," sniffed Bob Davis. "What are you trying to do—kid us?"

"I think there's something in it, you chaps," said Charlie Hunt, who was not so sceptical as the others. "At any rate, Mickey Mouse has been kidded up to the eyebrows if there isn't anything in it. I was talking to him this morning, and he told me that Lord Chuffmore had put a fortune into Professor Sylvester's invention—something like a couple of hundred thousand quid—"

"Draw it mild," interrupted Goodman. "Mickey was pulling your leg. Everyone knows that Lord Chuffmore is a millionaire, but he wouldn't chuck his money about like that."

The boys were silent for a moment. The name of Lord Archibald Chuffmore was one which thrilled them. All the world knew of the famous Lord Chuffmore's exploits—his lighthearted breaking of the record for the flight round the world—his sensational smashing of the world's land-speed record on Daytona Beach—his amazing climb of Mount Everest. Lord Chuffmore was an intrepid adventurer after the heart of every schoolboy.

"Mickey kept calling him 'Chuffy,'" went on Charlie Hunt. "They're both Old Boys, you know—shared the same study when they were in the Fourth—"

"Our study, I'll bet," said Stan Goodman.

"No—Study No. 3," said Hunt. "They went into the Fifth together—and then into the Sixth. Mickey became a schoolmaster, and Chuffy started out to break every record within reach."

The individual to whom the boys affectionately referred to as 'Mickey Mouse' was, of course, Mr. Alexander Mickie, the big, clumsy, good-natured master of the Fourth.

"Oh, well, I can't stand here wasting my time," said Goodman impatiently. "Come on, you chaps—let's get over to Little Side. What's so special about the aircraft, anyway?"

"Everything's special," replied Dick Sylvester promptly. "In the first place, it's four times bigger than any air liner ever built; it's as big as a sea-going yacht; it weighs thousands of tons and it's made of solid metal——"

"With no wings?" interrupted Goodman.

"Not a ghost of a wing," said Dick, calmly. "There aren't any engines, even—not the kind of engines we can visualise, anyway. She flies without making a sound—because it's only the engines and the propellers that create sound in an ordinary-type aeroplane."

"When you wake up," said Goodman tartly, "let me know. My poor ass, you're dreaming. You're talking absolute drip. This is the kind of stuff you expect to hear from a gibbering lunatic."

"Oh, yeah?" said Dick Sylvester tensely.

His gaze had become fixed. He was staring at a tiny silver spot in the sky, away to the east; and the spot was rapidly getting larger and larger.

"Dead on time," remarked Dick coolly, after a glance at the school clock. "Perhaps you'll understand—now—why I'm not so keen on cricket this afternoon."

The other boys, following the direction of Dick's gaze, uttered startled ejaculations. They were puzzled, at first, by the gleaming thing in the sky; and then, as they looked, it took shape. They could see that it was an immense thing of metal, and it was flying noiselessly at a height of about three thousand feet. The metal gleamed in the sunshine with a silvery sheen.

Stan Goodman rubbed his eyes and stared into the sky again; he closed his eyes; re-opened them, and stared again.

"It's no good—I can still see it!" he said incredulously. "It's potty. It just can't be!"

The others were wondering if they were asleep or awake. For the thing they were seeing was altogether too staggering to be believed; it was something incredible; something which stunned their very senses. Dick Sylvester had told them again and again, what to expect—but they had scoffingly declared that he was talking out of the back of his neck. Now that they were seeing the very thing he had anticipated, they couldn't believe it. It is well said that seeing is believing, but

these Whitelands boys, although seeing, were finding it very difficult to believe.

An immense air liner of conventional type they could have understood—even if surpassing all known design. An airship of the gasbag type, with whirling propellers, they could have understood, too. But the vessel which was now actually hovering over the school, its speed reduced to a mere crawl, was unlike anything they had ever heard of. It was all wrong. It should not have been hovering at all. A solid thing like that had no right to hover.

“This is all rot!” said Goodman violently.

“Pretty stunning, isn’t it?” asked Dick Sylvester. “I hope you fellows are going to apologise. I told you what to expect——”

“But this is plain crazy!” shouted Bob Davis, his voice shrill with excitement. “I just don’t believe it.”

His attitude was quite understandable. He saw this flying miracle, but his senses utterly refused to accept it as a fact. He was not the only one. All over Whitelands, people were staring into the sky, rubbing their eyes and hitching up their lower jaws. Senior and junior cricket matches had been forgotten.

The monstrous vessel in the sky was no airship at all. The reaction of most people, seeing it for the first time was exactly akin to the reaction they would have felt if they had seen an ocean-going liner floating in the sky. It was simply too absurd to be true. That solid mass had no right to be in the air at all. The law of gravity forbade it. Yet there it was! A vast creation of gleaming silvery metal, cigar-shaped and rakish, with a stream-lined control cabin in the nose—and, most surprising of all—stream-lined bulges fore and aft which looked as though they might conceal landing gear.

In fact, even as the boys watched, curious changes began to take place in the Asterion, which was now stationary right over the school and slowly floating downwards as though made of thistledown. Solid metal covers were rolling back from the lower bulges, revealing powerful tractors, of the type used in tank construction. Other solid metal covers were silently rolling upwards in the main body of the airship, exposing a central promenade deck. Several human

figures now leaned over the rail, and waved to the boys below.

"Hey! Uncle Bill!" roared Dick Sylvester, waving wildly. "That's Uncle Bill, you chaps—the second one from the right."

"Blow Uncle Bill!" said Stan Goodman, with a gulp. "How does that thing *stay* up there? It's as solid as a giddy battleship! There aren't any wings, or planes, or—or anything!"

Nobody took any notice of him. In fact, the shouting was so great that nobody even heard him. Fellows were running about, wildly excited. Ordinarily dignified and lordly seniors were just as thrilled as the smallest fag. Everybody was getting the beginnings of a stiff neck. Whitelands hardly realised that they were a mere handful among millions. For Professor William Sylvester's astounding airship had caused wonder—and, indeed, consternation—over several counties on this, its first public flight. All the experimental flights had been made in secret—and on the darkest of nights.

The extraordinary craft sank lower and lower, until, finally, it landed without a jar in one of the meadows adjoining the lane which ran from Greendale St. Mary to the school. Its gleaming bulk could be seen rising above the hedges and trees. Then a spell seemed to be broken.

There was an immediate rush. Everybody started running towards the school gates. But Dick Sylvester and Co. were there first. They had now been joined by Kenneth Pyne, Sam Kennedy, Hal, Robinson, and one or two other Fourth Form stalwarts. They went charging into the lane and nearly collided with a big man in old flannel trousers and sports coat who had gone out just in advance of them.

"Hey, look out, you young fatheads," said Mr. Alexander Mickie. "There's no need to rush. She isn't going to take the air again for a bit."

"Listen, sir!" panted Dick Sylvester. "Professor Sylvester is my uncle——"

"I know that, old son."

"He wrote to me a couple of days ago, and told me he was coming here to pick you up," continued Dick. "Is that right, sir? I notice you're carrying a suitcase——"

"Yes, just off on a little trip," interrupted Mr. Mickie calmly. "My old pal, Chuffy, is aboard, and I'm going for a flip. I may be away quite a few days——"

"But term isn't over yet, sir," interrupted Goodman. "The vacation doesn't start until next week."

"I've been a good boy, so the Head's letting me off to-day," explained Mr. Mickie, grinning. "I know you'll be sorry to lose me, but you must try to bear up."

"I want to ask a favour, sir," urged Dick. "I know it's impossible for all the Whitelands chaps to go aboard the Asterion—but I'm special. I mean, it's my uncle's ship. Do you think he'll let me show my pals round? I mean, just a few of us, sir?"

"I'll put in a word for you," promised the good-natured master. "Now, don't detain me any longer, because I'm anxious to have a word with Chuffy. Besides, I'm just as keen as you are to get a close-up of this miracle ship. Between you, me and the gatepost, kids, I still don't believe it."

CHAPTER II.

The Wonder of the Age

Lord Archibald Chuffmore was a tall, lean, wiry individual of about thirty-five, with a bronzed, clean-shaven face and humorous eyes. He emerged from a solid-looking doorway in the lower part of the Asterion's body, and descended the just-as-solid-looking metal steps which had automatically been lowered as the door had opened.

"Well, well—your looking fine, Mick," he said, as he clasped Mr. Mickie's hand. "A bit large around the middle, perhaps, and I don't like the look of those bags under your eyes——"

"Is this a moment, Chuffy, for discussing the bags under my eyes?" interrupted the Fourth Form master. "Besides, curse you, there aren't any bags under my eyes." He was staring at the towering mass of the astonishing airship. "Chuffy, old man, am I crazy, or did I really see this thing floating in the sky?"

Lord Chuffmore grinned.

"Yes, it is a bit breath-taking, isn't it?" he agreed. "Anybody seeing the Asterion at close quarters for the

first time can easily be forgiven for thinking that he has gone off his onion. She is a bit staggering."

"She's unbelievable."

"You don't know the half of it," said Chuffy. "But come inside and meet Bill. He may be a learned professor, and a great scientific brain, but to you and me, he's just plain Bill. A great guy, Bill—as you'll find out."

"It might be a good idea to rise a few thousand feet when I'm aboard," advised Mr. Mickie. "If you don't, there's going to be damage done. Hordes of boys are due here in a couple of minutes, and they won't be content to keep their distance."

"You're modest," chuckled the other. "I'll take you up a few thousand *miles* if you like. This baby isn't called the Asterion for nothing."

"Now, listen; you needn't try to kid me—"

"Kid you, nothing," said Chuffy. "Didn't you know that the Asterion is designed to explore Outer Space?"

"I heard some such nonsense——"

"Last week," interrupted Lord Chuffmore dreamily, "Bill and I took her up to five thousand miles—and, believe me, that's just a hop. Bill isn't content with merely skimming the surface of the earth. Lord, no! He's a devil for taking chances, and he won't be satisfied until he's made a trip to Mars."

Mr. Mickie was frankly incredulous as he followed Lord Chuffmore into the interior of the vessel. Chuffy touched a button, and the metal steps and door closed automatically, the door sealing itself hermetically like that of a bank vault. Mr. Mickie found himself in a kind of passage, and although there was no visible means of illumination, the passage was quite light.

"You don't really mean that about Mars?"

"Never meant anything more in my life," retorted the famous sporting adventurer. "Of course, all this seems fantastic to you, but I'm used to it. It'll take you some time to realise that the age of miracles has returned."

They went along the passage and mounted a staircase which took them on to a wide deck which was, indeed, very much like the promenade deck of a big ship. Everything was so definitely heavy and solid that Mr. Mickie was more astounded than ever. There were

doors leading to various compartments, and these doors were of immensely thick metal underneath their attractive, modern, streamlined decoration.

Mr. Mickie went to the rail—as heavy and solid as everything else—and leaned over. His heart was thudding, and he was telling himself that the very idea of this solid body soaring into the air was outrageous. If he had not seen her soaring in the air only twenty minutes earlier, he would have considered himself demented.

“Come inside and have a word with Bill,” said Chuffy. “Gangs of Whitelands kids are crowding up, and we’re likely to be interrupted if we stay here. They’re welcome to stare to their heart’s content. There’s no charge.”

“Some of my own boys—particularly young Sylvester, who is the Professor’s nephew—will be anxious to do more than stare, Chuffy,” said Mr. Mickie. “I don’t see how you’re going to keep them off—”

“Leave it to Bill—I imagine he’ll be pretty good at dealing with nephews,” interrupted Chuffy. “We’ll go through the lounge and . . . No need, though. Here he is.”

Professor William Sylvester, who emerged from one of the swing doorways at that moment, was very different from the average conception of a learned together. He’s the chap who’s coming on this flight man with a square jaw that looked rather like a chunk of rock. He was in the prime of life, with a touch of grey at his temples. He wore big spectacles, and there was something in his very personality which compelled immediate attention. He carried with him, in his mere presence, a strange magnetism.

“Bill,” said Lord Chuffmore, “meet my old pal, Mick. Mr. Alexander Mickie, M.A. to the Whitelands gang—but just plain Mick to you and me. We were at school together. He’s the chap who’s coming on this flight with us.” Chuffy turned to Mr. Mickie. “I have to say it all carefully like this, in words of one syllable, or Bill wouldn’t take it in,” he explained. “You may not believe it to look at him, but Bill’s a perfect example of the absent-minded professor.”

“Nonsense,” said Professor Sylvester. “Delighted to

meet you, Mr. Mick. If he's a friend of yours, Archibald

"Don't call me Archibald!" said Chuffy violently. "How many more times must I tell you that I loathe the name of Archibald?"

"We used to chip you about it at school, didn't we?" grinned Mr. Mickie.

"Yet," said the professor, "I don't see why. Archibald is a perfectly good name. I don't see why you're not proud of it, Archibald—er—Chuffmore. Chuffmore," he repeated reflectively. "Now, there's a clumsy, awkward name——"

"But I like it," interrupted Chuffy. "I like 'Chuffy' still better. So, in future, kindly bear in mind——"

"Must we keep gassing about your infernal name?" interrupted Mr. Mickie, in a pained voice. "I want to hear more about this extraordinary airship. How is she controlled, professor? What kind of fuel do you use?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, we don't use any fuel at all," replied Professor Bill, almost apologetically. "At least, not fuel in the accepted sense of the word. Perhaps we had better go along to the control room, and I will try to explain a few of the lesser mechanical points."

"The lesser," said Chuffy, "the better. Mick's a whale of a schoolmaster, but, as I recollect him in the old days, his grasp of mechanics is pretty feeble."

Mr. Mickie, thoroughly excited, and still bewildered, followed his hosts through some swing doors into the control room. In the lounge and corridor they had passed one or two alert-looking men in uniform; and there were two other uniformed men in the control room. The Asterion, apparently, had a regular crew, like any sea-going ship.

An involuntary whistle escaped Mr. Mickie's lips. The control room was much bigger than he had expected, and it was situated in the upper nose of the vessel. Directly overhead was a great dome of transparent substance which looked like glass, but which was probably plastic. The full daylight streamed in. A few steps led up to a circular gallery, from which observation could be made to all points of the compass. The control room itself was full of dials and control-boards and queer objects which reminded Mr. Mickie of giant radio

tubes. Immediately in front of the pilot's seat was something which looked rather like a television screen.

"Remote control observation, as you might call it," said the professor, touching a switch. "You see, as this room is so high up in the ship, it is necessary for the pilot to have a clear view of the ground immediately beneath."

Mr. Mickie stared at the 'elelevision' screen. It was just like looking through a window. The ground immediately in front of the landed Asterion seemed only a few feet away. It was as though the window was in the lower part of the extreme nose.

"But this is impossible," said the schoolmaster.

He could see crowds of Whitelands boys staring up at the ship, and he could see a smallish, well-dressed man with curious, humped shoulders talking to Dick Sylvester. The pair separated from the rest and approached. Mr Mickie vaguely wondered why he could not hear what they were saying, as they seemed so near.

As a matter of fact, Dick Sylvester had made up his mind to go aboard at once. What was the good of his uncle owning the airship if he—Dick—couldn't take advantage of the fact? The massive exit door had been opened, and the steps lowered, and an officer in uniform was standing on guard.

"Look here," said Dick, approaching. "I'm Professor Sylvester's nephew, and——"

"Indeed?" interrupted the stranger, plucking at Dick's sleeve and halting him. "Then perhaps we can go aboard together. I have an appointment with your uncle. My name is Paul Valescu——"

"What are we waiting for?" said Dick briskly.

He was glad to seize the opportunity. If this important-looking man was going aboard, there was no reason why Dick should not go with him. Dick approached the steps confidently.

"Where can we find Professor Sylvester?" he asked importantly. "I'm his nephew, you know—and this gentleman has an appointment with him. It's a bit thick of Uncle Bill not to come down and welcome me. He knew I was going to be here."

"I'm afraid your uncle is a bit forgetful of such matters," said the officer, with a smile. "He's in the

control room just now. Good afternoon, Mr. Valescu," he added, with a straight look at the stranger. "I didn't know you were coming again to-day. His lordship wasn't very friendly the last time you came——"

"A little misunderstanding—nothing more," interrupted Valescu hastily. "My business with Professor Sylvester is of the utmost importance. The boy and I will go to the control room together."

"Yes, that's all right," said Dick. "Come on, sir. How do we get to the control room?" he added, looking at the officer.

"Straight through the lounge and then up the stairs," said the man. "But I'm not so sure of Mr. Valescu. I wasn't given any instructions——"

He paused doubtfully. Dick and the stranger were already aboard, and Dick was eagerly hurrying up the stairs towards the lounge. When at last he reached the control room, he paused in the doorway, awed by what he saw.

"Uncle Bill!" he ejaculated breathlessly.

Professor Sylvester, in the middle of a sentence, turned and frowned at the interrupter.

"Who is this boy?" he asked impatiently. "Why is the ship swarming with boys? Go away! Can't I have a minute with my friends without crowds of noisy boys bursting in——"

"There's only one, Bill," said Chuffy gently, "and he happens to be your nephew."

The professor's face cleared.

"Why, yes, of course," he said heartily. "Hallo, Dick, my boy! Delighted to see you. Don't bother me now, though. I'm busy. As I was saying, Mr. Ritchie——"

"Mickie," murmured the Fourth Form master.

"Exactly—Mr. Mickie," said the professor. And went on with his technical explanation.

"Are you telling me in all seriousness that the Asterion can pass beyond the earth's atmosphere?" asked Mr. Mickie eventually. "That she can travel to the moon—or even to the planets?"

"Precisely," said Professor Bill. "One of these days I shall make a serious attempt——"

He broke off abruptly. Chancing to glance towards Dick Sylvester, who was fascinated by all this talk, he

saw the figure of Mr. Paul Valescu in the doorway. A frown came over the burly scientist's powerful face.

"Really, Valescu, this is intolerable," he protested. "I don't know how you knew I was going to land at this spot, and I don't know why my officers let you come aboard——"

"Afraid that's my fault, uncle," interrupted Dick. "Mr. Valescu said he had an appointment——"

"Mr. Valescu is a liar," said Lord Chuffmore gruffly. "He had no appointment. I had a few plain words with you two days ago, Valescu——"

"I confess, Lord Chuffmore, that I acted with unwarrantable audacity," interrupted Paul Valescu, striding forward. "But I plead extreme urgency. Gentlemen, let me once again press you to reconsider your earlier decision. I am empowered to offer millions—literally millions——"

"Are you going through that routine again?" snapped Chuffy. "This ship was built with Professor Sylvester's brains and my money—and we're not interested in a sale. As for your being 'empowered to offer millions,' that's nonsense, and you know it. Now, Mr. Valescu, let's be sensible about this. Above all, keep calm."

Chuffy turned to the astonished Dick.

"It wasn't your fault, kid," he went on. "Mr. Valescu has a persuasive tongue—— I'll tell you what. Cut off and collect your friends. They want to see round the ship, don't they?"

"Rather, sir," said Dick. "I was going to ask uncle

"That's all right—he's busy," interrupted Chuffy briskly. "Don't bring too big a crowd."

Dick Sylvester hurried off, elated—and just a little mystified. He did not know that Paul Valescu was a Rumanian nobleman—in his own country he used a title—who had spent a considerable fortune on the building of a so-called "space ship." The experiment had not only been a complete failure, involving the loss of all his money, but he had come within an inch of losing his life, as well. He had a bee in his bonnet about space ships, and had been a nuisance to Professor Sylvester for some weeks. In Lord Chuffmore's opinion, the unfortunate man was "a bit crackers."

But even Chuffy did not know *how* crackers!

CHAPTER III.

Shanghai-ed Into Space

"All serene, you chaps," said Dick Sylvester, when he joined the crowd of Fourth Formers who stood in the meadow gazing in an awed way at the towering mass of the Asterion.

"Meaning what, old thing?" asked Kenneth Pyne.

"Meaning, my bonny lad, that we have permission to go aboard," replied the Fourth Form skipper cheerily. "Uncle Bill is going to show us round the ship—and if we're lucky, he might even take us for a flip."

"Good old Uncle Bill!" said Stan Goodman heartily.

"I'm not so sure about you, Goody," said Dick doubtfully. "You're such a clumsy ass . . . Oh, well, I suppose you'd better come aboard. But I'm relying on you chaps——" He looked at Bob Davis and Charlie Hunt. "I'm relying on you chaps to keep him under restraint."

"Leave it to us," said Davis promptly.

"Here, what the dickens do you mean?" roared Stan Goodman. "If you think——"

He was interrupted by the shouts of many other boys who were eager to be included in the party. Bearing Chuffy's warning in mind, Dick Sylvester had to be careful. The entire Fourth would have swarmed aboard at a mere word, and that would have been too much of an invasion. In the end, Dick confined his party to a round dozen—Stan Goodman & Co. of Study No. 4—Kenneth Pyne and Sam Kennedy, of Study No. 8.—Pat Warren and Tom Pettitt of Study No. 11—Ginger Cummings and Mick Piper, of Selby's House—Tim Charters, Will Osborne and Dick himself, of Study No. 3. All other applicants were firmly refused, much to their chagrin.

"Here, what about us?" demanded Freddy Weaver truculently. "Isn't somebody going to invite us?"

Freddy Weaver was the go-getting, vigorous leader of the Third Form, and he was accompanied by Bobby Cole and Sammy Holt, his special chums. They were looking very determined.

"Sorry, kids—not this time," said Dick. "My uncle invited me to bring my own pals aboard——"

"Aren't we your pals?" demanded Freddy boldly. "Better make up your mind, Sylvester—because I give you my word we're coming aboard, whether you invite us or not."

"Cheeky young fathead!" said Dick, and dismissed the fags with a nod.

He and his own chums went aboard the miracle ship without a thought beyond the immediate future. They were going to be shown over the vessel by the genial Lord Chuffmore—and, if they were lucky, they were going to be taken for an hour's flight over the Dorset countryside. Never for a moment did those carefree schoolboys dream that they were on the verge of the most thrilling adventure of their lives!

Even as they were crowding on to the promenade deck and waving to their less fortunate schoolfellows, an unexpectedly dramatic incident was taking place in the control room.

"If you will give me just five minutes, gentlemen," Paul Valescu was saying, in an earnest voice. "It is within my power to give you fame and fortune—"

"Sorry, old thing, but we're pretty well booked for fame and fortune without any help from you," said Lord Chuffmore gently. "Now, why not calm down and let me take you back to your car? What you want is a long rest—"

"You think I am what you call funny in the head, yes?" interrupted Valescu tensely. "You are foolish. I have ideas—great ideas—tremendous ideas. Together, we can conquer space." He turned from Chuffy, and looked at Professor Sylvester with a fierce, fanatical fire burning in his eyes. "My discoveries, sir, and your discoveries, would ensure success. Let us, then work together. Yes? You agree?"

"Oh, I say," protested Professor Bill uncomfortably. "Didn't we go over this last week, Valescu? You've been pestering me pretty badly, you know. I don't want to say anything to hurt you, but I'm not in any need of your—er—'discoveries.' I've been doing quite well without them."

"Then this—it is final?" snapped Valescu.

"Afraid so," said Chuffy.

"You think so!" shouted the excited man, making a sudden leap forward. "But I think it is not final. You

fools! If you will not admit me into your secrets, then nobody else in the world shall share them."

"Here, steady——" began Chuffy.

"To-day, it is your first public appearance," went on Valescu wildly. "Every secret of this vessel is locked in its very construction—and in your own hearts and minds. No other living soul knows of these secrets. I have but to pull this lever, and the Asterion will shoot into outer space——"

"Leave that thing alone!" roared Chuffy, in alarm.

Valescu was as quick as lightning. He had reached the main control lever and was clinging to it. The man, hitherto harmless enough, had suddenly gone *berserk*.

"This," said Lord Chuffmore, very calmly, "is awkward."

Unfortunately, Professor Bill, alarmed for the safety of his precious ship, made a sudden—and fatal—move. He hurled himself bodily at Valescu. Chuffy would have been more diplomatic—— Not that it mattered now. Valescu, with a great cry of triumph, had wrenched the control lever completely over, and was clinging to it.

The Asterion gave a curious, shuddering lurch and shot away from the ground like a rocket. Professor Bill and Chuffy were flung to the floor—and that sudden, violent lurch had another and more disastrous effect. Valescu was still clutching at the lever, and the jerk was so great that, instead of his fanatical clutch being disengaged, the lever broke off at the base, and the man went sliding helplessly across the sloping floor of the control room.

At the same moment, one of the big, radio-tube-like objects gave forth a lurid violet light, burned intensively for a moment, then died out.

Valescu, his crazy work accomplished, managed to rise to his feet and stagger into the corridor. He reached the stairs and nearly fell down . . . Less than a minute later, Dick Sylvester and his chums were horrified to see a wild figure dart across the promenade deck and hurl itself over the rail into space.

Just before the shutters had closed, Dick Sylvester—and at least three members of the crew—had seen a queer kind of parachute opening from the humped shoulders of the man who had jumped overboard. Only

one conclusion was possible. Valescu, knowing that he would never be able to share Professor Sylvester's triumph, had wormed his way aboard the Asterion with the set and deliberate purpose of sending the airship to destruction—while providing himself with the means of saving his own life.

The demented man had apparently done far more damage than he had intended. All the essential interior services of the airship were functioning normally and automatically. Heat was being generated—oxygen was being manufactured and pumped into the air—pressure within that great, metal shell was regulated to a fraction.

But—

The most important control of all was temporarily useless. After that first, violent jerk, however, the Asterion seemed to be motionless. It was only when Chuffy ran up to the gallery, and took a look through the observation dome, that he realised that the vessel was hurtling skywards at an unimaginable speed. Already, the Dorset countryside was so far below that it was a mere blur.

Utterly spellbound, the Whitelands boys continued to stare out of the observation windows. This thing was too big for them; they were so filled with awe that speech seemed pointless. Even Goodman, the most matter-of-fact fellow in the Fourth, wore a stunned look. But he was the first to recover.

"No need to look so slugged, you chaps," he said, taking a deep breath. "We're alive, aren't we? The ship feels steady enough. By crackers! This is what I call a spot of real excitement."

"I'm scared," muttered Tim Charters frankly. "How the dickens are we going to get back?"

"Oh, leave that to Sylvester's uncle," replied Goodman airily. "Sylvester told us that the ship was designed to go to the planets, didn't he? We thought he was talking through the back of his neck. Well, here we are—off to the moon, or somewhere. What a lark!"

"Nice work, old son," said Lord Chuffmore, who happened to be near. "What's your name, by the way?"

"Stan Goodman, sir."

"I like your spirit, Goodman," continued Chuffy. "What a lark, eh? That's the way to look at it. Leave

everything to Professor Bill! I trust him implicitly. There's nothing to worry about——"

"Except getting back, sir," said Charters.

"Not at all. The Asterion has already made two trips into outer space—and she came back all right. One night last week, we took her to a height of two hundred thousand miles, and we landed without a jerk."

"My only hat!"

"Sounds like a fairy tale, doesn't it?" continued Chuffy. "I didn't believe it myself—at the time. But Bill assures me it's a fact, and I'm willing to take his word. It was safe enough then, so he'll probably have you back at Whitelands in time for calling over."

Soon afterwards Chuffy went back to the control room. Professor Bill and his assistants were still working steadily and intensively.

"That blighting Valescu tried to do us all in, Bill," said Lord Chuffmore. "He wasn't as mad as we thought. Remember that hump on his back? Believe it or not, a concealed parachute! I hope he broke his neck!"

The professor was not paying much attention.

"It will be an hour or two, I am afraid, before we regain control, but there is no need for alarm," he said. "Our speed at the moment is moderate. About fifty miles a second."

"A mere snail's pace," said Chuff, grinning.

"It is, indeed, a snail's pace compared to the speed we shall attain during the next hour or so—unless the atomic power of the sub-ether is brought under control," replied Professor Bill. "I am not altogether displeased with Valescu. I have long wanted to make a trip into the vastness of the solar system, but I did not dare suggest it. Now, thanks to Valescu, we have been pitchforked into the thing, and there is no alternative but to go ahead."

"Well, that's one way of looking at it," said Lord Chuffmore, yawning. "If there's anything I can do—?"

"Yes, you can go and have a sleep," said Professor Bill promptly. "You look as if you need one. Why do you keep interrupting me like this?"

Chuffy grinned and withdrew. When, some minutes later, he walked into the main lounge, he found seven of the schoolboys half asleep on the comfortable divans. It was the same in the main saloon. Perhaps this general

sleepiness was caused by some difference in the oxygen-content of the air conditioning; perhaps the wild excitement of the last few hours was having a natural reaction. At all events, it seemed to Chuffy that it would be a good idea to pack these boys off to bed.

He therefore gave instructions to the head steward, and in a very short time the young passengers were conducted to various, comfortable state-rooms. Each state-room contained two beds, and the charming little apartments were almost exactly like first-class state-rooms on a big ocean-going liner. Within half-an-hour the boys were sound asleep—although they had repeatedly told one another that they were far too excited to sleep.

Lord Chuffmore himself, realising that Professor Bill was best left to deal with this situation alone, turned in too. Exactly how long he slept he did not know, but when he awakened he was feeling fresh and restored—and exceedingly hungry. As a matter of fact, he had slept for nearly twelve hours.

He washed, shaved, dressed, and turned out spick and span—to find that the Whitelands fellows were just stirring, too. He accompanied several of them on to the promenade deck, where they all made a bee-line for the observation windows. What they saw robbed them of speech—almost of breath. The earth was no longer filling the entire heavens—it appeared in the sky as a great, shimmering planet.

“But—but this is *hot!*” muttered Chuffy, blinking. “Good gosh, how long have we been asleep? We must have travelled *millions* of miles! What our speed is now, I can’t possibly imagine.”

The boys were unable to find their voices until several minutes had passed.

“The thing that beats me,” said Dick Sylvester, awed, “is that we’re alive—and safe! Here we are, millions of miles from the earth, and the earth looks like a big star!”

“Yes, but where are we going?” muttered Goodman.

Lord Chuffmore nodded to himself. It was a point which needed answering—and, without saying anything to the boys, he discreetly withdrew and hurried to the control room. He found Professor William Sylvester alone—tired, haggard, but with an expression of quiet

satisfaction on his strong face. There was something else, too—a look which Chuffy could not quite place, but it somehow gave him a big thrill.

“Hallo, Archibald,” said Professor Bill, looking up from a big, illuminated dial. “Collins and Banks are sleeping; they worked magnificently for fifteen hours without a rest, and they deserve——”

“Forgetting, for the moment, that you called me Archibald, what, exactly, is happening?” interrupted Lord Chuffmore. “Is the old crate under control again?”

“Why, of course. She has been under control for the last two hours.”

“Well, that’s good news,” said Chuffy. “How soon do you think it’ll be before we are back on earth?”

“A difficult question to answer,” replied the professor, calmly. “We’re not returning to earth just yet, Archibald. No. Finding that the Asterion is behaving even better than we anticipated, I have decided to go on a little trip before returning.”

“A—a little trip?” ejaculated Chuffy.

“At the present moment,” said Bill, “we are hurtling towards the planet Venus at the rate of some thousands of miles per second. Interesting, don’t you think?”

“Interesting!” yelled Chuffy. “Bill, are you crazy?”

“I don’t think so.”

“But—the boys!” shouted Chuffy.

“What about the boys?”

“What about them!” Lord Chuffmore breathed hard. “We arranged to go on a trip like this, I know, but we never planned to take half the population of White-lands with us! Is it fair to the kids to expose them to deadly risks——”

“Nonsense! What risks?” interrupted Professor Bill. “Haven’t I told you that the airship is under perfect control?” A frown crossed his face for a moment. “To tell you the truth, I had completely forgotten about the boys.”

“You would!”

“Does it make any real difference?” continued the professor. “It would be a pity to return to earth now—when we are so far on our way. A few days, one way or the other, won’t matter. I’d like to take a close look at the planet Venus, too.”

Suddenly, Lord Chuffmore started laughing. He could not help himself. The professor's calm matter-of-factness was so incongruous in the present circumstances that laughter was Chuffy's only reaction.

"Bill," he said cheerfully, "you're priceless!"

CHAPTER IV.

The New World.

Days passed . . . Days of wonder and endless thrill for Dick Sylvester & Co., of Whitelands. The planet Venus, millions and millions of miles away, was growing bigger and bigger—proving that Professor Bill's wonder ship was, indeed, under perfect control. All doubts had been set at rest long since, and the Asterion, hurtling through outer space with the velocity of a comet, was proving that the great problem had been solved. This handful of human beings, cut right off from Mother Earth, still lived—still breathed—still consumed food with healthy appetites. In a word, life was normal.

At first, the boys could not understand how the ship, cut off from gravitational influence, still permitted them to walk about as though they were on earth. But this was explained by Professor Bill, who told them that the Asterion was, to all intents and purposes, akin to a tiny fraction of the earth itself. In other words, the ship provided, as it were, its only local gravity, and this was regulated to conform with the normal gravity of the earth itself.

True, there was a certain feeling of discomfort in most people's ears, and everybody was affected by a queer kind of headache; but these were only trifling matters and were more or less ignored. Dick Sylvester and his chums went to sleep with a feeling of tense expectancy. They were awakened at the usual time, and the first thing they did, after dressing, was to make a rush for the nearest observation windows.

And they saw—nothing.

At least, nothing except a filmy, whitish mist."

"Believe it or not, kids, the atmosphere of Venus," explained Lord Chuffmore coolly. "That's what Bill tells me—and I suppose I must believe him. Apparently, Venus is covered with immense mist-clouds—clouds of a kind that are unknown on earth."

"How long has this been going on, sir?" asked Dick eagerly. "Aren't we likely to hit mountains, or something, in this mist?"

"There are instruments which tell the nearness of anything solid," replied Chuffy. "We are still a tremendous distance above the planet's surface—and, if it's any comfort, you might as well know that our speed has now been reduced to something quite negligible. Bill said he was going to approach Venus timidly, and he's doing it. But don't ask me how he decreased our speed from some thousands of miles a second to a mere mile or so a minute. Anyhow, there's no need to worry."

"Who," asked Stan Goodman, "is worrying?"

They were very impatient, however—until, during breakfast, one of the stewards whispered that the mist was thinning appreciably. There was another rush for the observation windows—and shouts of astonishment went up.

"Look! Mountains—and forests!"

"Just like the Amazon jungles on earth!"

"Great crackers!"

The Asterion was descending slowly, and if the boys had any lingering doubts as to the controllability of the airship, these doubts were now set at rest. Exactly as the Asterion had descended into that meadow near Whitelands, so she was now descending towards the surface of the planet Venus.

Even as the boys stared out of the plastic windows, the last of the misty clouds were left behind; the ship descended into clear atmosphere—but she was still many miles above the planet's surface. Those clouds were a great deal higher than any earth clouds, and much more dense.

"Talk of miracles!" said Dick Sylvester tensely. "If anybody had told me a week ago, that I should soon be landing on Venus, I should have said he was crackers."

"I suppose it'll be safe?" said Kenneth Pyne. "Safe to land, you know. What if the bally place is infested with queer kinds of wild animals? Dashed awkward, what?"

Lord Chuffmore laughed.

"Awkward for the wild animals," he agreed. "Bill and I haven't neglected an important thing like that. The Asterion is provided with super cannon guns and

machine-guns—like an over-sized warplane. There's quite an arsenal below, too. Machine-guns—tommy-guns—rifles—grenades—everything. We're not going to be caught napping."

This was good hearing, although the boys paid scant attention. They were far too fascinated by all that they could see. After dropping for hours through endless mists, the airship was now in a glare of strange daylight, dropping towards a vast vista of mountains and forests. As far as the eye could see, there was nothing but an incredibly rugged landscape—different from, yet startlingly like an earth landscape.

The boys did not know it, but the Asterion's heating apparatus had long since been turned off, and now the cooling plant was in full operation. The temperature within the great, metal shell remained constant, for the air conditioning was perfect.

As the boys saw the landscape coming nearer and nearer, they realised that everything connected with these Venusian forests was on a huge scale. The trees, grotesque looking, were ten times bigger than any earth trees—they dwarfed the giant redwoods of California, and their foliage was curiously pale—a weak, delicate, sickly green.

Professor Bill, in the control room, selected a comparatively clear spot for the landing; but it was not until the vessel was nearly on the point of making history that the boys saw that the "trees" were not trees at all.

"Why, they look like nettles," ejaculated Bob Davis breathlessly. "Whacking great stinging nettles! They're about sixty or seventy feet high!"

"Crumbs! If everything on Venus is this size, I shouldn't like to be bitten by a gnat!" said Stan Goodman. "Hey! Hold tight, everybody! We're going to land!"

A minute later the Asterion touched ground with hardly a jolt—and there she stood, on the surface of the planet, Venus. The apparently impossible had been accomplished—and accomplished so easily that the boys hardly realised the tremendous nature of Professor Sylvester's triumph.

"Look—flowers!" muttered Pat Warren, pointing. "Those reddish things growing among the nettles!"

Flowers six feet high! Over there, towards the left, I can see all sorts of other coloured flowers—”

“What are *those*?” yelled Goodman suddenly.

He was staring at some strange objects which were fitting and floating far above—and gradually coming nearer. At first sight they looked like enormous bats, and soon there were flocks of them, high in the air and wheeling menacingly. Some of them ventured nearer, circling the grounded airship at close quarters. In the control room, Professor Bill was staring at the great observation dome. His attention had been attracted by faint thuds—and he now saw, clinging to the outer portion of the transparent plastic, two extraordinary figures. They were bat-like monsters, fully fifteen feet in height, and it seemed to Bill that the creatures were covered with soft hair; they had enormous feet with webbing between the toes. Wings, too—wings of the same webbing, and heads set between curiously narrow shoulders; and their faces, while being ridiculously human in aspect, were completely different, and their gleaming, blood-red eyes were awful to see.

It was only a brief vision, for the two creatures released their hold and fluttered away.

“Archibald—Archibald!” shouted the professor, wild with excitement. “Did you see? At last we have the proof—Venus is inhabited!”

The professor was not the only one who was excited, and everybody was eager to leave the ship and set actual foot on Venusian soil; but this was not so easy. As yet, the atmosphere of Venus had not been tested and, for all the explorers knew, it might be as deadly as poison gas.

However, there were plenty of ‘breathing suits’—asbestoe-lined, insulated suits with transparent, plastic helmets and independent oxygen supplies. A human being, wearing one of these suits, could breathe normally and move about with perfect ease—and do so for hours.

A small party of pioneers prepared. Lord Chuffmore, Mr. Mickie, the Asterion’s chief engineer—a dour Scot named Angus McRae—and two other men donned the breathing suits. The boys were very indignant because they were not allowed to join in. But their protests went unheeded.

"Don't venture far from the ship," advised Professor Bill. "All I want you to do is to test the atmospheric pressure and the 'feel' generally. Moving and walking about will be slightly different from the earth, but I do not think you will find any difficulty. You will probably feel lighter. While you are gone, I intend to admit some of the atmosphere through the testing tube and submit it to a careful analysis. We shall soon know whether the atmosphere of Venus is air, as we know it, or something deadly to the human lungs."

Soon, everything was ready. The little party descended to the lower, exit door. Here there was a kind of lobby which could be hermetically sealed by an inner door. The outer door was then opened, admitting the planet's atmosphere to this one confined space.

The first men to set foot on Venus felt a curious rush as the outer door opened, and then Lord Chuffmore strode forward and descended the metal steps. He took three or four paces on the surface of Venus—and staggered drunkenly. He felt curiously light, and found difficulty in controlling his equilibrium. But this was only a temporary drawback, for he soon found that he was able to adjust his balance to the new conditions.

They did not venture far from the airship; for after the first twenty yards or so, they saw that the terrain, at close quarters was extremely difficult. Their feet sank into boggy patches, and from ground level, too, the nature of the vegetation assumed fantastic proportions. This forest of stinging nettles soared above their heads to a height of sixty feet. Beyond, in the distance, they could see trees—real trees, similar in shape and foliage to earth trees. But they reared for many hundreds of feet into the air—even thousands of feet.

This first close glimpse of Venus gave the humans a curious sense of insignificance. Everything on this planet was enormous—Grass, flowers, weeds, trees, insect life—everything was fashioned on a huge scale. They were Gullivers in the land of Brobdingnag; and their imaginations failed to cope with the possibilities.

What chance was there for a handful of human beings in such a world as this? A world where the insects were presumably as large and dangerous as forest monsters; a world where the forest monsters were—Were what? At any moment the explorers were expect-

ing some grim and vast monstrosity to pounce upon them, and even the adventurous Lord Chuffmore was glad when urgent signals came from the airship, advising them to return.

After they were inside, and had shed their plastic helmets, Professor Sylvester trotted out the surprising news.

"I have made the test, my friends," he said, his eyes gleaming. "Astounding as it may seem, the air of Venus is breathable. It is heavy—decidedly heavy—but I am convinced that humans can breathe it with safety. I intend to make a practical test at once."

Then the Asterion was thrown open, as it were. After Chuffy had warned everybody what to expect, the great metal shutters were raised from the promenade decks, and the atmosphere of Venus was allowed to surge through every nook and cranny of the airship.

It was a painful experience while it lasted. Indeed, two of the boys passed out completely, although when they recovered they were none the worse. Within half-an-hour everybody was laughing at their earlier discomfort, and they became so accustomed to breathing Venusian air that it seemed no different from ordinary air.

The boys crowded the promenade deck, and leaned over the rail, gazing at the strange landscape.

"What about a spot of exploring?" suggested Lord Chuffmore. "The tractors on this crate are supposed to work, aren't they? Why not trundle along for a bit, and see what happens?"

"An excellent idea," said Professor Bill. "We will force our way through this forest of nettles and see what lies beyond."

CHAPTER V.

A Surprise.

The Asterion was soon moving forward with a graceful, majestic rolling motion, her immense tractors almost silent.

"Well, she works," remarked Chuffy. "I was half afraid that your precious gravisylys, or whatever they are, wouldn't operate on Venus, Bill."

"My dear fellow, quite the contrary is the case," said

the other. "All energy is derived from the sun, and we are much nearer to the sun than we were on earth. Consequently, the cohesion of——"

"All right—I'll take your word for it," said Chuffy hastily. "This is no time for going into a long scientific chin-wag. I'm too keen on the landscape."

By this time they had all collected on the forward observation deck—which, in effect, was a continuation of the port and starboard promenade decks. It extended, in a semi-circular arc, round the very nose of the airship, and from this excellent point of vantage, the observers had a direct view of the scene immediately ahead and below. If the boys had been less excited—and they were frankly bubbling—they would have been aware of a feeling of great strain. It would probably take them days to become thoroughly acclimatised to the Venusian conditions.

"Why trundle along like an over-sized tank?" asked Stan Goodman impatiently. "I thought the Asterion was an airship? Why can't we fly over these forests?"

"Nothing easier," replied Dick Sylvester. "But Uncle Bill and Chuffy want to get a close view, and the best way to do that is to stay on the ground. They want to see what will happen, too, when we butt into these giant nettles."

They soon saw. The great mass of metal, striking the vast tangle of pale green vegetation, forced its way through with supreme ease. The sixty-foot weeds crashed over to right and left as the monster land yacht—as the Asterion had now become—proceeded on her way. The nettles cracked and crashed with a curiously hollow noise, and almost immediately the air became filled with a rank, pungent smell—not altogether unpleasant, but slightly overpowering.

By the time they were in the middle of the "nettle forest," the pungent smell was much more pronounced, and the explorers were affected by a slight dizziness. Shouts went up from the boys when grotesque insects were seen to rise from the crashing weeds—insects of a pale, sickly colour, many of them as large as eagles. Lord Chuffmore stood by, ready to close the metal shutters at the first sign of danger—and this could be done instantaneously. Luckily, none of the strange insects came anywhere near the Asterion.

Suddenly the last of the "forest"—which was probably only a mere weed patch—was left behind, and the Asterion emerged upon open ground. A wonderful scene lay before the human visitors.

They were on the summit of a long, sloping hill, which descended before them smoothly. Coarse grass—grass twenty or thirty feet high—covered the ground. At the bottom of the slope, ran a great, broad river. On the opposite bank, trees were growing in abundance—trees which seemed to reach up into the very sky. Away into the far, dim distance there was nothing to be seen but tangled forests and winding rivers. No sign of a habitation—no building. The Venusian world was apparently composed of virgin forest and plain.

The Asterion continued on her way downhill, until, finally, Professor Bill brought her to rest near the bank of the great river. Here, there was a clear, barren space, where very little grass grew, and where the ground was hard, rocky and solid. There was now no sign of the strange, flying creatures—or, indeed, of any living thing.

"I intend to land," said Professor Bill firmly. "I want to examine the soil—the grass—the weeds—the water of this river. Nothing can be done unless we go down to close quarters."

Lord Chuffmore and "Mickey Mouse" agreed. Dick Sylvester and his chums, needless to say, were eager to land, too. At first, Professor Bill regarded this suggestion with disapproval, but the boys set up such a protesting clamour that he smilingly gave in.

"All right—you can leave the ship providing you promise not to stray beyond a radius of a hundred yards or so," he said, his voice becoming grave. "Remember, boys, that this is a totally unknown world. We may be safe. On the other hand, dire dangers may sweep upon us with scarcely a minute's warning. Until we have been on Venus a few days, we cannot know. Therefore, we must be ready to retreat into the metal-protected walls of the Asterion at the first sign—at the first vague hint—of possible danger. Is that thoroughly understood?"

It was. Chuffy, who shared the professor's sense of caution, further suggested that everybody should be provided with rifles or automatic pistols.

"That's all right, sir," said Dick. "We chaps can handle rifles; we all belong to the Whitelands Cadet Corps. It'll make us feel safer, won't it?"

Less than twenty minutes later, the party left the airship, and walked on the hard, gritty soil of Venus. The boys, coatless, with rifles slung across their shoulders, looked business-like; Lord Chuffmore and Mr. Mickie, with automatics in their hands, paid scant attention to their immediate surroundings, for they were watching the sky and the middle distance—ready to give the warning if anything unusual happened.

Professor Bill was the only one who acted like a schoolboy; he was as eager as a child to explore, to examine, to investigate. He pounced upon every object in sight—stones, fragments of rock, plant-life.

The boys advanced towards a river, eager to find what the water was like . . .

It was Stan Goodman who first saw the figure standing on the forward observation deck of the Asterion, leaning over the rail, watching the land party with a kind of cynical interest.

"Hey!" ejaculated Goodman, startled. "Look up there!"

The others looked—and blinked. Unless they were mistaken, the man on the forward deck was Paul Valescu!

Professor Bill was impatient and irritable when Chuffy drew his attention to the figure. Then he stared incredulously. Until that moment, everybody had believed that Valescu had dived overboard during the first moments of the Asterion's dramatic ascent from earth, and several days had elapsed since then! Yet here he was—with a rifle in his hands, and a dangerous expression on his flushed face.

"My trick, gentlemen, I think," he said mockingly.

"Very smooth—very spectacular, Valescu," said Chuffy, looking up at the man. "But this isn't going to get you anywhere. What's the idea, anyway?"

"The idea, Lord Chuffmore, is that you and Professor Sylvester have been incautious enough to leave the airship—which is now in my possession," shouted Valescu, with a wild note in his voice. "Do you understand? The Asterion is mine!"

"You infernal fool——" began Professor Bill.

"Don't move, my friend," interrupted Valescu, steady-ing his rifle. "I know how to use this thing, and I will shoot the first person who attempts to approach."

"Gosh! He means it, too," muttered Chuffy. "Better take it easy, Bill. This looks sticky. The man's obviously as batty as a coot—and as cunning."

The boys were watching with bated breath. They had half expected some kind of danger to loom up, once they had set foot on Venusian soil—but they had never dreamed that the danger would come from a fellow human—and a stowaway at that!

"You thought I had jumped overboard by parachute," continued Valescu triumphantly. "But I fully intended to accompany you on this trip to the planets. It was a paid underling of mine who jumped overboard with the parachute. He was ready, waiting—and at the critical moment, he leapt over the rail. In that way you were deceived; you thought it was *I* who had jumped. I have been on board ever since—hiding. Oh, yes—I had my men planted among your crew weeks ago, and I had my hiding place well prepared in advance."

"But, look here, Valescu, what good is this going to do you?" asked Lord Chuffmore **mildly**. "What was the reason for all this jiggery pokery? Since you have forced yourself upon us as a passenger, we shall have to put up with you. There's no need for this melo-dramatic nonsense."

"You are mistaken," said Valescu grimly. "You thought I had jumped overboard—therefore you instituted no search of the vessel. I have come with you unsuspected. Now the Asterion is mine."

"You're mad," said Professor Sylvester hotly.

"And you, my friends, are marooned."

There was a tense silence.

"Do you understand that?" continued Valescu, his voice rising again. "I waited my opportunity—and now you are marooned on the planet Venus. This ship is mine. I am in sole control. I shall return to earth, and you will remain here."

The man was obviously demented.

"I don't think you will last long," he continued, with a chuckle. "An hour or so, at most. We have already had evidence of wild creatures in these Venusian wastes."

The party on the ground heard these words like a death knell. They had landed light-heartedly, believing that everybody aboard the Asterion was friendly and trustworthy— Then came a gleam of hope. Chief Engineer McRae and another man appeared in Valescu's rear, and they were ready to pounce. Some tiny sound warned the man, however, and he spun round.

"Back, you fools," he said curtly.

But they sprang at him, and two automatics cracked simultaneously. One was Valescu's, and McRae reeled back, wounded; the other automatic was Chuffy's—and even at that distance, and at that awkward angle, his bullet grazed Valescu's shoulder, causing the man to spin round like a top. The next second Valescu, panting Rumanian oaths, had vanished.

"All aboard—and for heaven's sake hurry!" gasped Chuffy. "He's bound for the control room, and in two minutes he'll have the old crate in the air."

There was a wild rush. Stan Goodman and Dick Sylvester were nearer than anybody else, but before they could reach the open door, the airship gave a preliminary quiver. Instinctively, Goodman leaped upon one of the great tractor wheels, and Dick followed his example. The next moment the Asterion gave a lurch and rose into the air—carrying the two boys with it. Nobody had reached the doorway—

"Drop, you idiots!" yelled Tim Charters wildly. "No, don't drop—not now!"

It was too late. The airship was already a hundred feet up. There, with rare cunning, Paul Valescu caused her to hover. The land party was completely out of reach—hopelessly marooned—yet Valescu was still able to shout down to them.

Stan Goodman and Dick Sylvester were in a perilous position. Clinging to that great tractor, a slip would mean certain death, even at this height. If Valescu took the airship into the upper sky, they were doomed, anyway.

It seemed absurd, and opposed to all the laws of nature that that vast mass of metal could remain motionless, without obvious means of suspension, a hundred feet clear of the ground. Apparently, Valescu was able to handle the controls as ably as the professor himself.

It was during this tense period that Dick Sylvester and Stan Goodman saw that they had one chance of life. If they could climb up the great, tractor wheel while the Asterion was hovering and motionless, they might save themselves. From the top of the stream-lined upper casing of the tractor, it would be just possible to reach the promenade deck. At least, so the boys thought. Actually, the feat was impossible . . .

Professor Sylvester's anguish was painful to witness. He was utterly distracted. This vessel was the child of his brain, and it was in the hands of a crazed man. Lord Chuffmore stood calm and grim—he was perfectly cool. Chuffy was always cool, under any circumstances; many flirtations with death had taught him the folly of becoming excited, and that most mistakes are made under such conditions. For once in his life however, Chuffy was helpless.

In the control room of the Asterion, Paul Valescu chuckled as he turned to the door. He emerged to find himself facing several members of the vessel's crew, led by Collins and Banks, the engineers. They were grim, determined men. McRae was not badly hurt, but he might easily have been killed. These others were in an ugly mood.

"I hope you're not going to attempt anything foolish," said Valescu curtly. "You saw what happened to your friend. Do you want me to shoot again? Obey my orders, and no harm shall come to any of you—"

"We'll obey none of your orders," said Collins fiercely, "until you have lowered the ship and allowed the others to come on board."

"I am afraid that's impossible," said Valescu. "They are not coming aboard. Now, go back to your posts or I'll shoot."

They hesitated, then moved forward in a body. Instantly, Valescu's weapon cracked three times in quick succession. Two of the men cried aloud as bullets ripped into their flesh. The others stood stock still, aghast.

"Do you see?" said Valescu coolly. "I mean what I say. Don't squirm, my friends—you are only grazed. My aim is true, and I did not fire to kill. Unless you obey my orders, I *shall* fire to kill."

After that grim demonstration, the men, anxious as they were regarding the marooned party, could do nothing but obey. They were about to do so when, from a small metal doorway in the lobby behind Valescu two figures emerged.

Dick Sylvester and Stan Goodman!

After climbing up the great tractor they had found, within the stream-lined casing, a small, metal door—used for inspection purposes. Climbing through this, they had found themselves in the inner lining of the hull—a mysterious space which had confused them at first owing to the darkness. Fumbling their way up a metal ladder they had found an inner door—and were now emerging.

"Valescu!" yelled Goodman. "On him!"

He sprang recklessly, and Dick Sylvester made a wild dive at Valescu's feet. The next second, the man was sent hurtling to the deck, his gun knocked out of his hands. That attack from the rear had come so suddenly that he had been unprepared. Valescu's kickings and strugglings were unavailing against the strength of the two stalwart schoolboys.

It was at that moment that two of the Asterion's white-coated stewards came running up. Both men held automatics, and they jabbed the muzzles into the backs of the schoolboys, and dragged Dick and Goody to their feet.

"That'll be enough, kids," snapped one of the men. "All right, Mr. Valescu—we've got them."

Dick Sylvester goggled unbelievably. These men—these stewards—were paid creatures of Valescu's! Now that the brief struggle was over, both boys felt curiously weak and faint. No doubt there was something in the atmosphere which affected them.

"You dirty traitors!" muttered Dick miserably. "This man is my uncle's enemy. Why don't you grab him—"

"Leave the boys to me," interrupted Valescu curtly. "Take your guns and subdue any members of the crew who show fight. Why were you so long in coming?"

He turned to the two startled boys without waiting for his men to answer.

"Perhaps you will realise, now, my young friends, that I am a man who makes careful plans," he said. "Professor Sylvester did not suspect that certain members of his crew were in my pay; it was not my

intention that they should reveal their true colours until the right moment had arrived."

Dick groaned inwardly. The thing was becoming clear to him. He had been wondering how the Rumanian had existed during the past few days; obviously, these underlings of his had hidden him and carried him food. What men in the vessel were better placed for such a purpose?

Five minutes later, Dick and Goody were locked away—but only temporarily. The main party was already marooned—and they were to be taken to another spot, perhaps a hundred miles away, and marooned by themselves.

On the Venusian ground, anxiety was written on every face. The members of the party were staring upwards at the hovering airship. She was so near—so big. Yet she might as well have been a hundred miles away. With the disappearance of the two boys on the tractor, a faint hope had been born—but nothing had happened since.

"Do you think that lunatic meant what he said?" muttered Mr. Mickie, after an anxious glance at the group of boys.

"I always knew he was a bit cracked, but I didn't think he was dangerous," replied Lord Chuffmore. "If he does mean it, we're sunk."

"The man has been a nuisance for weeks—for months," said the professor anxiously. "You have only known him recently, Archibald; but throughout the construction of my ship, Valescu has, from time to time, pestered me. We must realise that the whole position is different now that we're here—on Venus. On earth, Valescu was just a nuisance. But what if he maroons us on Venus? I will tell you! He will return to earth and he will publicly claim the airship as his own invention. He will not only become famous, but he will make a fortune. What fools we were to leave the ship—"

"Take it easy Bill," interrupted Chuffy. "We didn't know the blighter was on board. It wasn't our fault that we under-estimated the cunning of this madman—"

"Look, sir!" yelled one of the boys. "The airship's moving!"

Professor Sylvester uttered a groan. His superb Asterion was rising higher and higher into the air—

and as she rose, Valescu came to the rail of the forward observation deck and leaned over.

"Farewell, my poor friends," he shouted mockingly. "I do not think you will last long. I shall not return to earth just yet, for I have a mind to tour round Venus."

He laughed and disappeared. Soon afterwards the Asterion commenced moving rapidly in a forward direction. A dead silence fell upon the marooned party as they watched. Their last and only link with everything earthly, was disappearing before their eyes. It seemed to them, in that moment, that the gleaming airship was like a bit of old Mother Earth herself; and once she had gone, there was nothing left to remind them of home.

Marooned! Cast adrift in a strange land—a new and terrifying world. The Unknown. For all they knew, fearful dangers lurked on every side, and they were so appalled by their thoughts that speech was impossible.

The Asterion grew smaller and smaller in the Venusian sky until she became a mere speck—until she vanished. Staring until their eyes ached, the party of men and boys failed to notice other specks in the sky—behind them, appearing from the opposite horizon. Hovering specks—floating, twisting, turning.

The Bat Men! Those queer creatures which had been glimpsed earlier, and which had apparently been scared off by the strangeness of the airship. Now they were returning, swooping nearer, and coming in great numbers.

CHAPTER VI.

The Prisoners

Dick Sylvester and Stan Goodman, breathless, bruised and frankly scared, heard the solid, metal door close behind them as they were thrust into their temporary prison. This proved to be a store-room; a long, narrow space fitted with shelves, with every shelf full of sealed boxes and canisters. Concentrated food, perhaps—or high explosive. The boys were in no mood to investigate—yet. All they could think of was their grim predicament—and the far worse predicament of their schoolfellows who had been left stranded.

"We must *do* something, Sylvester!" said Goodman, his eyes burning with determination. "Those other chaps—your uncle—Chuffy—old Mickie! They'll die, or be killed, or something, unless——"

"What's the good of telling me that?" interrupted Dick, in anguish. "It's awful, Goody, and the worst thing of all is our helplessness. How can we hope to get out of here? This door is solid metal and it's hermetically sealed. We might as well be shut up inside a bank vault!"

"By crackers!" groaned Goodman. "We expected all sorts of dangers on Venus—and we were ready to hop into the sky at the first sign of them. No dangers could have touched us in the airship, thousands of feet up. But I'm dashed if we expected that blighter Valescu to throw a spanner in the works—— Surely the other members of the crew will get the better of him before long?"

Dick shook his head.

"Better not hope for anything like that, old man," he said, his gaze roving up and down the store-room—which, like every other part of the airship, was lit by invisible rays. "Valescu has those two men of his, and they're all armed. They're determined, too—as we've seen. The crew may be loyal to Uncle Bill, but we can't expect them to get themselves killed. Valescu is in full control now."

Tap—tap—tap—tap!

"What's that?" asked Goodman suddenly.

A strange, faint tapping sound had come from the far end of the storage chamber. It had only commenced a moment or two earlier, and both boys moved along, straining their ears. The tapping was repeated, and it seemed to come from behind a jutting metal bulkhead at the end.

"It's nothing," muttered Goodman. "Caused by the motion of the ship, I expect——"

"No fear," interrupted Dick. "It's a deliberate tapping, and—— I say, look here! There's a narrow kind of door behind this bulkhead, with whacking great fastenings. Look at this big handle."

Dick seized the handle as he spoke, and with one wrench forced it down. The door, which was only eighteen inches wide, came open at once, revealing an

inner storage chamber. Two figures came blundering out—

"Wicks!" yelled Goodman, in amazement. "Great jumping crackers! Those blighters, Wicks and Crocker!"

The foremost figure clutched at Dick.

"We—we heard voices," it babbled. "First voices we've heard for days— We banged on the door—"

"All right—all right," interrupted Dick, removing the clutching hands. "Don't be so scared. How the dickens did you get in this store-room?"

"As if we haven't troubles enough!" snorted Goodman, glaring. "Now we have these miserable worms on our hands! How many more giddy stowaways are there aboard this airship? Madmen—paid crooks—and now you two wasters!"

The two wasters did not look very happy. Goodman's welcome jarred on them. Enoch Wicks and Oswald Crocker, of Study No. 2 in the Fourth, were not popular. Wicks was a cunning-faced young schemer with the unenviable reputation of being the Fourth's biggest liar and sneak; and Oswald Crocker, his study mate, was so weak that he was merely Wicks' yes-man. A bright pair. They had stowed away—and were now trapped like Stan and Dick. They did not believe their Asterion was now on Venus. Stan was about to drive the truth home forcibly when Dick stopped him.

"All right, Goody—don't slaughter him!" said Dick, as he saw Goodman's clenched fist. "You can't expect these chaps to take it all in at once. They'll never believe us—until they see things with their own eyes. It's too staggering. So, instead of wasting time, let's see if we can find some way out of this hole."

Meanwhile, the marooned party, clustered together on the bank of the sinister-looking Venusian river, felt utterly helpless after the airship had disappeared into the haze. They were like shipwrecked mariners—without supplies, without food or stores; and the dangers of the Unknown were all about them.

"No sense in denying it, kids—we're in a mess," said Lord Chuffmore, looking at the Whitelands boys and speaking briskly. "But, because we're in a mess, we needn't give up hope. We'd better organise ourselves."

"I wish I knew what had happened to Dick and

Goody," muttered Tim Charters anxiously. "They're probably dead by this time, poor chaps."

"We shall be dead pretty soon—so what's the difference?" said Bob Davis miserably. "How can we live in a world like this?"

All eyes were constantly turning towards the giant forests on the other side of the river. Many of the boys half expected to see some stupendous forest creature, bigger than the prehistoric animals of earth, break through the trees and come to the attack. In any case, Chuffy's talk of "organising" was more or less idle—for there was really nothing to be done. This spot, by chance, happened to be fairly open, and there was no danger of a surprise attack. Whatever happened, the humans would have warning— And, all the time, in every heart, there was a faint hope; there was a feeling that Valescu had been bluffing. Soon, the airship would return to pick them up. It was incredible that Valescu could really have marooned them.

Professor Bill was the only member of the party who feared the worst—and he kept his own counsel. He had gauged Valescu's character accurately. Valescu did not mean to return. The Asterion had gone—never to return.

But the others—particularly the schoolboys—kept looking up into the sky, hoping against hope that the gleaming bulk of the airship would reappear. But the only specks in the sky were the hovering groups of Bat Men, who still flew at a great height, and a great distance away—as though awaiting their opportunity.

Sam Kennedy was the first to see the ant-creatures . . .

"Listen Pyne," he muttered suddenly, gripping the arm of his study mate, with whom he was standing. "I may be seeing things, but take a look over towards those rocky hummocks. Is something moving?"

Kenneth Pyne turned his head and looked—and blinked.

"I'm afraid something is moving, old thing," he said, with a catch in his voice. "For the love of Jiminy Cricket! Earwigs! Earwigs as big as mastiffs! Yet they're not earwigs—and they're not exactly ants— Hey, Mr. Mickie! Chuffy! Have you seen 'em?"

They had. The ant-creatures—as they may be called, for want of a better name—were appearing from queer

burrows in the ground among the rocks two or three hundred yards away. They were long, sinuous creatures, pale green in colour, and bearing some slight resemblance to ants. But each one was as big as a Newfoundland dog! They came in threes and fours at first, and then in dozens—and scores.

“Don’t run,” said Chuffy tensely. “For heaven’s sake, kids, keep your heads. If we start running we shall probably incite the beggars to attack.”

“I’m afraid this looks like the end, Mick,” whispered Professor Bill, to the Fourth Form master. “Men have been killed by ordinary ants on earth—tiny things no bigger than your finger nail. So what chance shall we have against these horrors?”

“If they’re poisonous, they’ll wipe us out in less than a minute,” agreed Mr. Mickie grimly. “If we stand our ground we shall be overwhelmed—and if we scatter and run, we shall be in a worse fix than ever.”

It was, indeed, a grim and fearful moment. The ant-creatures, as yet, were still some distance away; but they appeared to be massing in a kind of formation, and there was something horribly concerted in their movements.

Then, unexpectedly, confusion. The ant-creatures seemed to falter and hesitate, and, scuffling hurriedly, and scurrying here and there, they turned tail. Within a minute they had disappeared into their burrows.

“That’s funny,” said Chuffy frowning. “They must have taken fright for some reason— Anyhow, it’s a bit of a respite for us—”

“I think they took fright,” said Professor Bill mildly, “because of these extraordinary creatures.”

He was staring into the sky—towards their rear. The Bat Men! Their approach unperceived, because the human party had been staring at the ant-creatures, they were now alarmingly close, and approaching even nearer. Scores of them—and now the boys could hear a faint, peculiar clicking and a soft fluttering.

“Vultures!” muttered Chuffy. “Just like a flock of vultures.”

“An amazing sight,” agreed the professor. “As a scientist, I am vastly interested in this astonishing spectacle. After all, there is no certainty that they are antagonistic—”

"That's what you think!" snapped Chuffy.

The Bat Men were swooping nearer and nearer, sometimes swinging this way, and then sweeping off in wild curves that way; now the leathery swish of their wings could be clearly heard— Suddenly, they pounced.

It was a dramatically swift attack. Dozens of the Bat Men—who appeared to be the "human beings" of Venus—dropped like stones and landed on the ground all round the earth party. At close quarters they were fearsome, indeed. Fully ten or twelve feet in height, their wings folded back like those of a bat, their grotesque faces were dominated by their huge, blood-red eyes. The clicking sounds were coming from the creatures' slit-like mouths. On the ground, they were clumsy and cumbersome, hopping and lurching about.

A minute earlier, Chuffy had half made up his mind to advise the boys to use their rifles; but now it was too late. If, indeed, the Bat Men were not aggressive, but merely curious, it would have been a fatal mistake to start a needless slaughter. But now the humans were overwhelmed—smothered by sheer numbers.

"This is it, you chaps!" gurgled Will Osborne.

Many of the others uttered similar cries, and Lord Chuffmore and Professor Bill managed to exchange agonised glances before they were half buried by the Venusian enemy. It did their hearts good to hear the schoolboys' shouts, for they were shouts of defiance. But what was the use? Fists were no good against these monsters.

Suddenly, Chuffy realised that nobody was actually being hurt. He had expected claw-like hooks to clutch him and crush his bones; but, although he was held firmly enough by two of the Bat Men, he was not injured.

Every member of the party was seized—gripped by the fearsome bird-men; and all the time, the Venusians were clicking away in that strange manner. Vaguely, it occurred to Chuffy and the others that the Bat Men were talking, and discussing what should be done.

"My hat! We're still alive!" panted Will Osborne.

"Yes, but for how long?" breathed Charters. "Oh, my goodness! There's a horrible, animal smell— Here, what the dickens— Help! What's happening?"

He soon found out what was happening—and so did the others. The Venusians were performing a very peculiar act. Charters found himself being bound up—secured by curious silken cords which the Bat Man was producing from some hidden source. It was a sticky, glutinous cord, and it was even possible that the monster was producing it from his own body, after the fashion of a spider. Charters was twirled round and round, held by claw-like hands and feet, as the sticky cord continued to wind itself about him—until, indeed, he almost resembled a cocoon. Only his head and face were left free. His arms were pinioned so tightly that he could scarcely move, and every other member of the party was being treated in exactly the same way.

“This is good!” said Lord Chuffmore, his voice surprisingly cool. “It proves, anyway, that the blighting things don’t intend to kill us out of hand. They wouldn’t go to the trouble of binding us up like this if they meant to polish us off.”

“Upon my word! I believe you are right, Archibald,” said the professor. “I say, this is exciting. Extraordinary too. How is this cord being produced? Have you noticed, any of you. It appears to be a silken substance, not unlike thick gossamer.”

Preparations were being made by the Venusians for another move. Having completed their task, the creatures were standing about, staring at the prisoners out of their fearful-looking crimson eyes. At first sight they had seemed to be monstrosities out of a nightmare; and closer inspection did nothing to alter this view. They kept up their continuous clicking, and the boys, although unhurt, could not help feeling that their captors were only reserving them for something worse than quick death.

Abruptly, the clicking ceased. The huge Bat Man holding Chuffy suddenly took a firm grip, tucking his lordship close to its body; at the same moment its great wings opened wide, and it flapped off the ground.

“Hi!” yelled Chuffy. “This is a bit thick! The bally things are carrying us off somewhere.”

All the rest of the Bat Men took to the air at the same moment. It was a slow, laborious flight, for the weight of the burdens was considerable. Round and about the carriers, scores of other Bat Men flew as a kind of escort.

The earlier experience had been startling enough, but this was terrifying, in all truth. Up they rose, higher and higher, wheeling and turning. Tim Charters and the others were fearful, at first, lest their captors should loosen the grip and allow them to fall; but there was no chance of this, for the sticky silken cords were like glue, and the prisoners were virtually stuck to their captors.

Two or three hundred feet up in the air, the Venusians arranged themselves into a definite formation; those with the prisoners were in the centre, in one group; on either side came flocks of other Bat Men, taking up their positions on the flanks. A further number went in advance, leading the way. Then, after further wheeling about, the entire flock set off in a straight line towards the great, mysterious forest.

Perhaps Lord Chuffmore was the most level-headed of the prisoners; even amid these perils, the thought which occurred to him was a grim and ugly one. What if Valescu had only been bluffing? What if he brought the airship back to the spot where he had marooned his victims? A lot of good bringing the airship back now—for they were being carried off into the wild unknown!

CHAPTER VII.

An Exciting Discovery

Enoch Wicks, of the Fourth, regarded Dick Sylvester and Stanley Horatio Goodman with considerable annoyance.

"What's the matter with you chaps?" he asked plaintively. "Why can't you trot out the truth? What's all this silly rot about the planet Venus?"

"Yes," said Crocker. "You know dashed well we're still somewhere in Dorset——"

"Listen, you two warts!" snapped Dick Sylvester, turning on them. "We told you the truth, and it's not our fault if you don't believe it. You think were in a tight corner—but we're on velvet compared with old Chuffy and Uncle Bill and a lot more of our chaps. They're marooned—and probably in awful danger."

"Marooned?" repeated Wicks, blinking. "Somewhere out in the Channel, you mean? There aren't any islands

—except that little one in the estuary, near Marsby Head

“Oh, why waste time on the lunatics?” snorted Goodman. “We must find a way out of this giddy hole. But how? That’s the question.”

They searched about, and soon found that the walls offered no possibility: they were built of that same hard metal, and there was no break. The only doors in these two store-rooms were the communicating door and the outer door; and this latter was heavily secured on the other side.

“Afraid it’s not much good,” muttered Dick, at length. “We shall simply have to wait until——”

“What’s this?” interrupted Goodman abruptly.

He was staring at the floor at the extreme end of the outer compartment. At first sight, the floor, in this spot, looked exactly like the rest of the floor. It was of thick metal. But when Dick Sylvester bent closer he saw that there was an almost invisible outline of a square.

“A trap door?” he breathed questioningly.

“Looks something like it, anyway,” muttered Goodman. “How the dickens we’re going to pull it up, though, I can’t imagine— Unless— By crackers! Look! There’s a little strip of metal at this edge which folds back.”

He moved the metal, and a spring catch was revealed.

“It is a trap door!” ejaculated Dick.

He seized the catch, gave it a jerk, and the square, metal door at once hinged upwards. A short ladder led downwards into a narrow space. Before Dick could prevent him, Stan Goodman was lowering himself.

“It’s all right!” panted Goodman, after a few moments. “It seems to be a kind of passage—rummily lit like everything else on this ship. Come on, you chaps. There might be a way out.”

Dick descended eagerly enough, and the startled Wicks and Crocker, after glancing at one another, followed. Dick was intrigued when he reached the lower level. He was, indeed, standing in a narrow passage, and along one side there were deep slots, or pigeon-holes—and each one contained an object which looked astonishingly like a live shell.

The explanation was soon forthcoming. The end of the passage opened out into a cannon-gun emplacement, built into the double shell of the hull. There was a mechanically-operated door in the outer shell.

"Well, I must say Uncle Bill has provided for everything," said Dick, momentarily forgetting his anxiety in admiration. "The Asterion is like a giddy battleship! Look at this whacking great cannon-gun—with shells all ready to feed it! In an emergency, this baby could do a whole lot of damage."

"Never mind the gun," said Goodman breathlessly. "Look at *this!*"

He was indicating some steep, metal steps which led upwards through the double hull. It could only mean that there was another exit.

"Why, of course," said Dick eagerly. "You don't suppose the gunner, in an emergency, would have to reach his gun by going through those store-rooms and then down a trap-door? That's only an emergency exit, I expect. Anyway, let's see where this leads."

Dick Sylvester and Stan Goodman had almost forgotten the stowaways; and, indeed, Wicks and Crocker were hanging back, still dazed and bewildered.

The steps were steep, and the space itself was so narrow that the boys were almost obliged to mount sideways. At the top there was a solid, metal door provided with a big handle. When the door was opened, the boys emerged into one of the wide passages in the interior of the airship. Luck was with them. They could not have emerged at a more crucial moment; for as they stepped out, they caught sight of Paul Valescu himself, and the man's back was towards them! He had just emerged from a doorway—

It was one of those moments when there was no time for hesitation. Split seconds counted, and it was characteristic of Stan Goodman to act blindly and recklessly, without a thought for the consequences.

"On him!" he panted, in a tense whisper.

Valescu half swung round at the sound of that voice, and Dick Sylvester knew that the die was cast. There could be no backing out now—even if Valescu had half-a-dozen men within call. The two Fourth Formers hurled themselves at Valescu like an avalanche, Goodman diving for the man's legs and executing a tackle

which would have earned him rounds of applause on the rugger field. The attack was so sudden, so unexpected, that Valescu had no time, even, to draw his gun. He went over with a tremendous crash—and as he landed, Dick Sylvester sprawled across his chest and held him by the arms.

“Nice work, Goody!” he said admiringly.

It was even nicer work than Stanley Horatio realised—and he himself was mainly responsible. In crashing over, Valescu had struck his head violently on the hard floor, and as the boys discovered in the next moment, his utter limpness was due to unconsciousness. They had rendered their chief enemy helpless in the very first attack—as much by luck as by skill. It took them hardly any time at all to drag Valescu into the state-room from which he had just emerged, and close the door . . .

“Now for it!” muttered the Fourth Form skipper, as he gripped Valescu’s automatic pistol in a business-like way. “We’re going after those blighting, treacherous stewards. If they start anything funny, I’m going to shoot!”

“Pity Valescu didn’t have two guns,” grunted Goodman. “Look, Sylvester, you’d better let me have that pistol——”

“Not likely!” interrupted Dick.

He was wise. The valiant Stanley Horatio, a rare fellow to have by one’s side in a fist fight, was highly dangerous in possession of a gun. In his excitement, he was quite likely to blaze away at friend as well as foe. Dick opened the state-room door and slipped out.

“Here, I say——” began Wicks dazedly.

“Say it later,” snapped Dick.

He made straight for the main control room, with Stan Goodman at his heels. Somebody was operating the airship’s controls—probably one of the engineers at the point of a gun—and that meant that Valescu’s men were there.

Bursting into the control room abruptly, Dick found that his surmise was incorrect. Only two men were present—and these were the traitors. They turned around quite casually as the door opened, apparently expecting Valescu.

“Hands up!” snapped Dick grimly.

“Hey, what the heck——”

"Hands up!" shouted Dick. "I mean it. I can use this gun, and I'm going to shoot the first man who tries to do anything. We have Valescu, and now we have you."

Exactly what would have happened if the situation had remained thus, it is difficult to say; probably, the two startled men would have defied the schoolboy's gun, and then the situation might have been extremely ugly. But Stan Goodman, ever the fellow of action, took matters into his own hands. Before Dick could prevent him, he rushed forward—incidentally, getting right into the line of fire and wrecking Dick's chances of shooting—and his clenched fist drove like a sledge-hammer into the jaw of the first man. When Stan Goodman punched, he packed dynamite. The fellow went over like a ninepin.

Swinging round, Goodman savagely attacked the second man, delivering a hard punch in the middle, which caused the fellow to double up—and as he was doubling, Goodman's left came up in a terrific uppercut. Dick, seeing what was happening, dropped his original intention of forcing the men to surrender, and rushed to Goodman's assistance. In any ordinary scrap he would have used his fists, but, even in his excitement, he realised that their very lives might depend upon the result of this fight—to say nothing of the lives of his school-fellows who had been marooned—and he gripped his gun by the barrel and used the butt of it with deadly effect.

As one of the snarling men staggered around, with his arms whirling, Dick crashed the butt end of the gun on the side of his head, and the fellow simply dropped to the floor in a sagging, crumpled heap. By this time, Stan was engaged in a wild scramble with the other man—and was in great danger of getting the worst of it. Dick sped over—and again his gun did its excellent work. One hard wallop, and the man was senseless.

"Phew That was hot!" he breathed tensely.

"Silly ass!" fumed Goodman. "What do you want to come messing about with that gun for? I could have licked the pair of 'em with my bare fists!"

"Perhaps you could, Goody—but it was just as well to be on the safe side," panted Dick Sylvester. "Better rope the blighters up before they recover. The ship's ours! Do you realise that, my bonny, blue-eyed boy?"

Meanwhile the Bat Men had flown for hours with their captives finally depositing them on a ledge high up in the

mountainside; a ledge which gave access to a wide and cavernous tunnel. Through this tunnel they were forced to march. Daylight had been left behind long since, and it seemed to them that they had been shuffling through the black tunnel for hours.

At last, daylight appeared again in the distance, and eventually they emerged once more into the open. It was a surprise, for they had half expected that their destination was to be some vast, underground cavern; they had formed the conclusion that the Bat Men were subterranean creatures.

They were wrong. Full daylight flooded down upon them once more—and they saw the extraordinary nature of their surroundings. They had emerged into a vast rock basin—an incredible cup in the heart of the mountain. On every side towered the rock walls, reaching up and up into the eternal mists. Such was the effect of this canyon-like place that the daylight was comparatively weak. There were dense shadows everywhere. All around the rock walls of the basin were ledges—and cave entrances. Bat Men were there by the hundred—and, in all probability, Bat Women and Children, too . . . This was obviously a great colony of the creatures—a Venusian township!

They lived in tunnels and caves, deep in this rock fastness. It was obvious that the coming of the captured humans had been known in advance, for the whole place was seething with activity. On the far side of the basin, on a great, rock platform, large numbers of Venusians were collected in a kind of ragged group—and Chuffy noticed that one Bat Man in particular was taller and broader than any of the others—a kind of super Bat Man. This great creature was of a lighter colour than his fellows, and it was safe to assume that he was the leader, or chieftain. Lesser Bat Men continuously fluttered about him.

Not that Chuffy—or any of the others, for that matter—paid much attention to the Venusians. They were all fascinated by something which occupied the very centre of the rock basin's floor. It was a great pool, fifty yards from edge to edge—and a greenish, lurid glow was rising from it. Obviously, the pool was full of flaming, molten fire, and volcanic in origin. Indeed, there could be little doubt that the whole, vast basin was actually the crater

of the volcano. Now and again, great livid flames leapt up from the centre of the pool—flames that were greenish at the base, and violet-red at their tips. The whole place was full of unpleasant fumes.

“Crumbs!” muttered Tim Charters. “Look at that!”

There had suddenly been an extra violent burst of liquid fire. It shot straight up in a dazzling cascade, like a great display of fireworks, and millions of sparks fell back into the pool. The prisoners were being marched nearer and nearer—and as they approached, they felt the heat surging upon them like a solid wall of fire. It was well nigh unbearable, suffocating and deadly. The Bat Men, however, seemed to be unaffected by the heat and fumes.

“Here, when the dickens are they going to pull up?” asked Bob Davis, in alarm. “If they take us much nearer, we shall be frizzled to cinders. I’m nearly blind already.”

“Perhaps they’re going to chuck us in,” said Charlie Hunt, in a scared voice.

Many of the other boys were showing signs of distress, and their Venusian captors seemed to grasp the fact that the heat was too much. For there was a sudden alteration in the plan, and the Venusians changed their course—now taking their captives away from the pool, and in a wide circling movement.

CHAPTER VIII

The Deluge

“That’ll do for the time being,” said Sylvester, breathlessly.

He and Stan Goodman had just tied the hands and feet of Valescu’s henchman, and they had wasted no time on this task—for Dick, at least, was acutely alive to the urgency of the situation.

“We must find Mr. McRae and the others, Goody,” he went on tensely. “The ship’s still flying, and there’s nobody in control. I can’t understand why somebody hasn’t shown up before now—what with all the row we’ve been making.”

Stan Goodman looked startled.

"I wonder if that crazy Balkan bandit has thrown 'em all overboard?" he asked blankly. "Great jumping crackers! Are we in sole command of the giddy ship? What the dickens are we going to do?"

The same thought had occurred to Dick, but he had not given voice to it, as it had seemed so fantastic: he had dismissed it at once. No, McRae and the other engineers and the rest of the Asterion's personnel were on board somewhere. Crazy as Valescu was, he would not have destroyed the very men who ran the vessel.

A quick search was rewarded. The missing men were discovered in the main saloon—not only locked in, but every one of them helplessly bound. Two or three of the men were suffering from the wounds which Valescu's gun had inflicted—but, fortunately, the injuries were not serious.

"Boys!" panted McRae, whose own injury was very slight. "How—— This is incredible—— Where is Valescu? I don't understand——"

"The ship's ours, Mr. McRae," interrupted Dick triumphantly. "We've got Valescu trussed up in one of the cabins—and those two blighting stewards are in the control room. Don't worry—they're roped up, too. Goody and I have been having quite a picnic."

"But—but this is positively amazing," said the chief engineer, as his bonds were cut and he rose painfully to his feet. "You're a living wonder, young 'un! A couple of living wonders, in fact——"

"Never mind about us being living wonders, sir," interrupted Dick. "You'd better buzz to the control room and take charge of the ship—yes, and get her back as soon as you can to the spot where Valescu marooned the others."

McRae made no comment, he merely nodded and hurried off. Meanwhile, the rest of the bound were released; and while some attended to the wounded, others hurried to their posts. McRae was relieved to find that his beloved ship was in no way harmed, and he was a happy man when he was once more at the controls—although his happiness was clouded by the grim thought of the possible fate of Professor Bill and the rest.

McRae's first act had been to turn the Asterion about, and she was now speeding back over the Venusian land-

scape, and several members of the crew were standing on the forward observation deck, scanning the wild countryside on the look-out for a landmark. Dick Sylvester and Stan Goodman were there, too—to say nothing of Wicks and Crocker. At last, this precious pair had been convinced that they were, indeed, on the planet Venus—and they were so stunned by this knowledge that they could only clutch the rail and stare dumbly. The thing had come upon them like a thunderbolt.

It had not taken long to collect Valescu and his precious helpers and lock them up in one of the deepest of the airship's store-rooms—in a prison from which there could be no possible escape. The Rumanian's wild plan to capture the Asterion had utterly failed—and all because of the pluck and determination of two White-lands schoolboys!

“A fair knockout, young gents—that's what it is!” commented one of the crew, as he stood scanning the landscape. “You two getting the better of that barmy foreigner, and him with a gun. If we can only find the others, everything will be all right.”

“Yes—if!” said Dick anxiously. “That's the burning question now. I'm scared—I don't mind telling you I'm scared stiff. A thousand things might have happened to them in this time, and we don't even know the way back to the spot! It might take us hours—days.”

He was unduly pessimistic in his anxiety. McRae was convinced that Valescu had kept the airship on a straight course during the period she had been under his control; and the chief was now taking her back on the same route. There was that great river to serve as a landmark, too—the only river of any size they had seen.

Sure enough, after an hour's steady flying, shouts of excitement rang out.

“There's the river—dead ahead—yes, and the great forest, too,” roared Stan Goodman. “Look! I can even see those giant nettles——”

“But where are the chaps?” muttered Dick Sylvester. “Where are Chuffy, Uncle Bill and Mickey Mouse? I can't see a living thing.”

They could not be sure until they were right over the exact spot; then the stunning truth hit them like a sledgehammer blow. They found the actual trail of the

Asterion as she had ploughed her way on her tractors through the giant nettles; they found the very spot where the party had landed.

Now there was no party. There was nothing. As far as the eye could see, the grim scene was wild and desolate, with no sign of life. Even the fearsome-looking Bat Men, which they had last seen wheeling in the sky, were no longer in view. This led the searchers to come to a terrific conclusion.

"They've been carried off," said Dick, in agony. "Carried off by those ghastly creatures! There's no telling where they are by now— Perhaps they're dead. We have the old ship back—but what's the use? We must search," he added frantically. "Perhaps they are somewhere in this awful forest."

"If they are," said Stan Goodman grimly, "it'll be about as much good as looking for pins in a cornfield!"

Nevertheless, it was the only course to pursue—and the anxious McRae took the Asterion up to a great height and commenced flying in ever widening circles away from this particular spot—with every eye scanning all the points of the compass. Thus the search went on.

Meanwhile, the lost ones were fully convinced that their last moments were at hand—that there was no possible chance of rescue. Their situation was indeed black and hopeless.

For the Venusians had done a terrible thing; they had once again gripped their captives and spread their wings; and now they were flying in narrow circles far above the great, molten pool. Round and round, uttering their strange, clicking cries. From all the other Venusians gathered in that vast, rock basin, echoing cries came. The humans were now almost indifferent to their fate, for they were half suffocated by the fumes which arose from the boiling, bubbling, liquid fire—fumes which apparently had no effect upon the Bat Men.

There seemed to be only one reason for this sinister manœuvre. At a given signal the prisoners would be dropped into the molten pool! Mercifully, they would know little or nothing about it. One plunge—and instantaneous death. At least, there would be no slow torture, no ghastly agony. It would be all over in a flash.

To a man like Lord Chuffmore—essentially a man of action—the situation was agonising. He had been in many tight corners in the course of his exciting life, and he had always managed to turn the tables on death. Now, for the first time, he was utterly helpless; but even in his helplessness he was able to admire the pluck of the Whitelands boys, not one of whom had uttered a single cry of fear.

“By heaven!” muttered Chuffy, aghast.

It seemed to him that they were to be tortured, after all, for during the last few moments the Venusians had been flying in perceptibly lower circles—dropping ever nearer to the ghastly heat. The noise from the crowds of Bat Men increased. Chuffy—and all the prisoners, in fact—were aware of a strange sense of urgency, or alarm.

Then the truth came to them like a thunderclap.

The rain started . . .

Rain such as humans had never seen, or imagined. A second earlier, nobody had suspected rain—nobody had known, even, that rain was commonplace on Venus. Perhaps it was not commonplace—perhaps the Venusians themselves were taken by surprise. At all events, the deluge swept down like something out of a nightmare. Chuffy, who had been in most tropical climates on earth, knew what Equatorial rain could be like—but in all his experience, he had never seen anything like this phenomenon which swept down into that Venusian mountain basin.

It was hardly rain at all; it was just one sheet of water; one vast tearing, hissing, blinding downpour. It started just as though a reservoir had burst its banks, and down it came. Instantaneously, there was confusion among the flying Bat Men; they fluttered here and there, beating their great wings helplessly against the flood of water, and they were being forced downwards towards the ground.

There was another startling result. Vast clouds of steam arose from the lava pool—steam which rose in billowing volumes. The water, pouring into that cauldron of fire, was instantly converted into steam, and it came roaring up like the escape from an immense boiler. In a matter of seconds, the rocky mountain sides were hidden in the tremendous vapour, and the very

air was full of the shouting of the elements. It was one terrific uproar, deadening to the senses.

The Venusians themselves were frightened. As they dropped lower and lower, beating their wings against the rain, they swerved on to the solid rock—away from the pool. Many of them sprawled over as they landed, and their first act was to release their burdens. Chuffy and several of the Whitelands boys were sent rolling over and over on the wet, slippery rock. Others were dropped before they reached the ground—but luckily, the fall was not great. The Bat Men—who were obviously capable of thinking—were intent upon self-preservation. For, as soon as they had disposed of their prisoners, they half flew, half scrambled towards the numerous tunnels in the rocky sides of the basin. They made for the ledges—for every gap. They sought shelter from the incredible downpour.

Another effect the water had; it softened the silken cords which bound the prisoners, and as they struggled on the wet rock, the boys found the cords loosening and falling away in pulpy masses of stickiness. A few violent efforts, and they were free. In less than a minute, the descending flood of water had washed them clean of every trace of their cocoon-like bonds. But it was almost impossible to stand, let alone walk, against the flood.

“Hey, kids!” came Lord Chuffmore’s bellowing voice out of the vapour clouds. “We’d better keep together. This way! Hullo—that you, Mick? Where’s Bill? Where’s——”

“I am here, Archibald,” came Professor Sylvester’s startled voice, as a vague figure came stumbling out of the mist, firmly grasping two Whitelands boys and half-dragging them along. “The others—what of the others? Are they safe?”

“Heaven knows,” muttered Chuffy.

Other figures came stumbling out of the murk, and voices sounded. It was almost too good to be true. Within a few minutes, all the members of the party had collected together, for their captors had been swept towards the ground in a compact group, and had dropped their burdens at the same time. Now the earth-party huddled together, awed by the events of the past few minutes; they were choked by the sulphurous stream, their senses were reeling, but one fact emerged to give

them hope. All were safe! Not one of them had been dropped into the pool of molten lava!

"The tunnel!" shouted Chuffy, his voice thin above the raging tumult. "It's over this way—and our only chance is to get to it. In another five minutes this basin will be a lake—and a boiling lake at that. Hurry, everybody!"

He led the way as answering shouts sounded.

Struggling, stumbling, fighting against their exhaustion, they continued the grim march. At last they emerged—to find the rock ledge full of great pools of water, and a hazy mist arising from the forest. The deluge had ceased, leaving everything in that strange world, wet and steamy. That is, everything below them. The sky was as clear as before—and Tim Charters was the first to see something which nearly caused him to break a blood vessel in his excitement. Pointing with a quivering finger, his voice cracked as he shouted.

"Look—over there!" he shrieked. "The airship—the airship!"

It was such a staggering surprise that everybody—including Lord Chuffmore—believed that Charters was suffering from an hallucination. But when they followed the direction of his pointed finger, they shouted in a hoarse chorus.

"The Asterion!" muttered Professor Sylvester, staring unbelievably. "My ship! Thank heaven!"

"Let's signal, or something!" shouted one of the boys. "Can't we let them know we're here?"

The airship, however, was eight or nine miles away, a mere silver streak in the sky—and she was flying, not towards the great cliff, but parallel with it. The boys, waving and shouting at the tops of their voices, did not realise that it was impossible for any sounds to carry over so great a distance.

"Take it easy, kids," grunted Chuffy gruffly. "Don't forget that Valescu is in command of the airship. Better not be too excited."

"But even Valescu wouldn't leave us here, sir," said Bob Davis, with a gulp. "Or would he?" he added in a startled voice.

"I think the answer is—he would!" retorted Chuffy grimly. "The man's crackers. That's our only hope.

You can never tell what a crazy man is going to do next. The blighter might take it into his head—”

“Look, sir!” broke in Pat Warren suddenly. “She’s turning—she’s heading in this direction!”

“They’ve seen us!”

“Hurrah!”

Excitement ran high—for, indeed, the airship had, during the past few moments, changed her direction. Lord Chuffmore, Mr. Mickie and Professor Bill watched silently. They were not inclined to jump to conclusions—optimistic conclusions—as the boys had done. It was very unlikely that they had been spotted on the rock ledge—and far more likely that Paul Valescu had directed the airship towards the cliff with the object of giving that colossal rock formation a closer inspection.

As it happened, the men were wrong—and so were the boys. For Valescu was in no condition, just then, to make observations of any kind. But Chief Engineer McRae and two or three of his men, to say nothing of Dick Sylvester and Stan Goodman, were observing everything that came within range.

Suddenly McRae uttered a shout.

“Take a look through these,” said the Chief hoarsely as he handed over a pair of binoculars. “I couldn’t believe my eyes at first—I can identify them now—Yes. The professor—Lord Chuffmore—a big group of the boys—”

“Lemme look!” gurgled Dick incredulously.

In another minute he was convinced. Wild cheers rang out from everybody on the forward deck. The seemingly impossible had come true. The lost were found—and found, amazingly enough on a rocky ledge thousands and thousands of feet above the giant treetops!

“They’re safe—they’re alive!” muttered Dick Sylvester as the binoculars shook in his hands. “Yes, they’re all there, I believe— But how the dickens did they get up there?”

“Those giddy Bat Men!” roared Goodman. “I say, Mr. McRae, can’t we put on speed? They may be in danger still—and I shan’t feel happy until they’re safely on board again.”

The tiny figures on the cliff ledge became clearer and clearer as the Asterion sped nearer. Just as those on

board the airship could recognise the figures on the cliff ledge, so the lost party could soon recognise the people on the forward deck of the Asterion.

"It's not Valescu standing there," muttered Lord Chuffmore, straining his eyes. "I thought he was coming to taunt us at first— It's old Mac! There's your nephew beside him, Bill, and three other kids—"

"But that's impossible, sir," interrupted Tim Charters. "Dick and Stan Goodman are the only two who were left on board— Well, I'm jiggered! There *are* two other chaps! Where on earth could they have sprung from? Who are they, anyway?"

Nobody was interested—for as the airship came nearer and nearer, now at greatly reduced speed, a strange rustling sound came from the interior of the tunnel—and Chuffy knew what that meant. *The Bat Men were returning!*

CHAPTER IX.

The City of Wonder.

It was touch and go . . . literally. The airship touched, and then went.

As she came nearer and nearer, uncannily hovering like a feather, Chuffy was deadly anxious. He could hear that ominous sound in the tunnel growing louder and louder.

Then the Asterion, perfectly controlled by McRae, touched against the ledge—and in such a position that the promenade deck was on an exact level. All the lost party had to do was to scramble on board.

"It's all right, Uncle Bill!" shouted Dick Sylvester triumphantly. "We've got Valescu locked away below—and those two men of his, too. The ship's ours."

"Excellent!" said the professor happily. "My dear Archibald, did you hear—"

"I can hear plenty!" snapped Chuffy. "Don't waste time talking to me, Bill—go aboard!"

He fairly shoved the professor over the rail; and by this time all the boys were aboard. Chuffy was the last to leave the ledge—and, glancing over his shoulder, he was just in time to see a number of dim, ungainly figures lurching out of the tunnel.

"Set her going!" he shouted, as he leaped.

“Archibald! Be careful——” began Professor Bill.

“Don’t call me Archibald!” roared Chuffy.

“But really—you are so reckless—— Oh!”

The professor broke off as he caught sight of the Bat Men, as the latter came swarming out of the tunnel. By this time Chuffy was aboard. The motley mob of Venusians took to the air at once, uttering shrill, clicking cries. They were just too late. The Asterion soared up and away from the cliff edge, and was soon streaking across the sky at great speed. Such was her speed, indeed, that the Bat Men were left far behind.

“I still don’t believe it,” said Chuffy, taking a deep breath.

“My ship!” whispered Professor Sylvester, his voice a little unsteady. “I never expected to see her again . . . Archibald, this is indeed a miraculous . . .”

“It wasn’t a miracle, uncle,” interrupted Dick Sylvester. “We took Valescu by surprise, that’s all.”

“I was referring, my boy, to the miracle of the great deluge,” said Uncle Bill. “But for that startling phenomenon, I should have been dead by now—and so would all your friends. We have had an amazing escape.”

“We’ll swop yarns later,” said Lord Chuffmore, after a keen glance at the boys. “We’re just about all in—we need sleep. Some of the kids are ready to drop as they stand—and I don’t wonder.”

It was perfectly true. The reaction had set in, and many of the fellows who had lately been through that awful experience were on the point of collapsing. Others, more robust, were staring blankly at Enoch Wicks and Oswald Crocker.

“Where the dickens did you blighters spring from?” asked Tim Charters in astonishment. “You weren’t on board at all.”

“We were stowaways,” said Wicks proudly.

“What!”

“Fact!” chimed in Crocker. “Pretty lucky for you fellows, too.”

“What do you mean—lucky?”

“Didn’t we recapture the airship from Valescu?” said Wicks boastfully. “You don’t know the fight we had! You can thank your stars that we *did* stow ourselves away——”

"What's that?" came an ominous roar from Stan Goodman, who had just walked up.

"Eh?" gasped Wicks. "Well, dash it, Goody, you've got to admit that Crocker and I helped a lot——"

"You awful liar!" snorted Goodman. "You didn't do a thing! Clear off—both of you! I want to shake these fellows by the hand."

The main sensation of the rescued schoolboys was that of infinite tiredness. At the same time, their relief was enormous. To feel themselves aboard the airship again, soaring safely thousands of feet above the ground, was too glorious for words. The recent happening was like a nightmare.

"Well, it's taught us a grim lesson, at all events," Mr. Mickie was saying. "We must not light-heartedly leave the airship and explore the Venusian ground. The dangers are far too great——"

"What's the matter with your memory, Mick?" interrupted Professor Bill. "The disaster was due solely to Valescu—and we had no suspicion that the infernal lunatic was on board. Now that he is safely under lock and key, the same kind of situation cannot possibly arise. Certainly I shall do some exploring. Plenty of exploring. We have hardly glimpsed the wonders of Venus yet."

"Well, what I want to glimpse right now," said Chuffy "is a good, solid feed—and after that, I wouldn't mind glimpsing a nice, soft bed."

He was echoing the feelings of them all. Many, indeed, were too exhausted to feel hungry. They managed to gulp some hot soup which the head steward had hastily served, then they went to their state-rooms. Within half an hour, all were asleep—and the Asterion soared in the upper air above Venue, speeding across the surface of the planet.

Thus thirty hours passed . . .

Thirty hours which included part of a day and a night. The night had been as black as ink—and when the boys awakened it was daylight again, so that they had the impression that they had slept for only a few hours. Days on Venus were very similar to days on earth—being, in fact, only about one hour shorter.

The first boys to awaken found themselves perfectly refreshed—and ravenously hungry. They aroused the

others, and all came on deck at about the same time. They found themselves staring at a vast expanse of ocean. As far as the eye could see, there was nothing but sparkling, gleaming water. The boys, with fresh faces and eager eyes, stared at that surprising seascape.

"My hat!" said Bob Davis. "How long has this been going on?"

"You mean the sea?" said Stan Goodman. "Oh, for umpteen hours, according to one of the engineers. We lost sight of land at dusk last night."

"Last night!" said Tim Charters. "How long have we been sleeping, then?"

"Thirty hours, or more, they tell me," grinned Goodman. "I expect that's why I'm so jolly hungry. It's just about breakfast time now—and breakfast is nearly ready."

"What are we waiting for?" said Sam Kennedy.

There was a rush for the dining room, and soon everybody was digging into a double-sized breakfast. They were all in the highest spirits. Professor Bill himself was positively effervescent with excitement.

"You seem jolly peppy, uncle," remarked Dick Sylvester. "Any particular reason?"

"My dear boy!" protested the professor. "Surely you can understand? Through the night we have been travelling over an ocean as extensive as the Atlantic itself—and at any time now we might come in sight of new land. We are pioneers, Dick—we are making history. I can hardly spare time to sit here, eating, I want to be on deck—watching."

"Watching for what, sir?" asked Charlie Hunt.

"For new wonders," replied the inventor promptly. "It is impossible to hazard a guess at what we shall see when land comes within sight again."

"I don't understand, sir," said Charlie. "The land won't be any different from the land we've already seen, will it?"

"Not different?" echoed the professor. "My dear child, you're talking nonsense. Of course it will be different. Totally different. It is bound to be different."

"But why, sir?"

"Are you completely brainless?" snapped Professor Bill irritably. "Supposing you were flying from England to Africa. Would you expect to find the African

coast exactly the same as the English coast? Of course you wouldn't! In just the same way, we shall see totally different scenery on Venus. By pure chance we happened to land in the Venusian tropics—in the very jungle. We are now in a much more temperate zone. Have you not noticed an invigorating snap in the air? When we next catch sight of land, I fully expect to see a very different kind of land——”

“Listen, sir!” shouted Stan Goodman suddenly.

They all sat very still, and the faint cry which Goodman had heard, came again:

“Land-ho!”

There was an immediate rush. Everybody was so excited that they left their food and hurried out on deck. Not that there was much to see when they arrived—a mere smudge on the far horizon. The airship was travelling at a quite moderate speed—not more than five hundred miles an hour. The professor had deliberately set the speed thus, as he wanted to have full warning of anything fresh. Shooting across the stratosphere of Venus at an incredible speed was not his idea of exploring.

Within the next half hour, the smudge became a well-defined landscape. Exactly as Professor Bill had said, there were no great forests—but smaller woods, moderate hills and mountains. There was a distinct difference in the atmosphere, too; the humid oppressiveness, which had been so apparent at first, was now missing. The air was cooler and drier.

“As I told you!” shouted Professor Bill exultantly. “I knew it! Our original landing was in the Venusian tropics, where everything grows to enormous size—similar, in fact, to the Amazon region of Brazil. We are now in a more temperate zone. The countryside in front of us is kinder, more gentle——”

“Ye gods and little fishes!” gurgled Chuffy suddenly.

“Really, Archibald——”

“Buildings!” roared Chuffy, who had binoculars to his eyes. “Either I'm seeing things, or I'm looking at a Venusian city! Whacking great, stone buildings——”

“Let me see—let me see!” gasped the professor. “This is a great moment——” He clutched at Chuffy's binoculars. “Yes, you are right. Buildings! Immense, lofty buildings higher than the greatest New York skyscraper.

So Venus is inhabited by real, civilised people! A staggering discovery!"

Excitement ran through the airship like a wave. The Whitelands boys crowded against the rail, staring with wide open eyes at the unfolding scene. Every member of the crew who could leave his post came on deck, too. The Bat Men were not the only inhabitants of Venus! The Bat Men, apparently, were the savages of this planet—the cliff dwellers.

"It's too marvellous for words," muttered Dick Sylvester, in a dazed voice, as the airship sped nearer. "Look! You can see the buildings with your naked eye now. There's a great city standing on the edge of the sea! I just can't believe it."

"Why not?" demanded his uncle sharply.

"Eh? Well, dash it, Uncle Bill——"

"Why should you be so astonished?"

"Aren't you astonished?"

"Certainly not," replied Professor Bill. "What we are seeing is only the logical thing we should expect to see. Why should not Venus be inhabited by civilised beings?"

"Well, of course, if you put it that way, Uncle——"

"Of course I put it that way," said the professor. "Let us take a parallel case. Supposing a party of Martians unexpectedly landed on earth. It is quite likely that they would land in a wild and savage spot—such as the great Gobi Desert, or the Amazon jungle. What opinion do you think these Martians would form of unclothed savages?"

"I see," said Chuffy, nodding. "You mean, they would assume at first, that all humans were the same? Which would be pretty wide of the mark. We've seen a bit of Venus already—and apparently we landed in the savage part of Venus. We've travelled seven or eight thousand miles since then."

"Exactly," said the professor. "There can be no doubt that we are now coming upon a civilized race of Venusians. Perhaps more civilized than the white races on earth. It is quite logical. One cannot judge humanity by Borneo savages; neither can we judge the Venusians by the wild specimens we have already seen. We must wait. We must reserve our judgment."

They watched fascinatedly as the Asterion drew nearer and nearer to the land—to that great city which stood in a compact mass upon the shore. A city of towering buildings—grotesque buildings which rose for thousands of feet into the air.

“Wonderful!” said Professor Sylvester, for the tenth time. “Truly wonderful!”

“The buildings seem to be made of dull glass!” said Stan Goodman excitedly.

“The ground’s paved with it, too,” said Bob Davis. “Look—great streets, tremendously wide.”

“But the streets seem to be made of a greenish coloured glass,” said somebody else. “I say, can’t we go a bit lower?”

The professor had already given an order, and the airship was now nearing the city at a greatly reduced speed, and dropping to a low level. By the time she was close over the seashore, which was some little distance from the city itself, the travellers were able to obtain a magnificent close view of this wonder. At close range it was seen that the immense buildings were extraordinary. The majority of them towered to a height of three or four thousand feet; they were mostly square in design, all angles and straight edges. Every wall contained hundreds of black, windowless openings. They were just gaps, square in shape, with a wide ledge to each. But not a single window-covering.

There were no streets in the ordinary way. The buildings, although constructed symmetrically, were not placed in street formation; and the open spaces between the buildings were innocent of any kind of traffic. A great city such as this, on earth, would have been teeming with vehicles of all kinds; but here, there was nothing—nothing but the open spaces and greenish paving.

“Look!” shouted Stan Goodman, abruptly.

He had seen some figures at some of the square, black openings. Then, within the space of a few minutes, more and more figures appeared. In a twinkling, it seemed, there were thousands of them—and many were walking about in the open spaces—although the majority fluttered in the air, from building to building. The inhabitants were evidently as excited—perhaps more excited—than the earthly visitors.

"Bat Men!" jerked Goodman, disappointed.

"Of course," said Chuffy. "What did you expect? A savage aborigine of Australia, although rough and uncouth, is shaped exactly the same as we are, in all essentials. Naturally, the civilised Bat Men are essentially the same as the uncivilised Bat Men."

"They are smaller—much smaller," ejaculated the professor, who had binoculars. "These Venusians are little more than half the size of those we met on the other side of this globe. They look quite different. Their faces are not so animal-like."

"Yes, by Jove, they're quite gentle-looking," said Dick breathlessly. "I say, uncle, they are covered with fur? It does look like it to me."

"My dear boy! You are quite right," said Professor Bill. "Archibald, look through these glasses——"

"Don't call me Archibald!"

"I beg your pardon," said the professor hurriedly. "Really, Archibald, I beg your pardon—— I mean Chuffmore! Confound you, man, why the devil can't you answer to your name without all this fuss? Look through these glasses. I believe these creatures are *clothed*."

"You're quite right," said Chuffy, after a look. "Their bodies are encased in some sort of sheeny fabric. That settles it! The first Venusians we saw were rank savages. These people are civilized. Think we could risk a landing, Bill?"

"Well, until we know a little more about them——"

"Why not? They don't seem to be hostile, and we can always take the old ship into the air again if there's any sign of danger. Anyway," said Chuffy, "let's watch the inhabitants' reactions as we get nearer."

With extreme caution the airship dropped lower and lower. By this time she had left the ocean behind and was right over the top of the city—which, although extensive, was confined to definite limits. In the far distance, only vaguely visible, were other Venusian towns—smaller, more compact.

"I am glad to note that these people of Venus are more sensible in their town planning than we are," commented Mr. Mickie. "This city immediately beneath us is the biggest of all, as far as I can see—but it doesn't sprawl out in a disorderly mass—like, for example,

London. But I'm puzzled by the enormously strong formation and structure of the buildings. Why, every one of them is as immovable as the Egyptian pyramids."

"Yes, my dear Mick, I was thinking exactly the same thing," said the professor eagerly. "If you look at the openings in the buildings, you will see that the walls are several feet thick. This solid construction is something unique. There is not one building flimsily made; all are designed to the same pattern, and all reveal the same tremendous strength."

"They can't be made of glass, really," said Stan Goodman. "It must be some kind of quartz—or rock. I say, just look at the Bat Men! Did you ever see anything more impressive?"

There were thousands of the Venusians in the air now, flying with singular ease, and apparently in no way frightened; they wheeled in great formations, fascinating to watch.

Smaller groups of the flying creatures came so near that every detail of their appearance could be seen—and it must be confessed that the visitors were a little shocked at this first, close view. For, to human eyes, the Venusians were grotesque. Their great wings stretched out exactly like the wings of a bat, and while they were clumsy on the ground, their movements in the air were extraordinarily graceful.

Their big, hairless heads seemed too large for their bodies; there were no visible ears, and the lidless eyes were large and blood-red. Startling at first sight, these eyes, once the human mind had grown accustomed to them, were by no means revolting; on the contrary, there was a certain fascination about them. The Bat Men possessed no apparent jaws, their faces joining up with the bodies so that any independent head movement was impossible. So quickly could the creatures turn and twist in the air, however, that this lack of head movement was no handicap. Their mouths, very tiny and very round, were so insignificant that they could hardly be seen.

There was no sign of hostility; the Bat Creatures flew round the slowly descending airship with every mark of curiosity—but that was all.

"I say," muttered Tim Charters suddenly. "They're all dressed alike—in this sheeny, silky kind of covering

—but have you twigged that lots of them are considerably smaller than others?"

"Well, why not?" retorted Goodman. "I'll bet the big ones are Bat Men, and the smaller ones are Bat Women."

"On Venus, old son, things may be different," said Chuffy drily. "Perhaps the females of the species are the bigger ones. That's a point we shall find out in good time."

As everything seemed so safe, Professor Bill decided to land. The Asterion sank into a great, open space in the very centre of the city. She touched gently, landing on the greenish pavement, which was as smooth as a tiled floor, and amazingly clean. It was quite obvious why this strange city carried no vehicular traffic; the Venusians were provided with their own means of quick propulsion; consequently, there was no limit to the height of their dwelling places, since they could so easily reach the topmost floors.

No sooner had the Asterion touched down than hundreds of the Venusians fluttered to the ground, folded their wings, and stood round in silent masses—all staring. Every opening of every building was crowded in the same way. There was something strangely oppressive in that great silence.

It was more than Stanley Horatio Goodman could stand. He suddenly waved his arms in the air and let out a great shout.

"Venus ahoy!" he roared. "Hullo, there!"

The result was startling.

As though a spell had been broken, the crowds of Bat Men pressed closed, and a great chorus of thin, reedy voices arose on the air; each voice was so small that it would have been well nigh inaudible alone; but in the mass, the sound was clear and distinct.

"Elca enus," went up a great chorus "Elca enus."

"My hat!" said Goodman. "They can talk!"

Lord Chuffmore passed a hand over his brow.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, you chaps," he said, in a dazed voice, "But doesn't that shout sound a bit rummy? You might almost think they were shouting—'welcome to Venus.' That, of course, is idiotic."

"Elca earth men!" came a concerted chorus.

"This is impossible," panted Professor Bill. "Did you hear that, Archibald? 'Welcome earth men!' They are welcoming us in English! Their vocal cords are so different from ours that they cannot pronounce the words correctly—but they're certainly trying. There is no doubt about their friendliness."

"I don't believe it!" said Dick breathlessly.

"It must be some trick of the ear," growled Chuffy. "They can't really be speaking in an earth language—and in English, at that! There are some things *I can* believe, and some things I can't. I'm dashed if I can believe this."

"Why not?" asked the professor sharply.

"Eh?"

"I said—why not? What do we know of the scientific development of this planet?" went on the professor. "It is quite feasible that the Venusians have perfected instruments which are capable of picking up electro-magnetic waves in the ether—the very waves of the earth's broadcasting. In that way, earth voices could have reached them——"

"Oh, you have an explanation for everything, but I still don't believe it," interrupted Chuffy. "There's no doubt they're trying to greet us in English, and my head is still spinning."

"Hey, you chaps!" gasped Kenneth Pyne, with a jump. "Look up there! For the love of Jiminy Cricket! What's all this?"

"My only hat!"

"What is it?"

"Oh, crumbs!"

The Whitelands boys were excited. Pyne had pointed to an extraordinary formation of flying Venusians which had appeared round the angle of one of the colossal buildings. It was a kind of cavalcade, with fully a hundred Bat Men flying in advance, and spread outwards in the shape of a fan. Immediately behind came an object which can only be described as a flying litter—a contrivance very much like sedan chair, attached to a dozen flying Bat Men by long cords. It floated gracefully, and so perfect was the flying of these creatures that the sedan chair maintained an even keel, and was perfectly safe. Within it sat—wonder of wonders—a man!

CHAPTER X

The Indiana Wizard

"Now I know I'm crazy!" said Lord Chuffmore, in a faint voice.

As the sedan chair, with its twelve attendants, came floating down, it was noticed by those on board the airship that the crowds of Venusians on the ground backed away. From thousands of throats came a rolling shout of acclamation.

"Thank heavens!" muttered Professor Bill. "Now, at least, we have some logical explanation. You are not crazy, Archibald. There is a man—a human being—in this quaint contrivance. Obviously, he is either English or American—which accounts for the fact that the Venusians have a slight command of the English language. The amazing point remains, however—how did this man ever reach Venus? The very explanation of this startling mystery only opens a more staggering field of wonder. The first man to reach the planets! A disturbing thought. I had believed that that honour was to be ours——"

"Never mind your disturbing thoughts," interrupted Chuffy. "His Nibs—whoever he is—has landed, and I must say I admire his natty vehicle."

Everybody watched with bated breath. Everybody had expected to find startling wonders on Venus; but never had they imagined anything like this! A man—without any question at all, a man—was stepping out of the sedan chair. A more grotesque specimen of humanity could hardly have been found; he was attired in some cream-coloured fabric, fashioned into loose fitting robes, and he carried a thick stick. He needed this stick, for when he walked he hobbled erratically, one leg being twisted gnarled, and shorter than the other. His back was so misshapen that there was a great hump sticking out over his left shoulder, and his right arm was crooked and short. His very face, gnarled and twisted, was a caricature of a human face.

But he hobbled along with extraordinary agility, and his eyes were twinkling with bright, intelligent excitement as he came near to the airship. At last the hunchback halted and stood there looking up.

"Darn my hide and burn my bones!" said this extraordinary individual, in a deep roaring voice out of all proportion to his appearance. "Then it's true! I wouldn't believe it at first, when they told me—Human beings from earth! Well, can you beat that! You American or British?"

"British," replied Chuffy. "We thought we'd just drop in, you know."

"Well, strangers, you're sure welcome," called up the hunchback. "I never thought to see anybody from earth while I lived. How do I get aboard this craft? You aren't going to leave me standing down here yelling myself hoarse, are you?"

The lower door was quickly opened, and in a few minutes the hunchback came hopping on to the promenade deck with outstretched hand.

"Wellman is the name, folks—Grant Wellman," he said, as he clasped Professor Bill's fist. "Doggone it, this is the biggest thrill I've had in ten years. I just can't believe it, even now. Straight from earth, eh? Gosh! That's something!"

The man, obviously an American, was very excited. He went from Professor Bill to Chuffy, from Chuffy to the other men, and from the men to the boys—shaking hands with all of them and behaving like somebody demented. This was not very surprising, for he had never believed it possible that he would ever see any of his fellow men again.

Professor Sylvester, after a moment or two of thoughtful frowning, suddenly slapped his thigh.

"Of course," he exclaimed. "Grant Wellman! I knew the name had a familiar sound—Grant Wellman, the Indiana Wizard.

Wellman twirled round.

"You've got me, sir," he said. "That's the name I was known by—yeah, and other names, too. The folks back in Elwood called me 'Crazy Grant' and 'Bats Wellman' and a few other things."

"I don't understand this," said Chuffy, puzzled.

"Perfectly simple," said the professor. "Surely, Archibald, you remember the great sensation of ten years ago?"

"What sensation?"

"There was tremendous excitement in Indiana at that time—although, I fear, the British newspapers gave very little prominence to the affair."

"Ten years ago," said Chuffy. "I was probably climbing Mount Everest at the time, or sweating like a pig on the Amazon. What happened in Indiana ten years ago?"

"Mr. Wellman was the laughing stock of America," replied Bill Sylvester. "He had constructed at great expense an enormous contrivance which he called his Space Annihilator. In other words, a super rocket-propelled shell. I am right, am I not, Mr. Wellman?"

"Dead right, brother."

"Your scheme, if I remember, Mr. Wellman, was to be shot off the earth by means of explosive charges—which would carry you beyond the stratosphere," continued the professor. "After that, the rockets were to come into operation. I do not remember all the details, but I believe your object was to reach the moon."

"Yeah—and I missed it."

"There was a big sensation when you made your experiment; the high explosive charge, which sent you hurtling into the stratosphere, killed several people who were incautious enough to venture too near—their own fault entirely—and from that minute, nothing more was ever seen or heard of you. It was assumed that your rocket had either disintegrated in mid-air, or that it had fallen back into the ocean."

"Yeah, I missed the moon," said Grant Wellman. "I went right past it without blinking. How I landed on Venus I don't know. I never shall know. I must have been pretty well unconscious during most of that flight, for I have only the vaguest memories of it. But here I am—the first human being to land on a planet."

Stan Goodman gave a grunt of disappointment.

"We thought we were the first humans to land on a planet," he said.

"Get rid of that idea right now, son," said Wellman promptly. "An American was the first guy to land on Venus."

"While admitting the force of your contention, Mr. Wellman, I would like to point out that you had no means of returning to earth," said Professor Bill gently. "We, on the other hand, have a ship which we can control. We can return to earth whenever we please. It is not of

much value to earthly science when a man shoots up to a planet and is never heard of again."

"You've got me there, brother," said Grant Wellman, with a twisted grin. "I'll admit I had no means of getting back. So, in a way, I guess you Britishers can claim to be the first real discoverers of Venus. But don't forget that I was here first."

"How did you land?" asked Chuffy. "I always thought those rocket-propelled contrivances were death traps."

"So they are, son—and right now I ought to be dead," said the other. "Don't ask me why I'm still alive—unless it's some quality in the atmosphere of Venus which saved me. There's no disease here—no death-dealing microbes—no virulent epidemics which attack the population. Maybe if I had been cracked up in the same way on earth, I should never have recovered. That's how I figure it, anyway. I've got to hand it to the folk of this planet, too—they sure patched me up good. Not pretty, perhaps, but good."

"But don't you remember *anything*?"

"I remember stowing myself into that darned rocket—and I have a hazy recollection of half suffocating during the flight—but I don't really remember anything until I recovered full consciousness on this planet. I was sure lonely. I dropped into the ocean not five miles from this city, and in daylight, too! From what I have been able to gather, the planet's atmosphere served as a brake, and these Venusian folk saw me like a flaming comet in the sky—and I fell plumb-spang into the ocean. The asbestos lining of my rocket saved me from being burned to death—but even so, I was burned plenty. Heck! If I had happened to fall during the hours of darkness——"

He broke off, as though the prospect were too awful to contemplate.

"They'd have seen you just the same, wouldn't they?" asked Chuffy.

"Maybe—but they wouldn't have fished me out," replied Wellman enigmatically. "Every bone in my body was broken. Yes, sir. Every doggone bone." He waved an expressive hand. "Take a look at me. Some sight, eh? Well, I'm glad enough to be alive. These creatures hauled me out of the sea just in time, and they

thought I was dead. So I was, nearly. Every bone broken, my body burned and blistered. It's a mystery why I recovered. But I did. It took a whole year—twelve solid months. By that time I was able to hobble about, with all my bones set in the wrong place."

"Didn't the Venusians attempt to harm you?" asked Chuffy.

"Heck! Haven't I just told you they nursed me back to life?" retorted Wellman. "But I guess it's the absence of harmful microbes that really saved me—me, with every limb gaping with open wounds. Harm me?" he repeated. "Say, the folk here are the most docile guys you'd ever wish to meet. Harmless—innocent—simple. They look upon me as a kind of super being, and if I liked, I could be boss of the show. Not that I want to be. I've never known such peace as I've known on this planet. There's no race hatred on Venus—no warfare—no class distinction. It's the ideal state. Folks hardly work at all, and it's the Simple Life for everybody."

"But how do they live?" asked Professor Bill, vastly interested. "We didn't see much sign of cultivation as we flew in. No factories—no industrial plant at all."

"You'll get it in time, sir," said Wellman, with his twisted smile. "These people—I call them people, because that's what they are—are pure vegetarians. They don't eat as we do. Their innards are made differently. Just a little vegetable juice daily, and they're all set."

"But how do you feed?"

"Easy. It was tough going at first, but I soon found that there were plenty of Venusian roots and vegetables which approximated to our own green stuffs," replied Wellman. "It took my friends about a year to fix up a reasonable diet, but after that it was plain sailing. Say, that gives me an idea. You'll have to be my guests at a banquet this evening—or, rather, late this afternoon. My guests of honour. Must do something special to mark a great occasion like this."

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Wellman," said Professor Bill. "We accept gladly—and I am sure I am speaking for all the others. There are a thousand questions I want to ask you—and ten thousand things I want to know about Venus and the Venusians."

A chorus of eager "hear, hears" arose from the school-boys, who had been listening intently to the conversation. Professor Bill himself was more than delighted to learn that the "people" of this planet were so gentle and harmless. He felt very safe in having grounded the airship, and it was nice to know that no armed guards would be necessary.

"It'll take you some time to understand my—friends," continued Wellman drily. "Understand them thoroughly, I mean. Their ways—their peculiar methods of thinking. I'm afraid they can't do much talking. It has taken me years to teach them a few words of our language, but they are all eager to learn. The trouble is, their mouths aren't made right. Not for pronouncing words as we know them. If you happen to hear them talking among themselves, all you'll hear is a kind of soft, whispering, clicking noise."

"Like the sounds made by the giant Bat Men of the great forests?" said Goodman eagerly. "This isn't the first time we've landed on Venus, sir. We had an awful time——"

"More of this later, my boy," interrupted Professor Bill. "We will tell Mr. Wellman of our earlier adventures at a more appropriate time."

"I hate to shove in a disturbing word—but about this banquet," said Lord Chuffmore. "If you're going to feed us with a lot of vegetable juices—well—I mean—— What I was going to suggest, Mr. Wellman, is that we have plenty of food on board, and we can easily bring our own eats."

Grant Wellman chuckled.

"Have no fear, brother—I shan't dish you a lot of unpalatable vegetable juices," he replied. "No junk of that kind. In fact, I'll give you a meal that'll surprise you. There are roots and plants on this planet which can be made up into the most delicious dishes you've ever tasted. Thoroughly wholesome, too."

"I thought, perhaps, you'd welcome some home food," said Chuffy drily. "We could even give you corn on the cob, baked beans in tomato sauce and canned porkmeat—to mention only a few American dishes."

"You thought I'd smack my lips and shout 'gime,' eh?" said Wellman. "Nothing doing. I've grown so

accustomed to the native foods of this world, that I don't care a toss for the foods I use to eat."

"That almost sounds as if you didn't care a toss about returning to earth," said the professor.

"Darn my hide, sir, I'm not sure that I do," replied the other. "I'm happy here—happier than I've ever been in my life. There's no fight for existence on this planet—no greed—no enmity. Say, I'll tell you something that'll give you a big kick." He turned and waved a misshapen hand towards the buildings of the city. "See them? Know what they're made of?"

"A kind of quartz, I imagine," said Chuffy.

"Quartz is right," agreed Wellman. "Only on earth a tiny chip of the stuff would be called a diamond. You're looking at solid masses of diamond—millions of tons of it."

"Incredible!" muttered the professor.

"Maybe—but the answer's simple enough," replied the hunchback. "On earth, diamonds are so rare that they're worth fortunes. On Venus the stuff is so plentiful that they use it to build their houses. Way back inland from this sea, there are quarries where you can dig the quartz out by the ton."

"Talking about the sea," said Chuffy, "don't these—er—people eat any fish! I suppose there *are* fish?"

For some reason Wellman seemed to stiffen.

"They touch nothing out of the sea," he said shortly, and changed the subject.

The boys were soon talking among themselves, discussing the exciting turn of events. By some kind of miracle, the American space pioneer had succeeded in landing on Venus. He had been smashed to mere human wreckage—and his recovery, another miracle, had left him a caricature of humanity. Perhaps he had good and sufficient reason for desiring to remain where he was. For, without doubt, whenever he went on earth, although he might be an object of wonder—as the first man to reach a planet—he would also be an object of pity. Here he was a kind of super lord in his own right.

It was during this hectic half-hour, while everybody was talking so animatedly—and while the thousands of Venusians continued to stand around the airship in silent, patient wonder—that two of the Whitelands boys went below.

They were Enoch Wicks and Oswald Crocker. Neither of the young rascals had much imagination. They were far too stupid. Once they had grown accustomed to all the wonders, they accepted them as commonplace—and became bored. Simpletons, both. What little brain-power they possessed took the form of cunning.

“No sense in sticking up here, listening to all this jaw,” Wicks had muttered. “Let’s go down and find some grub. I’m hungry. There’s tons of stuff left in the dining saloon.”

Crocker discovered, to his astonishment, that he was ravenously hungry, too. Perhaps there was something in the Venusian atmosphere which affected their appetites. At all events, now that Crocker was reminded of the fact, his desire for food amounted to an absolute craving.

However, when they reached the dining saloon, they found the stewards had cleared everything away. There wasn’t so much as a crumb. They were momentarily baffled.

“We must have something to eat,” grumbled Enoch. “Let’s go down and find a store room, or something. Then we can have a big feed all on our own.”

It was a tragically unlucky chance which directed them towards a heavy metal door, provided with two great bolts, which they opened. Having opened it, they peered cautiously inside—and found themselves looking at the bound figures of Paul Valescu and his two henchmen.

“Corks!” muttered Crocker. “Shut the door quick.”

“Wait, boys—wait!” called Valescu eagerly. “Don’t be in such a hurry.”

The two young idiots hesitated. There was no reason for alarm. The men were bound and helpless, and could do nothing. They had been thrust into the store-room in that condition as a temporary measure. Professor Sylvester had intended doing something with them long before this, but so much had happened that he had overlooked the prisoners.

“We opened the door by mistake,” said Enoch. “Sorry. We have to go. You’re the man who tried to pinch the airship, aren’t you? Well, you jolly well deserve to be trussed up.”

There was a wild light in Valescu’s eyes.

"I'm in great pain," he said, in an agonised voice. "The man who tied my wrists made a clumsy job of it, and I cannot get any relief. All I ask you to do is to ease the rope a trifle. Surely you can do that? There is no escape from this chamber—as the heavy bolts on the door will prove. Surely you are humane enough to ease my pain."

"Well, if that's all——"

"That's all, my boys—nothing else," said Valescu. "I am in such pain—— It is a matter for deep regret that Professor Sylvester should have so grievously mistaken my motives. Apparently, you boys have been misinformed. I made no attempt to steal the airship, and later—when the professor has had time to listen to my explanations—he will realise that he has done me a grave injustice. I am his colleague—a fellow-scientist. It is all very unfortunate."

Valescu, at the first glance, had truly estimated the brain power of the two schoolboys, and he was giving them the kind of talk most suitable for the occasion. Already they were impressed; he looked like a gentleman, he talked like a gentleman, and they began to think that there had been some stupid blunder, after all.

"I am willing, of course, to pay for the little service I am suggesting," continued Valescu.

He was quick to see the greedy light which appeared in Enoch's eyes. Again he had judged correctly.

"How much?" asked Enoch eagerly.

"It is a very simple thing I desire—merely the loosening of the ropes around my wrists, so that I can obtain some ease," replied Valescu. "I am cramped. I am in great pain. Will the sum of five pounds compensate you for this little service?"

"Fuf—five pounds?" gurgled Enoch.

"Yes."

Wicks was too obtuse to realise that the loosening of the madman's bonds might lead to grave and even disastrous consequences. Crocker, perhaps, was slightly less stupid.

"Better go easy, old son," he muttered. "I'm not sure that we ought to interfere——"

"Don't be an ass. There's no danger. Didn't you

hear him say five *quid*? All right," he added, creeping farther into the store room and addressing Valescu. "But I'm not going to loosen the ropes much. Where's the five quid?"

"Foolish boy! How can I give you the money while my hands are bound? Here—unfasten this one hand and I will be able to reach my pocket."

But even Wicks was not as dumb as that.

"Nothing doing," he said. "You asked me to *loosen* the ropes—not untie them altogether. I can get the money out if you tell me which pocket."

Valescu was obliged to agree, and he indicated his breast pocket. Wicks took out a wallet, and eagerly and greedily extracted five pound notes. Then he set to work on Valescu's wrists and eased them considerably.

"Well, that's all I'm going to do," he said, at length. "You can't tell me that the ropes are chafing you now. Come on, Crocker—we'd better get out of here."

They scuttled out and bolted the door after them.

"That was pretty easy, eh?" he grinned. "Five quid! And we were both broke! Five quid for doing nothing."

"What about my half?"

"Your half? You didn't do anything!"

"Yes, but dash it——"

"All right—here's a couple of quid," said Enoch, reluctantly parting with two of the notes. "Talk about easy money! Softest thing I ever struck!"

"I'm not sure we were right in doing what we did," said Crocker uncomfortably.

"Idiot! What difference does it make? They're still prisoners, aren't they? They can't possibly escape from a store-room with a heavily bolted door."

They hurried away from the spot, little dreaming of the harm they had done. They made for the deck, and Enoch Wicks soon displayed a large measure of his usual fatuousness. He approached a group of Whitelands boys which included Stan Goodman, Dick Sylvester and Kenneth Pyne.

"Well, aren't we going to land or anything?" asked Wicks eagerly.

"Can't land until Uncle Bill is ready," replied Dick Sylvester. "He's in the control room just now—showing Mr. Wellman some of the wonders of the airship."

"Rats! We might have to wait hours," grumbled

Wicks. "Why can't we do some exploring on our own? You never know—we might find a tuck shop."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"A tuck shop on Venus!" grinned Stan Goodman. "My hat! That's all you think of! In any case, what's the good of a tuck shop without money? You're always broke, Wicks!"

"Oh, am I?" sniffed Enoch, waving his pound notes. "I've plenty of money—and so has Crocker. Why can't we go on the spree?"

Goodman and the others regarded the pair in astonishment.

"Look at 'em—flashing quids!" said Dick, with a sudden frown. "At Whitelands they never had so much as a single bob! Here, Wicks, where did you find all that money?"

"You'd like to know, wouldn't you?" sniffed Wicks, and walked off arm-in-arm with Crocker.

CHAPTER XI.

The Escape.

Paul Valescu was able, after wrestling with his wrist-bonds for ten minutes, to free one hand. The rest was simple. Five minutes later he was completely free. He paced up and down the confines of the store-room in a fever of excitement—and gradually he formed a plan.

"I don't see why you're so bucked, sir," growled one of the other two. "We're still helpless. We're locked in——"

"Locked in—yes," interrupted Valescu sharply. "Have you no brains at all? Those two boys, fortunately for us, were idiots. You seem to be little better."

He took out a pocket knife and cut through the bonds of his companions. Freed, they felt slightly better—but there was still the barrier of that solid metal door.

"I don't see how we're any better off, sir," said one of the men.

"You are very foolish, Hacker," said Valescu impatiently. "You, too, Dillon. Cannot you see what will happen? The boys, you may be sure, will say nothing about what they have done. Soon, Sylvester will come to us—or will send somebody with food, perhaps. They

think we are helplessly bound—but as soon as we hear the door being unbolted——”

“You mean, sir, we can spring on ’em?” asked Hacker quickly.

“Of course. We can take them completely by surprise. If there is one man, all the easier. But we can quite effectively deal with two. We lock them in this room, and venture forth. Once I have regained control of the airship——”

He broke off, his eyes feverish. It was a cunning plan, dangerous because of its very simplicity. . . .

While they waited in their prison, Professor Bill was making active preparations to go “ashore.” The party included all the Whitelands fellows. There was no danger. Everybody wanted to see the wonders of this strange Venusian city, and they were assured that the inhabitants would not hinder them. Grant Wellman was emphatic on this point.

“If you had set your airship down in a nursery of eighteen months’ old babies, you couldn’t be safer,” he declared. “These Venusian folk just don’t know the meaning of aggression. Walk where you like—go where you like—and just don’t bother about a thing. I’ll leave you now—to make preparations for the big banquet.”

He pointed.

“See that big building?” he went on, indicating a particular structure. “That’s where I live. Entire ground floor—me having no wings, like the rest of ’em. I’m afraid you won’t be able to explore the upper storeys of these buildings, because staircases haven’t been invented on Venus. No need for ’em. Pretty useful, having wings,” he added regretfully. “I wish I had some.”

He arranged to return within an hour, and meanwhile the boys were given permission to “land” and explore the city—although they were warned not to wander too far. Chuffy, Mr. Mickie, the professor and McRae made up another party. Only a few members of the crew were left on board.

Half-an-hour later the Asterion stood more or less deserted and the various parties were walking about among extraordinary buildings, and even penetrating into some of them. It was during this period that one of the airship stewards went to the prison store-room

with a large tray containing food. He had been instructed to release one hand of each prisoner—and then only one at a time. He was to wait while the prisoners had their meal, and to re-bind them after they had finished. The Professor was still undecided as to how he would deal with the three men. Meanwihle, he could hardly let them starve.

The steward unbolted the door with no thought of danger, and this false impression was enhanced by the fact that the three prisoners still appeared to be bound. Handicapped by the tray, the steward advanced into the room. Then, at a word from Valescu, the three men cast aside their ropes—which had been placed in position as though still tight—and sprang upon the unsuspecting victim.

“Here, what the devil——”

They were the only words the unfortunate man uttered. Valescu, armed with a can of meat as a weapon, brought the latter down on the steward’s head with a sickening crash. The man fell forward, senseless, his tray clattering to the floor. In the same moment, Dillon had reached the door and closed it—making sure, however, that there was no spring latch.

“It’s all right, sir,” panted Dillon. “I don’t think anybody could have heard.”

“The ropes—quick,” said Valescu. “Bind this man up.”

Five minutes later the steward was not only bound, but gagged as well. Valescu and his two henchmen crept out of the store-room and cautiously made their way in the direction of the control room. Valescu’s chief worry, at the moment, was that he carried no really useful weapon. A can of meat is all right when attacking an unsuspecting man, but it would not be of much use against armed opponents.

A minute later he could have cried aloud with joy.

They had reached a door which led to the promenade deck, and a quick glance through had told Valescu that the deck was empty. Indeed, the whole airship seemed to be strangely quiet. The explanation was simple. One glance over the side told Valescu the truth.

In one direction a group of schoolboys were strolling away from the airship; in another direction Professor Bill and Chuffy and some others were just entering one

of the great buildings. The Asterion was practically unguarded!

Valescu uttered a strange Rumanian oath. He had never hoped for such luck as this! The airship was unprotected—or nearly unprotected—and a few minutes of swift action would make the vessel his again!

But he had not counted on Stan Goodman . . .

Stan Goodman, Bob Davis and Charlie Hunt were having one of their usual arguments. At Whitelands, in the privacy of Study No. 4 in Mortimer's House, they spent half their time in arguments and fistic battles. Dick Sylvester and the others, rather fed up with all the noise, had left the chums of Study No. 4 to themselves. Thus it happened—more or less by pure chance—that Stan Goodman & Co. were no more than twenty yards away from the airship when the commotion started.

First of all a shot rang out—then startled shouts—then more warlike noises. Stan Goodman swung round and stared.

"Hey, what's all that?" he asked blankly. "Who fired that shot? What's happening on the airship?"

Davis and Hunt looked round, too. Certainly, something very queer was taking place aboard the Asterion. Struggling figures were visible on the promenade deck; men were fighting; and a great flock of the peaceful Venusians were fluttering about in obvious consternation.

Then came another revolver shot and a half screaming cry of pain, followed by an angry shout.

"That shout!" gasped Goodman. "Valescu's voice! I'll swear—Great crackers! Look! Valescu's up there—free! I'll bet he's trying to pinch the airship again."

"He can't be free—he can't!" wailed Enoch Wicks, running up with Crocker, and both of them looking pale.

"Why can't he?" snapped Goodman suspiciously. "What do you know about it?"

"Nothing at all!" gasped Wicks. "I—I didn't untie his hands! Did I, Crocker?"

"We—we don't know anything!" said Crocker desperately.

"You—you awful rotters!" roared Goodman. "You know much more about this than— But what are we

waiting for? Come on, you chaps—Whitelands to the rescue!"

He made a dash for the ladder, and Davis and Hunt were right at his heels. Other Whitelands fellows, hearing the commotion, were hurrying towards the airship, too.

It was touch and go . . .

Goodman & Co., charging up the companion, and rushing on to the promenade deck, were on the spot just as Valescu and his men knocked out the last of the defenders who had tried to oppose them. They were in command! Valescu's one thought, now, was to reach the control room and put the Asterion into the air. But even as he turned, Goodman, Davis and Hunt hurled themselves at him. If only Valescu had been armed he would have been master of the situation; but the gunshots the boys had heard had been fired by Collins, one of the engineers, and Collins, just before being knocked out, had thrown the gun overboard. He had winged Hacker before doing so—and it was this fact, mainly, which had led to his undoing. For Hacker, infuriated by the wound—which was only a trivial graze on the leg—had hurled himself recklessly upon Collins.

"Boys—only boys!" panted Valescu. "Deal with them men! I must hurry!"

He was not going to waste precious minutes here, fighting schoolboys. He was still obsessed with the one idea of reaching the control room. But as he dashed for the doorway which led into the lounge, the doors burst open and Dick Sylvester and Tim Charters came flying through.

Valescu was trapped. With a snarl, he spun round, avoiding Goodman's flying fists. He made one leap for the rail and jumped clean overboard. It was a crazy, foolhardy jump and might well have resulted in shattered limbs. But by some extraordinary chance, Valescu landed on his two feet, rolled over, and picked himself up again. Undoubtedly, the force of gravity on Venus was different from the force of gravity on earth—and it was this difference, perhaps, which aided him. At all events, he was unharmed, and he went racing off towards one of the buildings, to disappear through a black gap.

"After him!" bellowed Goodman, from the rail.

Pat Warren, Sam Kennedy and Tom Pettitt were the nearest, and they went racing towards the building. Meanwhile, Hacker and Dillon had been overpowered—and they were soon being hustled off to their late prison.

"Phew! That was pretty hot!" breathed Dick Sylvester. "Nice work, Goody! If you hadn't been so jolly quick, we might have lost the airship again. What I can't understand is—how did those blighters escape?"

"Ask that young rat, Wicks!" snorted Goodman. "By crackers! As soon as I get hold of him— Oh, there he is! Hey, Wicks! I want you!"

Wicks and Crocker, who had just appeared on the deck, made a move to escape, but they were too late. They were hustled forward by Charters and Osborne.

"Now then!" snapped Goodman. "What the dickens do you mean, you pitiful worms, by releasing Valescu?"

"We didn't!" panted Wicks.

"Well, you looked jolly queer five minutes ago! Yes, now I come to think of it," said Goodman, "where did you get that money from?"

"Money? What money?"

"You know what money!" hooted Goodman. "My only hat! Traitors in the camp! Whitelands chaps—accepting tainted money!" He glared at the culprits. "Why, you poor, pitiful nitwits, hadn't you the sense to realise that you were signing your own death warrants? Valescu meant to pinch the airship again—and we only stopped it by the skin of our teeth."

"It's no good blaming me for it," said Enoch, indignantly. "I—I don't know anything about it."

"You're a liar!"

"I'm not! All I did was to loosen the ropes a bit—I—I mean, I didn't go anywhere near that store-room—Valescu didn't give me five pounds——" He paused, confused. "That money was my own——"

"That'll do!" interrupted Dick Sylvester. "I can guess exactly what happened. You went into that store-room, and Valescu gave you five quid to loosen his ropes—and you hadn't the sense to see that it was a dangerous thing to do."

"I didn't loosen his ropes!" shouted Wicks, desperately. "Did I, Crocker? Besides, supposing I did?" he

went on, giving himself away. "How could the rotters have escaped. The door was bolted on the outside."

"Oh, my goodness! Are you as brainless as all that?" snorted Dick. "Once they were free, all the three men had to do was to wait until somebody opened the door—and then spring. You hadn't thought of that, had you?"

"Oh, corks!" said Wicks, looking pallid.

"The best thing to do," said Goodman grimly, "is to lock these fatheads in a store-room, too! That's the only way we shall be safe. They've no more right on board than Valescu, anyway—they're stowaways."

Thoroughly frightened, and having learned a lesson they were not likely to forget, Wicks and Crocker were left to themselves. The others hurried off the airship in the hope that Valescu would have been recaptured; but when they met Kennedy, Warren and Pettitt, the three boys were looking breathless and disappointed.

"No good—we couldn't find him," said Kennedy. "We went into one of the buildings—the one we saw him enter—but we got mixed up with a lot of Venusians, and they all seemed scared and confused. By the time we had sorted ourselves out, it was too late. Valescu had escaped."

Dick Sylvester grunted.

"Well, I don't suppose it matters much," he said, after a moment's thought. "He's not on the airship—and he can't do much harm anywhere else."

At this point, his uncle, Lord Chuffmore and Mr. Mickie came hurrying up. An echo of the disturbance had reached them, and they listened with concern while Dick told of what had happened.

"The dangerous young idiots!" said Professor Bill, angrily. "I have a good mind to thrash them both. Good heavens! To think that that rascal might have seized the airship again! And we were so certain that everything was safe— Upon my soul! I feel quite hot! Well done, boys. Well done, indeed! I must thank you for your very prompt action."

"Yes, and if Valescu isn't retaken, we shall have to leave some armed guards aboard when he attend Wellman's banquet," said Chuffy grimly. "We can't take any more chances. As soon as I see Wellman again, I'll ask him if there's any chance of rounding up this maniac."

They were all relieved that the affair had ended so satisfactorily—and Wicks and Crocker came in for a very hot five minutes from Professor Bill. By the time they crawled away, they were in such a chastened mood that they were not likely to commit any further acts of folly.

Meanwhile . . .

Mr. Grant Wellman, shuffling along in his crooked, crab-like fashion, was making his exit from one of the main buildings of the town; and unexpectedly he came across the lurking figure of a man. He halted abruptly, his sharp, piercing eyes resting on the stranger with some curiosity.

“I don’t think we’ve met, sir,” said Wellman.

Paul Valescu, unable to conceal himself, startled by this apparition—this caricature of humanity—pulled himself together with an effort.

“No, sir, we have not met,” he said, with a disarming smile. “Dr. Valescu, at your service. I am Professor Sylvester’s colleague.”

He said that on the spur of the moment, while he was trying to sort out his scattered wits. Who was this queer, extraordinary hunchback? Obviously, he was not a member of the airship party, and it was incredible that he could be an inhabitant of Venus. Yet, incredible or not, he was apparently a man who was completely familiar with his surroundings—which indicated that he had been on the planet for some time.

While he looked at Wellman, Wellman looked at him; and Wellman was puzzled. He wondered, acutely, why Professor Sylvester had told him nothing of this—colleague. Valescu was no ordinary member of the crew; he was obviously a gentleman, and a distinguished-looking gentleman at that.

Valescu vaguely remembered one or two remarks he had overheard—remarks made by some of the airship men and the schoolboys. He remembered now—This city, this country, or continent, was controlled by a human being—

This was the man himself—this travesty.

“I am delighted that we have met, Mr.—Mr.— You are the remarkable individual, I believe, who has organised a model civilisation on this planet?”

“Somebody has been kidding you,” replied the other bluntly. “Wellman is the name, sir—Grant Wellman

The civilization on Venus needed no organisation by me. These birds could go to earth and teach the folks at home plenty. How is it that I didn't see you with the rest of the gang?"

"There is a reason," replied Valescu, lowering his voice and moving nearer. "I am glad that we have met in this way, Mr. Wellman. Can we talk privately? There is no danger of being overheard?"

Wellman stared.

"What's on your mind, brother?" he asked. "Go right ahead—nobody's going to hear us here."

"Excellent!" murmured Valescu. "Then I must inform you, my dear sir, that I am the inventor of the Asterion."

"Is that so?"

"She is mine—the child of my own brain——"

"Strange. Professor Sylvester told me——"

"That he *constructed* the airship, yes," interrupted Valescu quickly. "That is perfectly true. But mine were the great ideas behind the construction. The airship is my invention. Sylvester is a rogue—a thief. Chuffmore is no better. Indeed, Chuffmore is worse. For it was Chuffmore's wealth which Sylvester used to construct the airship. Little did I realise their true characters until this voyage had commenced."

"Sir, you astonish me," said Wellman unemotionally.

"You must believe me," insisted the other, waxing indignant. "These wretched men have stolen my ship—they have stolen my invention. It is my duty to warn you against them. They are planning to overpower you—to kill you, if need be—and seize control of the planet. Good heavens! Have I not had bitter experience of their treachery?"

"Such as?" hinted Wellman.

"The very instant we left the earth they turned on me—and since then I have been kept a prisoner," replied Valescu tensely. "They locked me in a store-room—— But there is no need to waste time on that. I escaped. I am free."

"Yes, I can see that."

"But do you realise that they are searching for me?" asked Valescu, gripping the other's shoulder. "They are dangerous, these men. Dangerous to you as well as to me."

"Well, doggone my hide!" said Grant Wellman slowly. "I thought I had finished with all this sort of thing. The double-cross, eh? Well, I'm not surprised, brother. There's something about those guys I don't quite like—"

"I can see you are a man of acute perception," said Valescu, quick to seize his advantage. "I urge you, my good friend, to heed my words. You are an American, yes? I, too, spent many years in America, and I love the country better than my own. Beware of these treacherous Englishmen! They are tricksters. Watch them closely, or you will be caught in their toils, too."

"Mighty nice of you to hand me this warning," said Wellman, nodding. "But what do you want me to do, exactly? You sure arouse my curiosity. If I can help you, I will. But listen, brother—I'm not saying I trust you."

"Really, my dear sir——"

"Any more than I trust them," added Wellman, bluntly. "I'm a cautious man, I guess, and I aim to have proofs before I move. They tell me that they own the airship. You tell me that you own it. Am I to believe them, or am I to believe you? See my difficulty?"

"Believe me—if you wish to live!" said Valescu fiercely. "Cannot you understand that I am warning you? Help me—and all will be well. It is my intention to return to earth at once, and I want you to aid my plans for re-taking the Asterion. You will make the voyage with me. Once we are back on earth, I will allow you to take all the credit for the discovery of Venus. You agree?"

Grant Wellman looked at the other through narrowing eyes.

"That's a deal, brother?" he asked. "When we get back to earth, you will proclaim that I am the sole discoverer of Venus?"

"Yes, yes! I care nothing for fame." Valescu waved a hand. "My whole life is filled with science—with research. I do not desire fame. Indeed, I fear it. I have no time for such trifles. Leave me in peace, my friend—and you are welcome to claim the credit. You will be the greatest man on earth—the greatest man that ever lived—the sole discoverer of the planet Venus."

A keen gleam came into Grant Wellman's eyes.

"It's a deal!" he said briefly.

"You'll help me?"

"I'll help you."

"Then you believe——"

"What I believe, and what I don't believe, don't matter a hang," interrupted the hunchback. "I have decided to help you—and that's enough. Listen, brother. We must not allow the others to guess that we are in collusion. Understand? Come with me. I will put you in a place of safety—then I'll deal with these treacherous Britishers as they deserve."

Without another word, he took Paul Valescu by the arm and led him through a side doorway into the open air. Two minutes later, they vanished through another dark doorway.

CHAPTER XII.

The Bombshell.

The banquet that afternoon proved to be an occasion of delight and ever-continuous surprises.

Nearly all the members of the earth-party were there, including the Whitelands boys. Half-a-dozen members of the crew, however, had been left to guard the airship—and they were well armed, and had been told to give the alarm at the slightest sign of danger. The only danger likely to arise, however, was from Valescu, who was still at large.

Grant Wellman's "apartment," as he called the lower floor of that great building, was very novel and very imposing. It was furnished in a very American way, for during the years, Wellman had taught the Venusians many things—and, gradually, he had acquired a home for himself which was both lavish and beautiful.

The great banqueting table was full of exciting foods. In many ways, the vegetarian dishes resembled earth foods, for Wellman had taught his cooks a good many tricks of the culinary art. There were many roots and plants on Venus which were edible to human beings. The flavour of some of the dishes was more delicious than anything the boys had ever tasted. There was no hint of anything amiss until the banquet was nearly over—It was still broad daylight, although it seemed to the members of the party that the light was waning slightly.

There were no windows in the ordinary sense, but many of the great, open square holes, through which the daylight streamed.

"Do you get much twilight in this part of the planet?" asked Professor Sylvester. "And the sun? Does the sun never shine? So far, we have seen nothing but immensely high clouds."

"At certain seasons—brief seasons, fortunately—the clouds completely disperse," replied Wellman. "Then the sun beats down with a ferocity which you would not credit. Remember, Venus is much nearer to the sun than the earth. Even after all these years, I cannot stand the direct heat. During these seasons I remain within these chambers."

He kept up a running flow of talk, fascinating his guests with stories of his earlier struggles, and how he had partially "humanised" the flying Bat Men. He told of the many wonders of Venus.

"I am content here," he continued, looking round at his guests with a strange gleam in his eyes. "After my complete recovery—deformed though I am—I never knew such happiness as I have known on this planet. Except for the hours of darkness, the life is all that one could desire. I have no wish to return to earth; I have no longing to see the strife-ridden world again."

He waved a hand towards the Venusian attendants, large numbers of whom were constantly waiting upon the diners—and doing so with a smooth, silent efficiency which was almost uncanny to behold.

"These are my friends—my dear friends," continued Wellman. "I do not wish to leave them—"

"Forgive the interruption, Mr. Wellman," said Chuffy suddenly. "Why did you say just now—'except for the hours of darkness'?"

Wellman went stiff.

"The darkness?" he repeated slowly. "Listen, brother. Don't ask questions. There are many things on Venus that are—ugly. Time to tell you of such things—later."

"But why later?" asked Professor Bill. "We are vastly interested—now. You hint that the hours of darkness are in some way terrifying. Cannot you be more specific?"

"Not at the moment," replied Wellman bluntly. "There is something else that must be made clear to you. My friends, I am afraid I am going to give you rather a nasty shock. You must regard yourselves, from this minute, not as my guests, but as my—prisoners."

There was a tense silence.

"Prisoners?" whispered Stan Goodman. "What the dickens does he mean?"

"Yes, Mr. Wellman—what do you mean by that remark?" said Lord Chuffmore, looking straight at his host.

"Surely my meaning is obvious?" said Wellman. "I have made up my mind to keep you here—on this planet."

"Is this a joke?" asked Professor Sylvester stiffly.

"Unfortunately, no."

"But this is preposterous," said the professor sharply. "You cannot mean what you say, sir. What possible reason can you have for keeping us—prisoners?"

"Yes, let's get it clear," said Chuffy. "What's your idea—to keep us all on this planet for ever?"

"For as long as you live, at all events," replied Grant Wellman, his eyes blazing with a new and fanatical light. "I have no intention of harming you—of restricting your movements in any way. When I say 'prisoners' I do not mean that I am going to confine you in cells, or any such nonsense. Do not imagine that I am talking in this way for my own amusement. I am telling you quite plainly that you will never return to Earth."

He spoke earnestly, passionately, and there could be no doubt that he meant every word he said.

"But good heavens, sir, what possible reason can you have for keeping us?" demanded Professor Bill angrily. "I can see, now, that you tricked us into accepting your hospitality— But why? We have done you no harm. We are peaceful—"

"One moment," interrupted Wellman. "You say that you have done me no harm—and I agree. But when you suggest that I have no reason for keeping you here, you are quite wrong. I have a very good reason—a reason that will become obvious to you after a few further words of explanation. I came to Venus, and I had no means of returning to earth. You have succeeded in reaching Venus—and this airship of yours will enable you to return to earth. That is so?"

"Of course it's so," said the professor.

"Then you have your answer, sir," said Wellman, rising to his feet, and quivering with the intensity of his emotion. "You can return to earth—where more of these space ships can be built to the same pattern as the Asterion. A hundred ships—a thousand ships—a hundred thousand ships!"

"Yes, but——"

"Listen to me!" thundered the hunchback. "What is the greatest curse on earth to-day? Conquest! Always conquest! It was the same when I left—and I have no doubt that the passing of ten miserable years has made no difference. There is scarcely a foot of land on the earth that has not been explored—and exploited. What is there left? Nothing—except, perhaps, the wilds of the Amazon forest. The earth is commercialised—and before long, the peoples of the earth will be looking for new worlds to conquer. Where will they look? I will tell you!" he added fiercely. "They will look into outer space—to the planets!"

"But this is sheer nonsense," said Chuffy, half amused. "In five hundred years, perhaps—or in a thousand years—something of the sort may happen. But not to-day, Mr. Wellman. You surely cannot imagine——"

"That, my friend, is exactly what I do imagine!" broke in Wellman tensely. "This airship of yours is an established fact. It has flown from earth to Venus—and can fly back from Venus to the earth. I am not going to take any chances. No, sir! Here you are—and here you remain."

"Of course, you can't be serious," said the professor.

"Can I make myself any plainer?" demanded Wellman passionately. "My mind is made up." He turned to Chuffy. "You talk of these things happening in a thousand years' time? Why should they not happen within ten years? Or even five? As I said before, if one Asterion can be built, a hundred thousand of them are equally possible. After your phenomenal success, millions of pounds will be poured into building fleets of space ships. Listen, my friends," he went on earnestly. "If I allow you to fly away from this planet, I shall never know peace again."

"But why not, in heaven's name?"

"Always I shall be looking into the sky," replied Wellman. "Always I shall be expecting a host of earth ships—flying to Venus in search of conquest. Do you think my gentle Venusians could battle against such an invasion? Machine-guns—bombs—poison gas—every dreadful artifice of war. They are harmless creatures, with no knowledge of warfare. They have been my friends, they have proved faithful. I will submit them to no such danger. My only certainty of continued peace for Venus is to keep you here."

There was, in a way, a good deal of sound common-sense behind the man's argument, and Professor Sylvester was only too ready to admit it.

"I gather your meaning, sir," he said, with dignity. "It only remains for me to convince you that I shall allow no such expedition to be organised——"

"Idle words, brother," snapped Wellman. "You will have no say in the matter. Others—men with no thought but that of gain—will build the ships and fly them. Do you think I have forgotten the greed that lies in human nature? No, I must keep you here—and to this end, I have already evolved a scheme. Indeed, the scheme is in active operation at this minute."

He made a sudden motion with his arm—and for the first time the guests realised that some hundreds of Venusians had silently entered the great apartment during the past few minutes. The long, central table, at which they sat, was completely surrounded. The Venusians might be gentle creatures, but they were obviously willing to obey Grant Wellman in an act of aggression against the visitors.

Lord Chuffmore glanced quickly up and down the table, at the startled faces of the men and schoolboys.

"Well, it's a good thing we took precautions," he said coolly. "Act as soon as I give the word."

"We're waiting, Chuffy!" shouted the Whitelands boys.

There was a diversion at this moment caused by the arrival of Paul Valescu. He was escorted into the chamber by half-a-dozen Venusians, and his arms were bound tightly to his sides. He was looking frightened and angry.

"What does this mean?" he demanded, as he caught sight of Wellman. "Why have I been treated in this

way? I have told you that these men are traitors and liars——”

“Forget it, brother!” interrupted Wellman contemptuously. “I wasn’t born yesterday—and I can smell a liar at ten yards’ range. Did you think I was deceived by your rigmarole of falsehood? I knew, from the very moment you opened your mouth, that you were trying to put something across. These gentlemen had already told me of your villainy—and I have decided that there is only one possible punishment for you. Quite a cute idea, really,” he added, with a twisted smile.

“Are you insane?” panted Valescu, white to the lips.

“What you wanted more than anything else was to gain possession of the airship, huh?” went on Wellman. “Right! You’re going to have your wish. I’m going to place you aboard the Asterion—alone. Then I’m going to send the airship into outer space—also alone.”

“No, no!” screamed Valescu. “You’re mad!”

“Clean crackers!” whispered Dick Sylvester. “A pair of ’em, by jove! I never thought that old Wellman was loopy, too!”

There was a moment’s silence as they all stared at Grant Wellman. The situation had developed so suddenly that the guests were breathless. Ten minutes earlier the banquet had been pleasant, genial, enjoyable. Now——

“Surely it’s time this comedy came to an end?” said Lord Chuffmore grimly. “My sense of humour, Mr. Wellman, is becoming a little strained.”

“Must I repeat everything I have already said?” retorted Grant Wellman, turning his fanatical eyes upon Chuffy. “Need I add further arguments to convince you that I *dare* not allow you to return to earth?”

“Dare not?”

“That is what I said—dare not,” said Wellman deliberately. “The peace of this planet—of the gentle people who live upon it—is my one concern. Perhaps you have forgotten that diamonds can be quarried within twenty miles of this spot just as granite can be quarried on earth? That lure, alone, would be sufficient to turn men’s minds crazy with greed.”

“You are mistaken, sir,” said Professor Sylvester quickly. “The very abundance of the diamonds is a safeguard. Any man, or group of men, who hoped to

enrich themselves on earth by transporting diamonds from Venus, would inevitably ruin the diamond market by flooding that market . . .”

“Wait,” interrupted Wellman, a note of contempt in his voice. “I am no simpleton, my friend. My years on Venus have not allowed me to forget the wiles and subterfuges of Big Business. You men here—” He made a sweeping gesture to include them all. “You men here—I have no doubt that you have already made up your minds to carry pockets full of diamonds back to earth. Each pocketful a fortune! This argument, let me add, is only a minor one. I have already given you my real reasons. . . . No, no, my mind is made up. Your airship is to be sent hurtling into outer space with only one man on board, and—”

“You cannot do this!” screamed Valescu.

“I shall do it—and I will tell you why I shall do it,” said Wellman. “You are a trickster and a liar, Valescu, and I cannot think of a better punishment for you than to send you into Eternity in sole possession of the very ship you have plotted so strenuously to obtain.”

“We’re slightly interested in that ship, too,” Chuffy pointed out.

“Yes,” agreed Wellman. “But what of me? What of my interest? Your airship is of more interest to me than to any of you—since its departure from Venus on a return voyage earthwards, would leave me racked with anxiety and suspense. My days and weeks would be spent in waiting—waiting for the inevitable moment when chaos and bloodshed would descend upon this peaceful globe. Enough!” His voice became sharp. “Valescu is to be taken to the airship at once; he will be imprisoned in one of the cabins. It has already been explained to me how the vessel can be set in motion—how the mechanism is operated. You were kind enough, Professor Sylvester, to explain these matters.”

“What a fool I was,” muttered Professor Bill bitterly.

“I shall kill two birds with one stone,” explained Grant Wellman. “I shall rid myself of this wretched Valescu, whom I despise—and I shall assure myself of the life-long society of you gentlemen and boys, whom I respect. Could anything be more satisfactory?”

“You cannot do this!” repeated Valescu hoarsely. “It is murder!”

"Have you not long desired to gain full possession of the Asterion?" mocked Wellman. "Well, brother, you're going to have the vessel entirely to yourself. Once it is set in motion, you will go on for ever and ever—always flying through space—always flying onwards, to the very limits of Eternity."

The hunchback laughed amusedly, and it was a laugh that sounded like a horrible knell in the ears of his listeners. . . .

Or did it?

A curious tension had become apparent among the Whitelands boys during the past few minutes; they seemed all keyed up to some premeditated act—and their eyes were fixed upon Lord Chuffmore, as though waiting for a signal. Chuffy himself, cool and calculating, was waiting for the right moment.

He felt—now—that the right moment had come. This was no comedy; Wellman was in deadly earnest. To a certain degree, Chuffy could sympathise with the man's logic. He had no desire to return to earth—small wonder, considering his misshapen, pitiful condition. He was hardly a man at all, but a mere caricature. A return to earth would mean fame and fortune—but fame and fortune meant nothing to Wellman. He had become such a lover of Venus that he had no desire to leave. His only thought was to prevent other human beings—hosts of them—from flying to Venus in search of conquest. Send the airship shooting into outer space, and his object was accomplished.

There was one chance to avert this disaster—and Lord Chuffmore was thankful that he had had the foresight to take a few preliminary precautions. Seizing a moment when Wellman's attention was distracted by Valescu, Chuffy rose to his feet.

"Okay, boys!" he said, clearly and deliberately, "Now's the time. Let 'em have it!"

Stan Goodman leapt to his feet with a wild yell, unable to restrain his excitement any longer. At the same second, a curious thing occurred. . . . Lord Chuffmore had taken a small object, rather like a ping-pong ball, out of his pocket, and he had tossed it straight at Grant Wellman. There was a loud "pop," a puff, and a cloud of dense smoke obliterated Wellman from view—although his choking cries were audible enough.

Simultaneously, McRae, Collins and several of the boys threw similar "ping-pong balls" among the Venusians. In an incredibly short time the dense clouds of vapour were spreading like magic.

"This way, everybody!" roared Chuffmore urgently. "Keep together—keep together! Better grab hold of one another to make sure. If we lose sight of anybody in this fog, he's a goner. Follow me! I know the way out!"

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Chuffy!"

The boys were so excited that they hardly knew what they were shouting for; but they took Chuffy's advice. They grabbed hold of one another and kept together. In the confusion and hubbub—which was now chaotic among the frightened Venusians—they succeeded in reaching the big exit. They stumbled blindly out into the open, followed by dense masses of vapour.

"Good!" panted Chuffy, after a quick look. "We're all here. To the airship—at the double!"

"Archibald, you are wonderful—truly wonderful!" panted the professor. "I had no idea——"

"Let's talk about my being wonderful next Tuesday week," interrupted Chuffy crisply. "Can't you understand, Bill, you ass, that our very lives depend upon speed?"

They hurried away. Every member of the party was present. Owing to the fact that the boys knew what was coming, and that Chuffy had marked the exit, there had been no delay or confusion in getting out. Grant Wellman and the Venusians, on the other hand, taken completely by surprise, were still floundering helplessly in the choking, smoke clouds.

"A bit thick, treating our host like that," panted Chuffy, as he ran. "Even thicker on the Venusians. But, dash it, what else could we do?"

"I still don't understand," said the professor. "How could you have known that there would be any danger?"

"I didn't know—but I believe in taking a few precautions," replied Chuffy. "Before we started out, I took the boys aside—and McRae and one or two others—and doled them out a few harmless smoke bombs. I told 'em to put the things in their pockets and forget all about them. The chances were they would never be

needed—but I've been in many a tight corner in my time, Bill, and although I was reckless in my younger days, I'm now a firm believer in the policy of 'safety first.'"

"I repeat, Archibald, that you are wonderful," said the professor. "A striking example of foresight."

It was quite true that the miniature "bombs" were harmless. The smoke would have no after-effects—and their only object was to provide a smoke screen. This they did very effectively.

As they ran, the men and boys tossed their remaining smoke bombs far to their rear, so that any pursuers would be confused by the dense smoke clouds which rose in puffing masses. Overhead, hundreds of Venusians were wheeling about in obvious confusion and dismay, making a wild chorus of queer, clicking sounds.

"A nasty surprise for old Wellman," panted Dick Sylvester, as he ran, "but those things are less dangerous than Chinese crackers. Once we're aboard the airship, we shall be safe, and it seems to me we'd better stick aboard——"

He broke off abruptly. The whole crowd of them had just swung round the last of the great, quartz buildings, and were in full sight of the spot where the Asterion had been left in charge of her guards.

But the Asterion was no longer there!

CHAPTER XIII

The Sign in the Sky

It was a stunning shock. During those first startled seconds, the adventurers could only stare in stupefied bewilderment. Lord Chuffmore was the first to guess the truth. They had been tricked by Grant Wellman! While they had been attending the banquet, their host had caused the airship to be spirited away. . . .

But how?

By what extraordinary trick had this thing been accomplished? The men who had been left on guard would never have taken the Asterion into the air without Professor Sylvester's instructions—which meant that they had been overpowered and rendered helpless. Then why had they given no warning?

"This—this is incredible!" muttered Professor Bill huskily. "My ship! What has become of my ship? That infernal rogue, Valescu——"

"Can't blame Valescu for this," jerked Chuffy, whose keen eyes were taking note of several things. "Valescu was Wellman's prisoner. No, this is one of Brother Wellman's little jokes."

"Jokes! You call it——"

"Sorry, Bill. This is a bit more serious," interrupted Chuffy. "But there's no need to panic. I think I can guess what happened. Wellman thought there might be a hitch—so he decided to grab the Asterion. She can't be far off—and I think I can guess in which direction she lies."

"How?"

"Look!" said Chuffy, pointing.

All eyes were turned in the direction he indicated. There, in the sky, not very far distant—perhaps midway between the outskirts of the city and a deep forest—hundreds of Venusians were wheeling in formation. There was something impressive and rather beautiful in their appearance as they circled in the fading light—which now, curiously enough, had taken on a glorious, pinkish hue.

"Why are those Bat Men flying out there in such numbers?" asked Lord Chuffmore shrewdly. "An escort, eh? It's my guess that the airship is beneath them—but don't ask me how she has been moved."

"Under her own power, of course," said the professor. "There is no other way. Have those men of mine gone crazy? Why, in heaven's name, move the airship at all?"

"Better buck up, sir!" urged Stan Goodman. "It mightn't be too safe for us in the city——"

"Yes, we'd better hurry!" agreed Chuffy.

They all ran at the double—and in their rear, flocks of Venusians were following, most of them in the air. But there was no indication of organised pursuit. The Venusians, apparently, were incapable of any such thing.

The fugitives were running more or less blindly. As yet, there was no certainty that they were running in the right direction. But to stand still would have been pointless. Thus, they left the last of the city buildings behind.

"Look!" panted one of the schoolboys. "Look at the sky! What's happened to it?"

During the past few minutes, indeed, a startling change had come over the sky. The Venusian sunset was marvellous beyond description. Nothing on earth could compare with it; it was staggering in its sheer wonder. The whole sky was ablaze—a livid, flickering, stupendous blaze of red, orange and purple. Although the sun itself was hidden behind the high-lying clouds, great, shooting beams of light stretched upwards from the horizon like a magnificent example of the Aurora Borealis—only it was a thousand times more bewildering in its intensity. The whole sky in that direction was a throbbing panorama of colour.

"Never mind the sky!" shouted Dick Sylvester. "Look—there's the airship! Chuffy was right!"

"She's moving!" yelled somebody else. "My only hat! She's being pulled along by something. But what?"

The breathless party had just reached the top of a rise, and there was a long slope in front of them—well beyond the outskirts of the city. At the bottom of the slope, in curious shadow, the outskirts of the great forest could be seen. The trees, although not so large as the trees on the other hemisphere of Venus, were nevertheless gigantic monarchs.

But nobody looked at the forest; all eyes were fixed on the Asterion—and the vessel's attendants. She was being pulled along bodily—dragged over the ground by sheer strength. This was being accomplished by hundreds of strange looking creatures. They appeared to be animals; animals much bigger than horses, but somewhat resembling rats. They had rat-like noses, with great, flapping ears; but their hind quarters were like no animal on earth, being fin-like in shape, with great, webbed feet, as though they were sub-aquatic. They were straining at great, long ropes, and crowds of Venusians were urging them on. There was little doubt that the creatures were the "domestic animals" of Venus.

"Doesn't look too good," grunted Chuffy. "Smoke bombs won't help much against these brutes—even if we had any left. The point is—are they hostile? For all we know, they might turn on us at a command from the Bat Men."

“Crumbs!” shivered Enoch Wicks. “They’re nearly as big as elephants! And—and look at those awful teeth——”

“Hullo! What’s that?” ejaculated Goodman.

He was staring in the sky. An extraordinary thing had happened. Without warning, the vivid lights had flickered—the whole sky went black for a moment and then came to life again. Again it happened—the glorious colours dimmed, sprang into full glory again, and then dimmed to a pale, eerie radiance.

At the same moment, the escort of Venusians, flying above, wheeled about towards the city with wild, clicking cries and every indication of panic.

“What on earth——” began Mr. Mickie.

Even the “animals” harnessed to the airship shared in this sudden panic. Whether they were released by the Venusians, or whether they stampeded of their own accord, the onlookers could not tell; but in a moment they were free of the gear and tearing straight into the forest, thundering over the ground like a herd of elephants, loping in a most erratic fashion. The Bat Men who had been on the ground were on the ground no longer—they were flying frantically back to the city.

Within the space of a few breathless moments, the earth party was left entirely alone.

“But what *scared* them?” asked Chuffy tensely.

“It must have been the curious flickering in the sky,” replied the professor. “I don’t quite like it myself, Archibald. It is ominous.”

He spoke the truth. The flickering was repeated, and it was like some deadly warning. A moment later, a different kind of warning came—a vocal warning, uttered by one whom the adventurers had never expected to see. The voice came out of the sky, and it was charged with urgency.

“Back! Back to the city! Night is upon us!”

Everybody stared upwards—and there, sweeping over them, was Grant Wellman in his curious, flying cradle, held by scores of flying Venusians. Already they were swinging around to return to the city.

“We’re all right!” shouted Chuffy. “We have the airship. No need to worry——”

“The Things of Darkness will have you!” came Grant Wellman’s voice, like a wail out of the ether.

Then he was gone, his Venusian bodyguard whirling him away in terror. Less than ten seconds later, not a Bat Man was to be seen. All had gone fleeing back to the city. Nothing living was within sight—except the startled humans.

“What does it mean?” muttered Mr. Mickie.

“Heaven knows—but we’re mugs to be standing here!” retorted Lord Chuffmore.

“Don’t be absurd, Archibald,” said the professor. “We are only two or three hundred yards from the airship, and we can all be aboard within a few minutes. No harm can come to us then. Come, boys!”

“We hope!” murmured Chuffy. “I don’t like Brother Wellman’s panic; he’s not the kind of man to panic unless he had good reason. Remember the hints he gave during the banquet? Hints about the darkness?”

They were all hurrying towards the airship, and it seemed incredible that they could be any danger. But the next moment the darkness came. It came dramatically, startling. Just as though a candle had been snuffed out, the last ray of light flickered in the sky—and then everything became black.

It was not the blackness of an earth night—but a blackness inconceivable and incredible, all the worse because of its swift descent. One moment the party was hurrying forward towards the clearly visible airship, and the next moment they were groping like blind creatures.

“No stars—and no moon!” came a muttered exclamation from Chuffy. “I say, this is a bit thick——”

“Naturally, there is no moon,” interrupted the professor, as he felt Chuffy’s hand clutching him. “Venus has no satellite, like the earth. The stars are completely hidden by the immensely high cloud bank. This is awful! I can’t see——”

“There’s danger!” interrupted Chuffy urgently. “What kind of danger, I don’t know—I hardly dare guess. But there’s *something*—and it must be pretty ghastly. We must reach the ship. Boys—boys! Keep together, for the love of Pete! Hold on to one another.”

“That’s what we are doing, Chuffy,” came Dick’s voice out of the solid blackness. “But it’s so confusing. I’ve never seen darkness like this——”

"Idiot!" came Goodman's voice. "How can you see darkness?"

"I mean, it's like something solid—— Listen! Did—did you hear something just then?" Dick's voice was startled. "I—I thought I heard a kind of horrid slithering——"

"Steady!" came Chuffy's tense voice. "No need to let your imaginations go adrift, kids. Follow me."

He was in the lead, and he thought he knew in which direction the Asterion lay; but after one or two steps, he was uncertain. Walking blindly, with hands outstretched in front of him, he felt that a solid wall was facing him.

It was indeed a moment for imaginations to go adrift—particularly in view of the vague hints which Grant Wellman had uttered, to say nothing of his recent strange behaviour. . . . The Things of Darkness! What had he meant by those ominous words? Why had he uttered them at all? Scarcely half-an-hour ago he had plotted to capture them all—to hold them prisoners. Apparently this danger was so horrific that he had forgotten all about his scheme; common humanity had prompted him to issue that grim warning.

With tightly compressed lips, Chuffy floundered on. He had seen something which everybody else had missed—something which had cleared up one of the little mysteries which had hitherto puzzled him. He had happened to cast a backward glance towards the city a mere second or so before the darkness had shut down—and he had seen that every one of the great, unglazed openings in the quartz buildings had been closed! Those buildings had become solid. Masses of quartz had been filled into the openings, making the walls unbroken lines of massive quartz. The thing Chuffy was asking himself was—why? Why had those openings been so powerfully covered? Why had the Venusians gone screaming back to the city?

Obviously there was danger—and at any ordinary time they would have sought their immensely strong houses in good time, before the twilight had flickered. But this evening they had been chasing the adventurers, by Grant Wellman's orders; and in the excitement they had been caught unawares. Even Wellman himself had been afraid to remain abroad in the darkness.

"We never came out prepared for anything like this," came Professor Bill's voice, to interrupt Chuffy's thoughts. "If only we had electric torches——"

"Matches!" shouted Chuffy. "Idiot! I've had matches in my pocket all the time."

"Then, for heaven's sake, strike them!"

Chuffy fumbled in his pocket; meanwhile, the men and the boys stumbled on blindly through the darkness. With every second that passed, the chill in their very souls became more acute. Whether it was imagination they could not tell, but everyone of them was obsessed by a sense of impending horror.

Suddenly a wild shriek came from one of the school-boys in the rear of the party.

"Something touched me—something tried to grab me!" he screamed fearfully.

"Steady—steady!" warned Chuffy, who, as usual, was in full command. "It's all right boys. The airship's right in front of us. Look!"

As he spoke, he held aloft a bunch of ten or twelve matches, all flaring at once. With choking cries of relief, the others saw that the Asterion was, indeed, towering right in front of them, like some massive metal building. The flare of those matches, cutting the Stygian darkness like a searchlight, revealed the glimmering hull of the Asterion—and the open doorway, with its short ladder still in position. Luck—pure, blind luck had directed the party to the right spot—the one spot where they could gain swift and easy access to the airship's interior.

Scrambling, panting breathlessly, the boys went piling in, while Chuffy stood nearby holding the flaming matches aloft—holding them until his fingers were burned, and he was compelled to drop the red hot embers.

"We're all in!" came a tense shout.

"You, too, Mick—and you, Bill—and you, Mac!" urged Chuffy, pressing the men forward. "Thank heaven! We're all in."

He was actually through the doorway, and was preparing to close it. Then, from outside on the ladder, came a gurgle of horrified alarm—in the voice of Stan Goodman. Somehow, he had been left outside, and the sudden expiring of the flaming matches had prevented

Chuffy from noticing this. His face was just inside the doorway, and he was clutching at the ladder madly.

"Something's got me!" he panted desperately. "It's holding my leg—it's pulling me back."

CHAPTER XIV

The Things of Darkness

Never had Bob Davis and Charlie Hunt heard that note in the voice of the reckless, valiant Stanley Horatio Goodman! It was a note of unutterable fear! Fear—from Goody! It was so unusual, so startling, that his chums' hearts nearly stopped beating. What was this unimaginable horror of the Venusian darkness which had him in its grip?

"Stand aside!" shouted Chuffy sharply.

With rough hands, he sent two or three of the boys hurtling over as they attempted to crowd in the doorway. Whatever danger lay there, he meant to face it alone. There was light inside the airship, filling the lobby just within the doorway—but this light had the effect of rendering the outer darkness, darker still. All Chuffy could do at the moment was to strike another bunch of matches and hold them aloft—and swearing inwardly, at the same time, that he would never venture forth again without a powerful electric torch in his pocket.

He held the matches aloft with one hand while he grabbed at Stan Goodman with the other. Goody was staring up at him—his face pale, ghost-like—and strained.

"Okay, old son," said Chuffy. "I'd better come out—"

"No, don't," panted Goodman. "Don't do that, sir! It'll have you, too."

At that moment Chuffy saw something which sickened him. He had a glimpse of a black, slimy, snake-like tentacle which came squirming over the schoolboy's shoulder. It was a feeler, and as it moved, it writhed and twisted.

"Nasty!" said Chuffy, steadily.

In a flash he made up his mind what to do. Goodman must be dragged through the doorway by sheer force.

He put an arm round the boy's shoulder and heaved; and at the same moment Mr. Mickie, on the other side, reached down and took hold of Goodman's other arm. Together, they exerted all their strength. They were horrified to feel a grim and tenacious resistance. The something which had hold of Goodman's body was holding him as in a vice.

"It's no good," panted Goodman wildly. "Your hurting me, sir— Better let go—"

"Now—together!" roared Chuffy. "One heave!"

He ignored Goodman's appeal, and with one accord he and Mr. Mickie wrenched with all their strength. There came a horrible glub-glubbing sound, and the next instant the two men and the boy hurtled inwards as something gave. They landed in a wild heap.

"The door!" gasped Chuffy. "Shut the door!"

Professor Bill was already at the lever—waiting. The door was of solid metal—enormously thick and strong, and when it was closed, the opening was hermetically sealed.

Thud!

It was not the heavy, metallic thud that might have been expected; there seemed to be a spongy resistance just before the door actually closed. Then—a ghastly, sickening squelch. Chuffy, sitting up, his face streaming with perspiration, stared at the floor, quite near the door.

"What is it, Archibald?" muttered the professor.

"Search me!" said Chuffy briefly.

Something was lying on the floor—something which had been severed by the door edge as the latter had shut. It was nearly a yard in length—a thing as black as night, as thick as an elephant's trunk, and it still writhed. A black liquid was oozing out of the severed end and spreading over the floor. "Like the tentacle of an octopus," muttered Mr. Mickie.

He touched it with his foot and turned it over. Then he saw that there were no suckers, as the tentacle of an octopus would have revealed—but blunt claws, slowly working in and out of the folds of black flesh, moving up and down as though reluctant to perish.

"It—it had hold of me," whispered Stan Goodman hoarsely. "There were others, too—pulling at my body and my legs. I—I believe I'm all torn—"

"We'll soon see," said Dick Sylvester quickly.

"Anyhow, I'm alive," went on Goodman, with a slight return of his old spirit. "The blighting thing didn't have me, did it? Thank's awfully, Chuffy——"

"Take him to the saloon and give him first aid," interrupted Chuffy gruffly. "Bill, what's the idea of standing there? You ought to be in the control room. The sooner we take this crate off the ground, the better."

"Why, yes!" ejaculated the professor, with a start. "Of course! This wretched thing——"

He tore his eyes away from the black object on the floor. Several of the schoolboys took hold of Stan Goodman and prepared to lift him bodily.

"Chuck it, fatheads," he protested. "I can walk!"

But when he tried, he found that he could not. His arms were bare, the sleeves of his jacket having been torn bodily away. His trousers were ripped, too, and on his arms and legs there were many long, vivid bruises—although in no place was the skin actually torn. Those blunt claws had gripped, but they had not torn the flesh.

"By crackers! I feel better now," muttered Goody, taking a very deep breath. "There wasn't much pain, you know. That's what I couldn't understand. But when those—those horrible things were clutching at me I felt absolutely numb. Yet I wasn't numb. I don't know how to describe it. I seemed to be paralysed all over—with a horrible, tingling sensation all through me, as though I'd had an electric shock."

"Interesting—decidedly interesting," said Professor Bill, who seemed reluctant to depart. "No doubt the creature to which this—er—feeler belongs contains some stored energy—not necessarily electrical, but peculiar to the conditions of Venus. Yes, very intriguing."

"Bill——" began Chuffy.

"It has long been a theory of mine that planetary creatures are essentially different from earth creatures," continued the professor abstractedly. "The night, too—— I've always believed that planetary nights must be quite different from earth nights—particularly on those planets where there are no satellites to provide a false light."

"All very enthralling, Bill—we're tickled pink—but wouldn't it be a good idea to get this ship into the air?" said Chuffy mildly. "You can trot out your theories

when we're a couple of hundred miles or so above ground. Bill!" he roared. "To the control room, curse you!"

"Eh? Oh, yes!" gasped the professor. "Of course! Of course! Really, Archibald, there is no need——"

"Don't call me Archibald!" roared Chuffy.

However, his tone had had the desired effect, and at last Professor Bill hurried away—convinced that his scientific theories were not popular at the moment. His companions needed no telling that there was something unpleasant and even deadly in the Venusian night. These were matters which could be discussed more agreeably—as Chuffy had said—a couple of hundred miles above ground. Better still, a couple of thousand miles. The Asterion could accomplish fantastic distances in a very short time, once she was off the ground and under control.

In the next few minutes, therefore, there was plenty of activity. The engineers were sent to their posts, Professor Bill himself hurried to the main controls, and the boys were ordered to keep to the main lounge.

A discovery which Chuffy soon made—and which he kept to himself for the time being—rather startled him. The men who had been left on guard were missing! They were not prisoners within the airship, as Chuffy had supposed. In some way they had been doped or overpowered, while the rest of the party had been at the banquet. Obviously, they were prisoners in the Venusian city—prisoners of Grant Wellman. But as this was not the moment to think of rescuing them, Chuffy said nothing to the others. Nothing could be done until daylight, at least.

In the main control room, Professor Sylvester was relieved to find that everything was in order. He sent brief signals to every compartment of the ship—signals indicating that he was about to take off. Back came the answering signals, proving that the engineers were at their posts.

Over went the lever, and the Asterion behaved in a most unusual way. Instead of answering on the instant, as usual, she quivered in every plate. The sensation was extraordinary. The great airship shook and vibrated violently.

"Good heavens!" muttered the professor. "What on earth——"

He broke off. He was staring at the dials and indicators.

"We're not moving!" he muttered blankly. "We haven't moved a foot from the ground."

"I don't like it," said Chuffy—which was a gem of understatement.

"It is incredible," continued Professor Bill. "Why are we not rising? Everything is operating—the indicators prove it. The vessel is throbbing with energy. Yet we are not moving."

"Better turn off the 'fluence, or something will go bust," advised Chuffy. "She won't stand this strain for long, Bill. Of course, there's only one explanation."

"That is?"

"We're being held down."

"Held down?" repeated the professor incredulously. "Don't talk absolute nonsense, Archibald! How can anything hold us down? This ship weighs thousands of tons——"

"I don't care if it weighs as much as the Cheops Pyramid," interrupted Chuffy grimly. "We're being held down—and it seems to me that it might be a dashed good idea to see what kind of nuisance we're up against. You've got searchlights on this ship, haven't you?"

"Searchlights!" ejaculated the professor. "Of course—yes!" He shut off the power as directed, and the violent straining and quivering died down. "An excellent suggestion, Archi—er—Chuffmore! Searchlights, of course. We must hurry."

He was not only bewildered, but intensely worried. For the first time in his experience, the atomic motors had failed—and he knew that it was through no fault of the mechanism. Some vast, mysterious power was holding the airship to the ground. The searchlights, perhaps, would reveal this mystery.

Meanwhile, in the main saloon, the boys were rapidly recovering their usual good spirits. The lights, and the knowledge that they were safe, had soon restored them. They knew nothing of this fresh set-back. Stan Goodman was not badly injured, as everybody had feared. Except for the nasty bruises on his limbs, and a general feeling of numbness, he was unharmed. All he

needed was rest and quiet—and for once he was willing to take both. He sat in a chair, very subdued.

Many of the others were gathered at the solid windows, staring out into the darkness. They had felt the airship quivering, and that quivering had now ceased. They knew, instinctively, that they had not moved.

“I don’t like this, you know,” said Dick Sylvester, at length. “Nobody’s told us, but I believe something is wrong. I’ll swear we haven’t left the ground.”

“Look!” said Tim Charters suddenly. “There’s a beam of light out there——”

“A searchlight!”

“My hat!”

There was a rush for the windows. The dazzling beam of a searchlight was playing down from above—from some position in the nose of the airship. It was sweeping round, illuminating the ground with a dazzling brilliance . . . And not only illuminating the ground.

“Look!” whispered Will Osborne huskily.

The others were breathless with horror—and disgust. They could see that the Asterion was surrounded by great Creatures—visible only for a moment, for as the searchlight touched them, they retreated precipitately out of range. Only for a moment or two did the watchers glimpse these monstrosities. But that glimpse was more than enough! They were inky black things with bodies that heaved disgustingly—and it seemed to the startled boys that the Creatures were shaped something like enormous black beetles—each one towering twenty or thirty feet high, and possessing scores of cable-like feelers. These writhing feelers were passed right over the Asterion’s hull—to starboard, to port, aft and for’ard. They were holding the airship to the ground—as Gulliver was held to the ground by the Lilliputians!

CHAPTER XV

The Horrors of the Night

“Did you see them, Archibald?” asked Professor Sylvester, as he turned a pale, startled face towards Chuffy. “Am I going mad, or did I actually see——”

"You saw 'em all right, Bill," interrupted Chuffy. "Twice as big as elephants, with bodies like scorpions, and scores of mile-long feelers! The blighters scuttle away as soon as the searchlight touches them, though. The trouble is, we can't flood the whole ship with light."

They were behind the searchlight, high up in the bows of the Asterion—in a specially made searchlight turret, which could be raised, when necessary, above the streamlined outer casing of the hull. There were, in fact, many of these searchlight turrets fore and aft of the airship.

"What are we going to do—have the machine-guns out into operation?" asked the professor, as he crouched in the confined space of that turret, watching Chuffy operate the searchlight.

"I imagine that our machine guns, powerful as they are, will be about as much use as pop-guns against these babies," growled Chuffy. "So these are the 'Things of Darkness' that Brother Wellman warned us against! He apparently knew what he was talking about."

"Yes, indeed," said the professor. "We can now understand many things."

"Can we?"

"We can understand why the Bat Men flew back to their city——"

"But these ghastly things can't fly, can they?" asked Chuffy, as he moved the searchlight about. "There—did you catch a glimpse of that one? Golly! They can move with the speed of lightning. But how they hate light! I wonder, Bill, if you noticed that all the big openings in the city buildings were closed just before sunset?"

"No, I did not notice——"

"Well, I did. Every wall had become solid."

"Another indication—another proof," said the professor tensely. "We now realise why the inhabitants of Venus do not provide their houses with ordinary windows. Windows would be useless against monsters of this type—with feelers of gigantic power that reach upwards for hundreds of feet. Don't you understand, Archibald? The people have built their houses of immense blocks of quartz—far, far stronger than reinforced concrete. With the coming of darkness, all

openings are solidly sealed. Why? Obviously to keep out the night enemy."

"Something else, too," jerked Chuffy. "The blighting things hate any kind of light . . . Look at them scuttling as I turn the searchlight about! The very fact that the Venusians go about fearlessly in the daytime is a pretty clear proof that these scorpion-things are powerless in the daylight. They only come out of their holes after darkness has fallen . . . I say, they must be *some* holes!"

"Creatures of the night, indeed," said Bill Sylvester.

"Creatures utterly and absolutely distinct from day creatures. A most enlightening discovery Chuffmore! On this planet, without any doubt, there are two separate and distinct species. On earth, as you know, the night creatures are quite capable of prowling about by day—and vice versa. But here, on Venus, the species are separate and distinct. Accordingly, the only safety for the Venusian 'humans' is to build their cities absolutely clear of ornamentation, with every house as strong as a fortress."

"You've said it," said Chuffy. "Now we can understand why the city is built so peculiarly—why it's so bare. I mean, no trees—no parks or gardens—just the plain streets and plain houses. During the night the Bat Men hide themselves away and they're safe behind the great walls. When daylight comes they are free again . . ."

He broke off and listened.

"I don't like the sound of that," he said uneasily.

From the main part of the hull came faint but unmistakable sounds of straining metal. As the Asterion was firmly on the ground, her power completely shut off, there could be only one explanation.

The monsters were not only holding the vessel down with their great feelers, but they were actually trying to *crush* the vessel, and destroy it. Unless something was done—and done quickly—the results would be disastrous. Chuffy said so.

"But, my dear fellow, you forget the immense strength of the ship," protested Bill. "A solid, metal hull of this description, capable of withstanding the incredible stresses of outer space, is not going to be

crushed by a number of absurd creatures with long feelers——”

“Don’t be too sure,” interrupted Chuffy. “I’m beginning to hate the sound of straining metal. It’s no good fooling yourself, Bill. There’s only one explanation of that sound. Light seems to be the only weapon we can use. See how the ghastly things scuttle off into the darkness as soon as the light touches them——”

“Wait!” interrupted the professor. “There are other searchlights, Archibald—two more in the bows, two amidships, and three in the stern. I’ll get every man on them. We’ll play the beams in every direction, so that not a single inch of ground surrounding us is unprotected.”

He hurried away, and in a very few minutes he had given the necessary orders. Meanwhile, the great, gleaming hull of the airship was continuing to give forth its ominous creaks. Every passage, every state-room—the lounge—the saloon—echoed with the soft whispering sounds of the straining metal.

She was built of stout stuff, and could withstand an enormous amount of strain—but, even so, sooner or later something would give. The possibilities were grave beyond imagination. If any portion of the vessel was actually crushed, so that her stout outer casing was broken, any thought of returning to Earth through outer space would have to be abandoned. On Venus there were no facilities for repair.

The Asterion was in agony. The terrible night creatures of Venus were not only surrounding the vessel, but piling on top of her, crawling over her, smothering her. Those great feelers—each one as strong as a steel cable—were tightening all the time. They were trying to reduce the Asterion to a mass of wreckage. The fearsome brutes were now present in greater numbers than ever.

Some echo of the general alarm inevitably reached Dick Sylvester & Co. in the main lounge. They had repeatedly asked if they could be of any help, but the answer had always been “no.” They felt very futile. There was nothing for them to do—except wait, and watch from the windows.

“This is awful, you know,” muttered Tim Charters, as the whole vessel gave an exceptionally strong quiver.

"If this goes on much longer, the ship will be crushed like an eggshell. All we can do is to stand here and wait for the end!"

"Nothing like being cheerful," grunted Dick. "If you can't say anything better than that, Charters, you chump, for goodness sake dry up. Uncle Bill's doing all he can."

"Look! More searchlights coming on," said Bob Davis suddenly.

If the boys were worried, mere words are inadequate to describe Professor Sylvester's emotions. His precious ship was in danger of being wrecked—and by a lot of creepy, crawly exaggerated beetles! The thing was fantastic. Here they were, with the Asterion absolutely in fit condition for flying into the upper air, being held down by a lot of giant insects!

"If these concentrated searchlights fail, men," said the professor as he gave the order, "we're probably doomed. I hardly dare anticipate——"

He broke off. One after another the searchlights had been switched on. They were soon playing in every direction, the beams swinging round so that every inch of the surrounding ground was flood-lit.

The professor himself stood at the main controls, and his voice, through the internal telephones, was heard throughout the ship. As the searchlights flooded, so the professor turned on the power—gradually, at first, so that the strain would not be too great. The Asterion was trying once more to pull herself away from the grip of the monsters.

It was a tense, thrilling moment.

The searchlights were full on, blazing on every side. The inky blackness of the night was pierced by the dazzling white beams; the schoolboys at the windows—the only people on the airship who were mere spectators—caught many glimpses of the beetle-like horrors as they scuttled with extraordinary speed out of the zone of light. During those few minutes the boys felt that they were passing through a ghastly nightmare.

Great lumbering bodies, scaly, black and loathsome; giant feelers by the hundred, writhing and lashing and beating against the vessel's hull. Every now and again the whole ship would shake as something immense and weighty thundered against it. One result was soon apparent, however. The giant creatures were falling

away, blinded and confused by the searchlights. Very soon, the ground immediately surrounding the airship was clear—except for an occasional monster which dropped from the hull, where it had been clinging, to hit the ground with a shock that was like a minor earthquake. A brief glimpse of writhing body and whirling feelers, and the thing was gone.

"We're getting free of 'em!" shouted Stan Goodman huskily. "They're going!"

"By Jiminy Cricket! I believe you're right!" muttered Kenneth Pyne, his eyes shining as he stood at one of the windows. "Not a sign of 'em now— Yes, there goes one—and another! Whoa! Did you feel that?"

They had all felt it. The airship was still groaning in mortal agony, for the professor had increased the power, and the strain was terrific. Most of the monsters had been driven away, but many still remained, and scores of giant feelers were still entwined about the hull—particularly towards the stern. The bows were almost clear.

The front part of the vessel suddenly gave a violent upward jerk. A moment later the bows rose higher and higher, free of the ground—while the stern still remained prisoner.

"She's going—she's going!" gasped Dick.

"Yes, but what's going to happen next?" panted Pat Warren, scared. "She'll never stand this strain—"

Professor Bill was in mortal agony. If he cut off the power now, there would probably be serious damage. On the other hand, if he increased the power there was a chance that utter disaster would follow.

Fortunately, the matter was decided for him. At that moment the Asterion gave a violent lurch and shot many feet into the air. Her stern had come away from the ground suddenly, as though a number of steel cables had snapped. Up she went, rising higher and higher.

"Hurrah!" yelled Dick. "We're free!"

"Not yet, old boy," muttered Pyne. "Look out there. Feelers—coming downwards from the top of the hull. We've still got some of the horrible things clinging to us."

The airship continued rising—and there now came the horrible, ominous thuds of several more of the monsters

dropped to the ground and were crushed by their own weight.

A few more anxious minutes, during which time the giant beetle-things continued to fall away, and the airship attained an even keel. Soon she was soaring higher—free, undamaged and answering her controls at the slightest touch.

"Thank heaven!" breathed Professor Bill. "That was a nasty experience, Mac!"

"As nasty as any I can remember, sir," agreed the chief engineer, wiping the sweat from his brow. "Night-time doesn't seem to be particularly healthy on this planet."

"I am extraordinarily interested," said the professor keenly. "I believe we have only touched the fringe—Think she's riding comfortably Mac?" he added anxiously.

"Perfectly, sir."

"I hope so—I hope so. After what has just happened, I am thankful, indeed, that the vessel is still airworthy," continued the professor. "The strain must have been terrific. At least, we are beyond the reach of those infernal creatures."

Lord Chuffmore had come to the same conclusion, and he opened up the great, metal sides which protected the promenade deck, and leaned over the rail. With a rush, the Whitelands boys joined him. The searchlights were still playing at full strength, their beams directed downwards.

"There they go—scores of 'em!" yelled Stan Goodman, pointing. "Ugh! They give me the creeps!"

Only for a moment were the beetle-things in view. The Asterion was now not only rising, but moving swiftly forward, the professor having decided to get away from this neighbourhood altogether. He was very anxious about the safety of his precious aircraft.

"Nothing much to see, kids," said Chuffy, after a few moments. "I think we can take it that the 'all clear' has sounded. Phew! It was pretty hot while it lasted—Hey! What's the big idea, you young ass? You're hurting!"

Dick Sylvester, who was standing next to him, had suddenly grabbed Chuffy's arm in a fierce grip.

"Look!" gasped Dick. "Over there!"

"What on earth——"

Then Lord Chuffmore's voice choked in his throat. A long, writhing feeler, like a massive cable, was coming downwards from the upper part of the airship's hull—coming downwards and probing into the deck space as though endowed with an intelligence of its own.

"Look out, you fellows!" roared Chuffy, in alarm.

He was a second too late. Tim Charters, who was nearest to that horrible thing, spun round just as the end of the feeler curled viciously round his body, the blunt claws holding him as in a vice. The next second the feeler soared outwards, carrying the unfortunate schoolboy with it.

The danger had come so unexpectedly, so dramatically, that everybody on deck was stunned by the sheer horror of it. They had believed themselves to be safe from the Venusian monstrosities. Now—this!

Even Chuffy was momentarily paralysed. He was not only filled with apprehension for Tim Charters, but remorseful for his own carelessness. It was he who had jumped to conclusions—he who had taken it for granted that the last of the beetle-things had fallen off the airship—he who had opened up the promenade deck—and, worst of all, he who had allowed the boys to accompany him out on the deck!

"Good heavens!" he muttered huskily.

He stared helplessly at Charters—who was in full sight, hanging ten or fifteen feet away from the vessel's side, clutched in the grip of that giant feeler. At any second, the Thing might relax its hold, and the airship was now a thousand feet above the ground. Death yawned beneath the schoolboy. There was the alternative danger—and this even more acute—that the monster itself would lose its grip on the vessel's hull and fall to the ground, carrying its victim with it.

"Tim, old man!" choked Dick Sylvester.

"I daren't look!" muttered Will Osborne, white to the lips. "He's as good as dead already! Can't we do something?" he added wildly. "Must we stand here——"

He broke off and started climbing the rail, as though intending to attempt some fantastic rescue. Of course, it was quite impossible, and some of the other fellows forcibly dragged him back.

"It's no good, old man," muttered Dick. "For goodness' sake, calm yourself——"

"He'll be killed!" interrupted Osborne desperately.

"All my own fault," came a panting, strained voice from the darkness. "I ought to have been more slippy, You chaps stay where you are—you can't do anything to help me."

Lord Chuffmore felt a lump in his throat. There was something rather fine in Tim Charters' coolness in that dread situation; the schoolboy must have known that he had very little chance of life.

"Fool!" muttered Chuffy savagely. "Why am I standing here?"

As he made a rush for the inner doors, intending to race to the control room, he paused—remembering that there was a telephone near at hand. He was experiencing an overwhelming sense of guilt. This was all his fault! Like a crazy lunatic, he had allowed the boys to come out on deck. . . .

"Bill?" he snapped, into the 'phone, as he heard a voice. "Listen, Bill! Take her down! But for heaven's sake, go easy——"

"What on earth is the matter, Archibald?" came Professor Bill's voice. "Take her down, did you say? I am only too thankful to have brought her into the air. We are well over a thousand feet up by now, and I intend to increase the speed——"

Chuffy fairly yelled. He had just caught a glimpse of the luckless Tim Charters, for one of the search-light beams had swung round, and was illuminating the boy. That cable-like feeler was now a long way from the deck, and Chuffy received the impression that Charters was hovering in mid-air; the feeler, black as the night itself, was hardly visible. Charters was being waved up and down and twisted this way and that, as though his captor played with him.

"Bill!" shouted Chuffy. "Listen carefully. There's still one of those devilish things clinging to the ship."

"Indeed? Well, there's no need to get excited," said the professor, over the 'phone. "It won't hang on much longer—particularly if I take the ship up into the stratosphere——"

"No—no—not that!" yelled Chuffy. "Take her down, I tell you, Bill! One of the boys——"

He broke off, horrified. He had just caught sight of another cable-like object feeling its way down towards the deck. It said much for the excitement which had gripped the boys and Chuffy that not one of them had realised this danger. If that horrible thing clutching at the airship could release one feeler to probe the deck, it could also release other feelers!

"Boys—inside—quick!" shouted Chuffmore. "Don't argue—don't stand there like lunatics. Take the lead out of your feet and *move!*"

His tone, rather than his words, spurred them to action. They raced across the deck, but went no further than the inner doorway. Here, comparatively safe, they waited—their eyes still fixed on their doomed chum.

"Upon my word, Archibald, I cannot understand your excitement," came the professor's voice. "There is no danger now——"

"No danger for us—but ghastly danger for one of the boys," interrupted Chuffy. "Listen, Bill! He's been grabbed by one of the thing's feelers, and he's now being held over space. At any second he may drop."

"Good heavens! You don't mean——"

"Yes, I do!" said Chuffy tensely. "There's only a chance in a million that we can save him. Take the ship down, Bill! Take her down slowly, carefully——" He broke off with something like a groan.

What possible hope would there be for Tim Charters, even if the airship safely reached the ground? The boy was still clutched by the monster, and it suddenly occurred to Chuffy that Charters' danger would be worse. A swift fall to death would be merciful; but if he were carried off by the beetle-creature when the ground was reached, his fate might be horrible beyond the imagination. So Chuffy found himself at a loss for words.

Meanwhile, Professor Bill was taking the Asterion steadily downwards. He watched the indicators tensely. Through the special "television" observation window he was able to see the ground—illuminated by the searchlights—slowly rising up to meet him. Bill needed no further telling that Tim Charters' danger was ghastly. But if the airship could only land before the beetle-thing fell clear, there was just a chance.

"Mac!" rapped out the professor, without glancing at Chief Engineer McRae. "Send some of the men to

the big, cannon guns. Tell them to stand by for orders."

"You mean the machine-guns, sir?"

"I don't mean the machine-guns," snapped the other. "Machine-guns will be useless against such monsters. The cannon guns, Mac. There are two for'ard, and two aft. Get the turrets out and the guns ready for action. The instant we land we've got to blast the life out of this vile insect. It's our only chance of saving the boy."

Curiously enough, Lord Chuffmore, his brain becoming clearer, thought of the same idea at the same moment. He rushed to one of the cannon guns in order to man it himself, yelling for others to go to the guns. When he arrived, he found the gun already manned—the turret projected outwards from the streamlined hull.

Everything that could be done to save Tim Charters' life was being done. Tim's friends could only wait and watch, their hearts in their mouths. The airship was now descending rapidly, and the boys were vaguely wondering why the beetle-thing had not fallen clear long since. Tim Charters himself was haunted by the same thought. He felt that he had no right to be alive—that by all the odds, he should have been dead minutes ago.

Minutes!

It was hard to realise that only a mere minute or two had elapsed since Charters had been seized. Now, in less than another minute, the airship would be on the ground— Nobody knew why the monster had clung to the airship, but there was a very real and logical explanation. It was fairly and squarely amidships, right on top of the airship—so placed that not a single searchlight beam touched it. It lay, in fact, in a little zone of darkness, with light all round. As these creatures hated light it was afraid to move. Perhaps it was half stupefied by the light. Certainly, if one of those beams had struck it, it would have loosened its hold at once. As it was, the majority of its enormously long feelers were spread downwards over the smooth hull, clutching.

A wild hope began to fill the breasts of the watchers. Dick Sylvester and one or two others ignored the possible danger, and ran across the deck to the rail again. They stared at the ground, which was now only a hundred feet below. The searchlights illuminated the ground pitilessly. There were no trees—none of the

pale, sickly green vegetation which was characteristic of Venus—nothing but a black, earthly looking marsh, without a trace of vegetation. Dick shuddered as he looked. It seemed to him that there was something ugly and sinister in the appearance of the ground—something strange, mysterious and—frightening.

“I don’t like it,” Dick muttered hoarsely. “Will! There’s something funny——”

“I know,” interrupted Will Osborne, who was beside him. “I can’t tell you what I mean, but—but it’s not like ordinary ground at all. It looks so—so black and queer.

Lower and lower. . . .

Only twenty or thirty feet now—and, at that moment, a wild shout went up. The Venusian monster had suddenly lost its grip. . . . There was a horrid, slithery sound, a sound which filled the air with vileness, and the boys at the rail caught a glimpse of a black bulkiness blotting out the searchlight beams towards the stern. For a fraction of a second the monster hovered, then fell. Tim Charters, still clutched by the feeler, fell, too.

“He’s gone—he’s gone!” muttered Dick, in agony.

Chuffy, his finger on the button of the cannon gun, was unable to get the creature into his sights. Everything was happening so quickly; and the thing which happened next was so much quicker than anything that had gone before—so surprising and shocking—that Chuffy was momentarily paralysed.

For the happening was staggering beyond words.

The Venusian night monster struck the ground—and the ground seemed to quiver and open up. It enveloped the creature, rolled over it, and became smooth again. All in a second! Tim Charters had gone, too! Clutched by that feeler, he had been dragged down in the same way. The onlookers caught one glimpse of him as he was sucked into that apparently solid ground. There was another heave, a rolling, billowing movement, horrifying to see.

Then nothing—nothing but the black, smooth surface!

CHAPTER XVI

The Mighty Geyser

"He's gone!" said Stan Goodman, in a whisper.

It was incredible. It was horrible. The Asterion was hovering twenty feet above the ground, stationary, and those on deck were staring downwards, looking with dazed eyes at the spot where Tim Charters had last been seen.

"It's not ground at all!" panted Charlie Hunt. "Did you see the way that monstrous thing was swallowed up? It's mud—nothing but thick, oozing mud!"

"And old Charters was sucked down into it!" said Will Osborne, in a voice of horror. "There's no chance for him now. I don't think there ever *was* any chance for him. But now he's dead—suffocated."

The tragedy of it held the others numb and dazed. Now that Tim Charters was really gone, they all felt helpless. It seemed to them, as they stared downwards, that the surface of that vast mud lake gave an abominable heave—and was still again. The extraordinary thing was that it did not look like mud at all. It was so smooth and solid—

"I say!" came Ginger Cummings' voice, from somewhere along the deck. "It's *hot!*"

"Shut up!" snapped Kennedy. "This is no time to be grumbling about—"

"No, you don't understand," interrupted Cummings. "The mud down there—it's hot. Can't you feel the heat waves coming up? Look!" He pointed. "If you look closely, you can see little bubbles, and every time a bubble bursts, there's a spout of steam. Poor old Charters—"

Blub-blub-zurrrrh!

Without any warning, there was a terrific commotion in the lake of mud; the surface bubbled and boiled—then an incredible mass of mud came shooting upwards, spraying into the air for hundreds of feet and dropping back on the airship's plates with dull, plonking sounds.

"It's a geyser!" yelled Stan Goodman. "The mightiest geyser anybody has ever seen!"

"Poor old Tim was sucked down into it," said Dick Sylvester, with a shudder. "Well, let's hope he didn't suffer much——"

"Look!" screamed Will Osborne.

He pointed wildly. At that second another terrific outburst had come from the mighty geyser, and hundreds of tons of mud shot upwards in a vast shower. Hardly any of the boys noticed it; they were staring at something else—they were staring at an impossible, incredible human Shape which had risen level with the deck rail, and was now clutching at the latter. Half-a-dozen boys sprang forward at the same time; they reached forward to grasp the misshapen mass of mud, which was hardly recognisable as anything human.

"It's Tim!" choked Dick Sylvester.

Their hands reached him—helped him. They were almost stunned by the realisation of the truth. Tim Charters had been sucked down into the geyser—and within a matter of seconds he had been hurled upwards by the force of the subterranean energy. By some miracle, he had been flung against the Asterion's deck.

He was dragged over the rail, half across the deck, and none of the boys took the slightest notice of the rain of mud which cascaded about them; they were even unaware of the ominous rocking of the airship itself.

"Tim!" panted Dick Sylvester.

"No good talking to him," said Will Osborne. "He's half dead. Let's take him inside——"

"Who's half dead?" demanded the mud shape.

"Tim!" yelled Dick.

"All right—don't fuss!" came Tim Charters' familiar voice. "I'm not hurt. A bit muddy, perhaps——"

"Oh, my goodness!" said Dick Sylvester dizzily.

It was extraordinary to hear Tim—who had apparently been doomed to certain death a few minutes earlier—talking in a more-or-less normal voice. It was an effort, of course. Tim was not nearly so cool as he made out. He was dazed, in fact, and utterly unable to explain his miraculous escape.

"But what *happened?*" asked Stan Goodman.

"No good asking me," muttered Tim. "I thought it was all up—I suddenly found myself in a lot of mud—hot, clinging mud—and I seemed to go straight down. I didn't have time to get any of the beastly stuff into

my mouth, although I felt half suffocated. The next second, before I knew it, I felt myself being shot upwards. I grabbed at something, as blind as a bat, then I heard you fellows. Pretty lucky, eh?"

"Lucky!" said Dick, taking a deep breath. "It was a chance in a million. Lend a hand, you chaps; we'd better take him straight to a bathroom and give him a swill down. For all we know he may be hurt somewhere. Can't see anything while he's smothered in this mud."

"He's not the only one who's smothered, by Jiminy!" remarked Kenneth Pyne, with a grimace.

The others ignored him. Being smothered in mud was a trifle. A few seconds earlier they had believed that Tim Charters was dead. Now he was with them—alive, and apparently unharmed. It was indeed a near-miracle. The boys went crowding towards the lounge— Then—

Zurrrrh! Blub-blub! Swoooooosh!

If the geyser had been active before, it now became frantic. The convulsion immediatly beneath the airship was awful beyond description. The whole surface of the mud lake, for hundreds of yards around, simply hurled itself into the air. Thousands and thousands of tons of mud spurted upwards, to the accompaniment of horrid, gurgling noises and bursts of choking, evil-smelling steam.

Most of the mud struck the under plates of the airship, causing her to rock, reel and shudder. But a large part of the mud, after shooting sykwards, fell back on the airship. The mud fell in great masses, and the dull shocks were like the blows of some giant hand. To make matters worse, tons of the stuff surged through the deck openings.

"Inside—everybody!" yelled Chuffy, who had appeared on the scene again. "We must close the inner doors. By glory! This is just one darned thing after another."

The mighty convulsion of the geyser was over, but nobody could tell when the next eruption would occur; and the Asterion was already in grave difficulties. It was impossible to close the metal slides which protected the deck, for everything was choked with mud. But the inner doors were closed just in time—before

rolling masses of the mud came surging into the very interior of the ship.

Lord Chuffmore went hurrying into the control room.

"We've found the kid, Bill," he said breathlessly. "Can't tell you how it happened—but he was thrown upwards by the geyser, and the other boys have him—"

"Geyser?" echoed the professor blankly.

"Didn't you know? A fine spot you chose to land!" said Chuffy. "Smack in the middle of a record-sized geyser. Not an ordinary geyser, at that! I wouldn't mind water, but this stuff is the stickiest mud——"

"Archibald!" snapped Professor Bill. "Why must you drivel on like that? Don't you understand that we are in grave difficulties? Now I realise why the controls are so sluggish. We are fighting an enemy more deadly than the beetle-things. The weight of mud on the airship is already proving too much. We are being forced down into the heart of the geyser."

"That's a cheery piece of news," said Chuffy steadily.

He accepted the statement with his usual philosophic calm—but it would be trifling with the truth to say that he was happy. No sooner had they averted one danger, than another cropped up. Chuffy was a great fellow for excitement, but he was rapidly coming to the conclusion that they were having too much of a good thing. Enough, in his opinion, was as good as a feast—and this affair was assuming the proportions of an orgy.

"Well, Bill, it's up to you," he said briefly. "Can't fight mud with machine-guns or searchlights."

He went to the nearest observation depot, the glass of which was smeared with mud blobs, and looked out. There were still spaces which were transparent. The searchlights were still full on. At least, two or three of them were. The others had been smothered and obliterated by masses of mud. There was mud everywhere—mud all over the airship, mud shooting through the air in cascades. Chuffy was aware that his ears were filled with a continuous confusion of sound. The giant geyser was making a tremendous noise.

Even as he looked, more cascades of mud came shooting upwards. It seemed to Chuffy that the extent of the geyser was miles in area; and eruptions and convulsions were taking place in half-a-dozen spots at once. He could see the surface boiling and bubbling, and every

now and again a whole mass of the mud would shoot skywards.

Professor Bill, meanwhile, was in agony. The powerful atomic motors were operating at full power, yet the Asterion was unable to drag herself free from the dread clutch of the mud. Some thousands of tons of the stuff had fallen on to the airship, and large masses of it were still clinging. The sheer weight was forcing her down—and none knew better than Bill that when she fell right into the geyser, there would be no possibility of pulling her out again. That great mass of metal—that marvellous achievement of earthly science—would be sucked down to destruction with its precious load of humans, like a soap bubble going down a drain pipe.

The danger was, indeed, far more acute than the danger from the beetle-things.

“One more outburst like that, and we’re finished,” said the professor, his face grey and drawn. “We are less than ten feet above the mud, Chuffy. We are still dropping slowly, although the motors are working full pressure. There is nothing more I can do.”

Chuffy was silent. He had left the window, and was staring at the “television” observation square, through which it was possible to see the ground immediately beneath. It seemed to him that they were touching the mud already.

McRae came hurrying in.

“It looks pretty bad, sir,” he panted. “The stern is right in the mud. I don’t know how we can get up——”

“Whoa!” yelled Chuffy. “What was that?”

His ears were filled with a terrific roaring noise, like the sudden discharge of a thousand hooters; the airship rocked violently as an incredible spurt of mud struck her bows. The effect was startling and dramatic. That mass of mud, striking the underside of the vessel, caused the bows to jerk upwards at an acute angle. Chuffy and McRae were thrown off their feet, and Professor Bill only saved himself by clutching at the control levers.

“Heaven help us!” he panted. “This is the end.”

He knew that the Asterion’s equilibrium was completely upset. Nothing could right her while that mass of mud hampered her freedom of movement. Yet, if he had only known it, this latest manifestation of the geyser proved to be the airship’s salvation.

Up went the bows—up and up, and at the same time the vessel rocked until she was almost on her beam ends. During those anxious seconds it was touch and go . . . Then came a slithering, rushing, oozing sound. Owing to the steepness of the angle, the tons of mud on the top of the airship commenced sliding off. Once that movement had started, it continued. Ninety per cent. of the mud slid away.

The Asterion, her atomic motors operating at full power, shot into the sky like a gas balloon suddenly released from its cable. There was a wild lurch, a crashing of movable objects, and everybody in the ship was flung headlong. The Asterion rocked and reeled, then, mercifully, she resumed an even keel and continued shooting skywards. It was as though she had dragged herself away from a clutching hand.

"We're rising!" shouted the professor shrilly. "We're free! My ship is safe!"

Chuffy picked himself up and softly swore.

"As I said before—one darned thing after another," he grumbled, grinning twistedly. "These Venusian nights seem full of entertainment!"

"This particular night," said the professor, "is only an hour or two old."

"Well, for the rest of it, I suggest we pop up to about five thousand miles—and stay there," said Chuffy. "They can have their nights! I've had enough for once."

He looked at the indicators.

"It's all right—we are rising rapidly," said his friend. "A nasty experience, Archibald. I began to think that we were doomed. This is indeed a great relief."

"We're not rising very rapidly, are we?" said Chuffy.

"I don't want to put any strain on the vessel—"

"Strain her as much as you like—only don't stop until we're about half way back to Earth," interrupted Chuffy. "Phew! I don't mind admitting I'm all shaky—and what I can do with right now is a long whisky and soda."

He suddenly started.

"What am I thinking about?" he went on gruffly. "I haven't had time to find out if that poor kid is badly hurt. I'll go along and see, Bill. Meanwhile, keep rising! I'm a great fellow for excitement, but I'm no glutton."

When he arrived in the lounge, he found Goodman and Co., talking excitedly with Pyne, Kennedy and one or two others. They were at one of the windows, staring out.

"That was a nasty minute, wasn't it, sir?" asked Bob Davis, as he saw Chuffy. "We don't know exactly what happened, but we were nearly trapped in that geyser, weren't we?"

"So nearly that I still go hot and cold when I think of it," replied Chuffy. "What about young Charters?"

"We're rising, aren't we, sir?" asked Charlie Hunt.

"You bet we're rising. There's no more danger. What about young Charters?"

"Oh, he's all right—wasn't hurt a bit," said Goodman. "As soon as they washed him clean, they found that he hardly had a bruise on him. They've taken him to his state room now."

"Best place for him," said Lord Chuffmore. "He must be suffering from shock, anyway—although, perhaps, he won't admit it. I'll go and have a look at him."

As he moved out of the lounge, a member of the crew accosted him.

"What are we going to do about the mud, sir?"

"I thought we'd got rid of most of it——"

"The mud on the starboard deck, I mean, sir," said the man. "We tried to open the doors a minute ago, and we had to close 'em again—quick. The mud started coming in like a lot of black treacle. The deck is thick with it. It's all over the hull, too, sir."

"We should worry! We're in the air, aren't we?"

"Mr. Collins says that it's not ordinary mud, sir—it dries as hard as concrete," explained the man. "If we don't do something to get rid of it before it dries, we shall never get rid of it at all."

Chuffy saw that it was a problem which had to be dealt with at once. Encountering Mr. Mickie a minute later, he and the schoolmaster made a swift examination. They were rather shocked. The Asterion was in a pitiable condition. Almost every inch of her beautiful silver hull was coated with inches of the sticky, glutinous mud. Her beauty had gone; her silver glory was no more. The starboard deck was feet thick in the stuff.

"Good heavens! The men will never be able to wash this filthy mess away," said Chuffy. "Collins is right. If we let it dry, we shall never be free of it at all."

"The whole hull needs washing," said Mr. Mickie. "Look, I have an idea. She can use her tractors to move along the ground, can't she?"

"Of course. But don't talk to me of the ground," said Chuffy. "I don't want to see the ground again until daylight——"

"Yes, but by daylight the mud will be as hard as rock." objected the other. "I'm suggesting that we should land on the beach—the sea can't be far away—and trundle the ship right into the water. That ought to wash the mud away."

"Give her a bath, you mean?" said Chuffy. "Yes, it's a good wheeze—and it seems to be the only way to do the trick. With every door hermetically sealed, the old tub is practically a submarine. I'll see what Bill says."

Professor Sylvester objected strongly at first; but when it was pointed out to him that the beauty of his ship would be irreparably ruined unless something of the sort was done without delay, he consented.

"Yes, I suppose it is the only solution," he agreed. "We can land on the beach quite easily and plunge into the water by means of our tractors. If we act at once, the mud will wash away before it sets."

"But where's the sea?" asked Chuffy.

"Not far off, I imagine. We have not travelled far, actually. I'll take the ship down until we're only three or four hundred feet above the ground, and cruise round for a while," said the professor. "Our searchlights will serve to guide us."

At that moment, the Asterion was nearly five thousand feet up, and the Venusian night was so appallingly black that no trace of the ground could be seen. It was a darkness which human eyes had never before seen—a darkness comparable to that of a catacomb. There were no stars in the sky, for every star was hidden by the dense cloud pall miles overhead.

The professor was cautious as he took the airship down; and, indeed, but for the searchlights, he would not have risked it at all. Lower and lower they went until they were only a couple of hundred feet above the ground. The powerful searchlights in the bows—

which had been unaffected by the mud—enabled the professor to keep the ship at the same height, and moving cautiously forward.

A few miles like this, then it was necessary to raise the vessel to two or three thousand feet—for the Venusian city, dark, silent and apparently deserted—loomed right ahead. They passed over the city with everybody watching curiously. On the outskirts they caught glimpses of the immense beetle-things, crawling about among the buildings.

Then they were beyond the city and descending again. So presently, they reached the black and mysterious sea.

CHAPTER XVII

The Thing From The Sea

The landing on the beach was uneventful.

There were none of the night creatures here, with their deadly, cable-like feelers. The beach was absolutely deserted. Soon, the Asterion was trundling forward—straight into the water.

The boys, who should have been partaking of supper, had no appetite for food. They crowded at the available windows and stared out. There was something about the appearance of the sea which filled them with awe. It had looked flat, grim and sinister by daylight—but now, seen only in the glare of the searchlights, it was positively frightening.

A great vista of smooth, oily, disgusting blackness. The boys felt, somehow, that deadly danger lurked in those mysterious depths.

“We oughtn’t to chance it,” muttered Dick Sylvester.

“Yes, after what has already happened in this darkness, I feel a lot safer in the upper air,” said Stan Goodman. “Still, the old ship has to be washed, hasn’t it?”

“It’s all right, boys—we’re not going to trundle in very far,” said Lord Chuffmore, who came up just then. “Just far enough to give ourselves a wash—then up into the stratosphere again.”

“But wouldn’t it be better to remain muddy, sir?” asked one of the boys. “At least, wouldn’t it be better to leave everything until daylight?”

"That's the rub," said Chuffy. "Can't do it. By daylight the mud will be rock hard, and you ought to see the mess we're in. Appearances wouldn't matter so much—but the professor is afraid that the caked mud will have a disastrous effect upon the ship during our return flight to earth, in outer space. You see, the slightest projection sets up friction—and friction means trouble at high speed. The streamlining of the Asterion is so finely adjusted—— But I needn't go into details. All you need know, is that we must wash this mud off the hull if we're to make a safe return trip to earth."

The boys understood, then, that it was no mere whim—no fancy of the professor's for the beautiful appearance of his ship. If they needed any further proof, it was provided by the laborious progress the ship made as she trundled towards the water. Her great tractors were already clogged with the half-drying mud. By the morning they would be completely out of action, unless washed and cleaned.

Within five minutes of entering the water, a change was noticeable. The tractors were operating much more freely. Churning through the water, the caked mud was washed away as though by magic. She went right in, until completely submerged, and the water softened the mud on her plates and washed it away.

Professor Bill was thankful that the sea bed proved to be level and solid. But he only took the airship a few hundred yards out from the beach—until she was completely submerged. Then he turned her about and trundled her out again. This performance was repeated several times, with excellent results.

The professor was ready, at a moment's notice, to take the ship straight up into the air. Men were watching at every available viewpoint, ready to give warning of sudden danger. But no danger came. The Asterion was allowed to give herself a thorough wash in peace.

"One more plunge, Bill, and I think it'll do the trick," said Mr. Mickie, as the airship turned about on the empty beach. "There's hardly any mud left—and Collins reports that the starboard deck is nearly clear."

"Splendid," said the professor. "I am as anxious as you are, Mick, to go into the air again. What do you think of my ship, eh?" he went on enthusiastically. "Just as she can fly with impunity through outer space,

she can move about under the sea. Not quite a submarine, but pretty near."

"I prefer her as an airship," said Mr. Mickie drily.

"I'm afraid we shan't clear all the mud away from the decks—although her hull is now completely clean," said Bill Sylvester. "However, we can set men to work with brooms and mops. Perhaps the boys will help, too. It is a pity the sea is not a little rough,—it would help considerably. But this strange ocean appears to be utterly tideless and stagnant."

After that further plunge, the professor decided to take off at once and cruise over the city. He made it a rather longer plunge than any of the others, and the Asterion went surging under water for some distance.

"We ought to be thinking about some sleep, really," said Lord Chuffmore, as he glanced at the wide-awake boys. "As soon as we're out of this mess, you'd better have your supper and turn in."

"But we're not sleepy, sir," objected Stan Goodman. "Anyhow, if there's any more excitement, we want to be in it."

"There's not likely to be any more excitement," said Chuffy. "All we're going to do, after we leave the sea, is to cruise over the city. I want to see if there are any other night creatures, in addition to the beetle horrors."

"What if there are?" asked Dick.

"Well, you never know—we might amuse ourselves, and do the Venusians a bit of good, by potting at them with our cannon guns," replied Chuffy. "A new kind of sport."

The professor was equally anxious, in his own way, to examine the city by searchlight. Nobody had any possible thought of danger—now. They had been in and out of the sea so many times, that it had become fairly obvious that the sea, at least, contained no perils.

They were vastly mistaken . . .

The Asterion was on her way out of the water—the last trip. She was completely submerged. Mr. Mickie, who had joined Chuffy at one of the windows, suddenly became very stiff. His gaze, as he looked out of the window, became a stare. There was nothing to be seen but a blackish-grey blur of water, dimly illuminated by the searchlights. It was a curious fact that not a single fish had been seen in this grim, stagnant sea.

"Look," muttered Mick, clutching at Chuffy's arm. "What's that?"

"What's what?"

"I thought I saw—— Funny!" muttered Mr. Mickie, as he still stared.

"What do you think you saw?"

"I don't know. A kind of black *bulk*." Mr. Mickie was vague. "Somehow, it seemed a lot blacker—— What was *that*?"

They all felt it; a fine, tense quiver which passed through the hull of the airship, as though she had suddenly become charged with electricity. At the same time, Chuffy saw what Mr. Mickie thought he had seen—an immense darkening of the sea in that one spot. It was like a great black shadow, a mysterious something which shouldered against the airship.

"It's something brushing against our bows, sir," panted Stan Goodman, from another window. "Didn't you feel it? Here, I say! *Listen!*"

They all heard the soft, slithering sound—a sound which was uncanny in the extreme. Chuffy, staring out of the window, found himself staring at nothing. The blackness had increased until it was like a solid wall. Yet the searchlights were still operating.

"I wonder if Bill knows——" he began.

Then the airship rocked softly, as though she had brushed against an enormous, yielding bulk. It seemed to Chuffy that the black mass outside the window heaved and rolled. Two minutes later, the Asterion emerged from the water and trundled up the beach.

There was no black mass here—no danger. The searchlights, sweeping around, revealed a deserted beach.

"What was it?" muttered Mr. Mickie.

"I wonder if it was anything," said Chuffy, steadying his voice. "Just imagination, perhaps. We probably ran into a hollow, and this caused the ship to roll a bit, giving the impression that we had brushed against something soft and big——"

"You felt that, too, did you?" said the other. "Don't kid yourself, Chuffy. We *did* brush against something."

Cascades of moisture were pouring from the airship now, and Professor Bill, making a quick inspection, was satisfied that the mud had been completely cleared away.

"Take her up, Bill," said Lord Chuffmore tensely, as he entered the control room. "I'm not fanciful as a rule, but this blinking sea has made me nervous. I believe we had a very narrow escape a minute ago."

"That's very strange, Archibald—I, too, imagined that we struck against something," said the professor. "Have you any idea—"

"Not a ghost of an idea—except that we rubbed shoulders with something mighty ugly and horrible," interrupted Chuffy briskly. "It must have been about ten times bigger than a whale. Can't you take the old tub into the air?"

The professor frowned.

"I strongly object, Archibald, to your referring to my ship as an old tub——"

"And I strongly object to your calling me Archibald!" roared Chuffy. "That makes us even. Now, are you going to take off?"

A moment later, the Asterion was soaring aloft—her old self. Clean and gleaming, freed entirely from the sticky geyser-mud, she rose triumphantly. There were many sighs of relief.

"It is becoming increasingly evident," remarked the professor, "that Venus is a planet of deadly danger at night. During the black hours, there are strange and horrific things abroad. We have had ample evidence of this. While being aware of the dangers, I am nevertheless intrigued. We are making many wonderful discoveries; we are contributing enormously to the world's scientific knowledge."

"If it's all the same to you, Bill, the world's scientific knowledge can go and boil its head," said Chuffy. "All I'm concerned about at the moment is that we're several hundred feet in the air. I tell you, we've had a narrow escape."

From what? Nobody could say. But they all felt exactly the same as Chuffy; they felt that during those last few minutes in the sea, they had brushed against some deadly peril, and had only escaped in the nick of time.

"I'd give a fortune to know what that thing was," continued Chuffy thoughtfully. "It's all the more dashed exasperating because we didn't see anything. The scientific view point doesn't interest me much——"

The professor shook his head.

"I am very much afraid, Archibald, that you are a hopeless case," he said. "The scientific view point is the only one that matters. If ever we are on speaking terms with Mr. Wellman again, we must question him with regard to the night life of Venus. He was very reticent at our last meeting—but after to-night he may be more inclined to talk. I fancy he will be able to give us some very interesting information."

Feeling safe and secure in the air, Professor Bill now took his ship right over the city, and every searchlight was operating, the beams sweeping the quartz buildings and the deserted spaces. Going on deck, Lord Chuffmore found that most of the boys were there already. There was hardly any trace of mud left, and several members of the crew were busy with mops, clearing up the last traces.

"Hullo! What are you doing out here?" asked Chuffy, as he caught sight of Tim Charters. "I thought you were a casualty? Feeling fit again, kid?"

"I'm all right, sir" said Tim.

"You ought to be in bed."

"That's what the chaps tell me, but while there's some excitement going on, I want to be in it," replied Tim.

"What a thing it is to be a schoolboy of your age," sighed Chuffy, as though he were about eighty-seven. "You go through the most harrowing ordeal, and escape death by inches, and in half-an-hour you're as bright and chirpy as ever. Amazing! If I'd gone through that experience, I should have emerged a physical wreck, with twenty years added to my life."

"Come off it, sir," grinned Tim. "As a matter of fact, I hardly remember anything about it. It was pretty awful, being in the clutch of that feeler, but I wasn't hurt, so why worry?"

"You'll do," said Chuffy briefly.

He went to the rail. The airship was now flying quite slowly over the heart of the city. She was, in fact, almost hovering, and the tops of the giant buildings were only a few feet below.

Not that anybody took much notice of the buildings. The watchers were more interested in the beetle-creatures which were scurrying about in the open spaces, trying to escape from the searchlight beams. Just

beyond these beams, in the half darkness, the loathsome things could be seen trying to gain entry into the buildings. They crept along close to the walls, their enormous feelers clutching at the stones, trying to find nooks and crannies. Without doubt, they were attempting to gain entry so that they could seize upon their prey. It was small wonder that the Venusian "people" built their houses of such enormous strength, with windows that could be blocked up with the coming of darkness.

"Ghastly looking things," muttered Enoch Wicks, with a shudder. "I don't know why we're standing here, looking at 'em. They make me sick."

"Nobody asked you to stand here," said Goodman pointedly. "Buzz off back to the saloon, my lad!"

"Hey, look at the way the horrors are scuttling off in every direction," said Bob Davis. "Must be our lights."

The lights were certainly having a big effect. There was a veritable stampede in the open spaces below. The beetle-like monsters were scampering away, out of range of the bright searchlights. It could now be seen that there were hundreds of them; the whole city was swarming.

But not for long. Five minutes after the airship had arrived, the "streets" were clear. Not a single beetle-creature remained. All had gone back to their burrows, or the forest, or wherever they had their lairs.

"This sort of things goes on every night," said Chuffy, in a sober voice. "As soon as darkness falls, so the day of Venus comes to an end. And the night life commences—with these diabolical things in full charge. Golly, it makes me go cold when I realise that we've only glimpsed the fringe of the thing. Perhaps there are other horrors—too awful to imagine!"

"I'm beginning to think the same thing," said Mr. Mickie, in a low voice. "Remember what Wellman said, Chuffy?"

"About the night things? He didn't say much——"

"That's what I mean. He only hinted. But the hints he *did* give referred to the sea," went on the school-master. "He gave us to understand that there was danger from the sea. Yet these beastly scorpion-things aren't from the sea."

"By Jove, you're right," agreed Chuffy. "We first encountered them near the forest, and a few minutes

after darkness had fallen. I wonder—— There doesn't seem to be any danger from the sea," he added abruptly. "Or does there?"

Again he was remembering that mysterious black bulk which had brushed against the Asterion.

Looking down, he could see that the open spaces were now entirely empty. McRae, acting on Professor Sylvester's orders, had appeared with a powerful camera and flashlights. He took many photographs of the city—records to be taken home. Once, when the professor took the airship out to the city's outskirts, McRae was able to obtain an excellent photograph of the fleeing monsters.

"That one's worth its weight in gold," said the chief engineer, with satisfaction. "Pity we couldn't go a little nearer, that's all. Still, there'll be other nights, and *next* time we shall have everything ready."

"There's something I don't understand, Chuffy," said Dick Sylvester. "If our searchlights can keep these awful things away, why don't the Venusians have fires burning everywhere? A whole ring of fires, say, outside the city limits?"

"If the Venusian were here alone, I could say that the answer was simple—that they haven't the intelligence to think of such a thing," replied Chuffy. "But what about Wellman? Surely he must understand the value of light? Why hasn't he suggested a ring of fires?"

The answer—or something that was suggestive of an answer—came almost immediately afterwards, and in a most unexpected way. It chanced that the airship, on her way back across the city, was passing only a few feet above one of the tallest buildings. An excited shout from two of the boys drew Chuffy's attention to a grotesque, misshapen figure on the flat roof of the building.

It was the figure of Grant Wellman, and he had just emerged from a kind of quartz trap-door. He was waving his arms wildly, his crooked body casting fantastic shadows.

"Go away—go away!" he was shouting.

"Hey, Wellman, what have you done with six of our men?" demanded Chuffy, seizing the opportunity to broach an important subject. "If they have come to any harm——"

"They are quite safe," interrupted Wellman wildly. "Go away—come back to-morrow. Turn off your lights!"

"Turn off our lights?" said Chuffy, puzzled.

"Go!" roared Grant Wellman, in wild alarm. "Would you destroy us all? Curse you for your folly! Go away from the city—and turn off your lights!"

"Do you want those beetle things to come back, then?" called Chuffy. "We thought we were doing you a good turn——"

"Fools!" raved Wellman. "There are other perils on this planet—far, far greater perils. Just as the light frightens some of these night monsters, so it attracts others. It attracts them as light attracts moths. You do not realise the peril you are bringing upon us——"

He broke off, and then uttered a wild, anguished cry.

"Too late! The danger is on us!"

He had ceased to stare up at the airship—and was now looking fixedly across the city towards the sea. Two of the men in charge of the searchlights, hearing Wellman's words, swung their beams round in the same direction.

"*Look!*" whispered Dick Sylvester, in horror.

A monstrous thing was coming from the sea towards the city—a vast, incredible, lumbering mass towering hundreds of feet into the air and measuring nearly half-a-mile in length—a creature so huge, so enormous, that the human mind boggled.

"Am I mad?" babbled Stan Goodman. "Can I really see this?"

"So that's what brushed against us in the sea," breathed Lord Chuffmore, gripping Mr. Mickie's arm. "Ye gods! We were as near to it as that—rubbing shoulders with it—and we escaped! We didn't realise how lucky we were!"

There it was, a black, towering horror, moving ponderously but with a deadly purpose—straight towards the city. Further back, in the black shadows, it seemed to the watchers that there were other monsters, but they could not be sure. One, after all, was enough.

"It's—it's like some awful prehistoric monster!" muttered Dick Sylvester. "A brontosaurus. That's it! Yet it's different—— Look at that long tapering neck

and the dragon-like head. And the body—ugh!—as slimy and horrible as that of a slug.”

“Look what it’s doing!” yelled Goodman.

The Great Horror had reached the first building in its path, and it reared itself up hundreds of feet into the air—a mass of sheer weight and savage strength. It seized the building and tore it to pieces as though it were made of cardboard. Amid a great cloud of dust and rubble, the immensely strong, quartz structure collapsed, and across the air came the sound of a thunderous thudding and hammering.

“Yes, there are others—lots of ’em!” shouted Dick, suddenly. “Look! They’re coming to destroy the city!”

“No wonder old Wellman was scared!” said Bob Davis hoarsely. “This is awful!”

The Great Horrors of the Venusian sea had been attracted by the lights of the Asterion. All unconsciously, the adventurers had brought disaster upon the city.

CHAPTER XVIII

A New Danger

Horrified, Lord Chuffmore stared down at the destruction—and at the giant monsters which were now coming from the sea in ever-increasing numbers—like sheep, following their leader. Obviously, they were creatures of the meanest intelligence. They were none the less dangerous because of that; their very size and strength made them a horrific peril.

“We must do something, Chuffy,” said Mr. Mickie sharply.

“Yes—but what? Guns? Cannon-guns—yes?” said Chuffy, with a start. “Cannon-guns might have some effect. Shove a few shells into their vitals at close range, and they may be discouraged.”

“We can’t see these harmless Venusian people butchered in front of our eyes,” continued Mr. Mickie anxiously. “We brought this danger to the city, and we must put things right.”

“Look at that building—wrecked as though it were a mere rabbit hutch,” said Chuffy. “And there are more of them coming, Mick—lots more.”

"It's our lights, sir!" shouted Dick Sylvester. "Why don't you switch off the searchlights?"

"If we do—what then?" snapped Chuffy. "The night will be as black as ink. We shan't be able to see what we're doing. I doubt if it's any good turning the lights off, anyhow—now. The monsters are here. We must fight them off."

"But how, sir?"

"Mick, hurry off and have the big guns manned," urged Chuffy. "Glory! To think that we had one of these things rubbing against us in the sea."

He hurried away to consult with Professor Sylvester—who was only partially aware of this new and unexpected development. He had, however, the instinctive urge to turn the airship about and take her away from the city—towards the sea, the searchlights playing down on open ground.

Most of the boys remained on deck, staring at the scene below. So far, mercifully, only one of the buildings had been demolished—and this on the very outskirts. It was a comparatively small building and did not appear to contain any Bat Men inhabitants.

The towering, lumbering, nightmare creatures were trailing up from the sea, however, making straight for the city, and it seemed that nothing could save the place from destruction. These peaceful inhabitants were doomed to a horrible fate.

"We're dropping—we're getting lower!" said Will Osborne excitedly. "What's wrong? We're sinking!"

"Keep your hair on!" said Dick, steadily. "We're going lower so that the guns will have greater effect."

"The professor's mad," wailed Enoch Wicks, white with fear. "Why doesn't he take the airship right away? Why can't we go higher, instead of lower? It's madness to stay here. How do we know that these horrible things won't reach up and grab us? One touch and we should crash!"

"What about these poor Venusians?" roared Goodman.

"What about 'em? It's their trouble—not ours."

"What do you mean—not ours?" bellowed Goodman. "We brought the trouble on them, didn't we? By crackers! You dirty rotter! I've a good mind to kick you inside out!"

Wicks subsided, and Crocker, who had been about to make some remarks of a similar kind, never even started. At that moment there was more excitement, so the attention of the other boys was distracted.

Bang-bang-bang!

There came a number of sharp, staccato explosions, and the airship quivered from stem to stern. She was flying lower than ever now, with Professor Sylvester controlling her with consummate skill. The shells from the guns struck the first sea monster in the middle of its body—and at that appallingly short range, there could be no mistake. There were a number of blinding flashes and the monster seemed to reel and stagger. Then it rolled slowly over on its side, great, gaping wounds appearing. A smother of foam came from its dragon-like mouth. Then it sagged, shuddered and became still.

"That's one of 'em!" said Chuffy tensely. "Dead as a doornail. We know, at least, that cannon fire will kill the brutes—large as they are."

"They seemed to be a kind of cross between animal and fish," muttered Mr. Mickie. "Soft and flabby—and, of course, vulnerable to attack. I may be wrong, Chuffy, but it seems to me that the rest of the awful things are wavering. They don't know their own minds, by the look of it."

The Asterion was now midway between the city and the sea, all her searchlights concentrated downwards upon the ground. It was a fact that the great, sea monsters were milling around in vague disorder, leaving wet, slimy trails behind them. No longer were they advancing in a menacing herd on the city.

"The lights, of course," said Lord Chuffmore quickly. "While we were right over the city our lights attracted them—just as Wellman said it would. Golly! Why are we staying here?" he added loudly. "The obvious thing to do, is to fly back over the sea."

"Attract them back into their natural element, you mean?" asked Dick Sylvester quickly. "I wonder why we didn't think of that before?"

"Because our brains are glued up," snapped Chuffy. "Because we were so startled by the sight of these babies that we couldn't think of the *only* solution."

Within a minute, the airship was speeding over the sea, her every searchlight concentrated in one great cone—

and blazing towards the city. It was soon apparent that the giant, sea-things were on the move again—this time they were lumbering back towards the sea. There were dozens of them, like great, moving mountains. After halting and hesitating uncertainly, they turned.

"An excellent idea of yours, Archibald," remarked Professor Bill, as he came on deck. "Our friend Wellman did not speak idly when he told us that these night atrocities are attracted by light. Most interesting. I am more than ever convinced that Venus is considerably more interesting than Mother Earth. A planet of continuous surprises."

"I'm beginning to think," replied Chuffy carefully, "that the sooner we leave for home, the better. I mean, I should be a lot happier if we didn't have these kids aboard. It's a big responsibility, Bill."

"Yes, I agree," admitted the professor. "Our first duty should be to take the boys safely back. Their parents are already mourning them as lost, I imagine. Yet—think of the possibilities," he went on enthusiastically. "I am loth to leave Venus just yet, Chuffmore. So far, we have hardly probed the fringe of this remarkable planet. Here we have a world where there are two separate and distinct forms of life. During the hours of daylight, all is peaceful and safe on the surface of Venus; but as soon as darkness comes, the planet is converted into a place of grim and dreadful dangers."

"Well, thank goodness, we've averted one of them," said Chuffy, as he pointed. "Here comes the whole gang—lumbering back into the sea. In spite of their size, they must have brains about as big as a pinhead. Our lights are drawing them back into the water."

It was true. The immense, lumbering monsters were all trailing back into the sea, plunging into the water with a great disturbance, and wading out until they finally vanished beneath the surface.

"As soon as the last of them has disappeared, I'll take the ship up to a height of ten or twelve thousand feet," said Professor Bill. "There we'll stay until dawn. No need to take unnecessary risks."

"Ten or twelve thousand feet?" repeated Chuffy. "What's the matter with ten or twelve thousand miles? I shan't feel safe until—Hullo! What's the matter with young Davis?"

Bob Davis was standing in a curiously rigid attitude, and he was staring—not at the ground, like everybody else, but into the mysterious blackness of the sky.

"I thought I saw something just now, sir," said Bob, turning a flushed face towards Chuffy. "Something moving in the sky——"

"Your imagination," interrupted the other. "How can you see anything in this darkness?"

"He's right, though!" said Dick Sylvester quickly. "It isn't completely dark, Chuffy. I mean, our searchlights. There's a kind of reflected glow—— Look! There's something moving up there—not in one place, but in dozens."

"Hundreds!" yelled Bob Davis. "We shouldn't see them at all but for the searchlight reflection. What are they—birds? No, they're too big to be birds. They're a long way off, and yet we can see them——"

"Upon my word, Archibald, the boy is right," ejaculated Professor Bill abruptly. "There is certainly something in the sky—something moving rapidly in our direction."

Everybody stared, tense. There was a complete silence. At least, a complete silence on board the airship. From below came the splashing and wallowing of the monsters as they returned to the water.

"There's no more danger from those beauties," said Chuffmore quickly. "Better switch the searchlights into the sky—and see what we're up against this time."

Orders were quickly given. Even before the searchlight beams were switched, however, it was possible to see hundreds of strange creatures in the upper air. As Bob Davis had said, they were still a long way off—— Still a long way off, and yet, in that dim reflected glow, they were clearly visible! A sure proof of their gigantic size. They were great, flying bulks, like a flock of grotesquely-shaped aeroplanes, and they made not the slightest whisper of sound. They came nearer and nearer, flying straight towards the airship with unerring precision.

"What the dickens are they?" muttered Stan Goodman, mystified. "Each one is as big as a giddy air liner! They can't be Bat Men—even the savage kind of Bat Men. They're too big. Gosh! Old Wellman certainly

did know what he was talking about when he said that our lights were dangerous.”

At that moment many of the searchlight beams were switched upwards—straight into the sky. The blackness of the night was split by that concentrated glare, and a long gasp of surprise and consternation went up from schoolboys and men alike.

Straight towards the Asterion flew the flock of strange creatures, and it could be seen that their colour was a pale, sickly green. Eyes glinted in the searchlights, and immense wings were flapping noiselessly.

“Lizards!” gurgled Stan Goodman. “Flying lizards! Each one as big as a house!”

“They’re coming straight at us!” muttered Bob Davis.

There seemed to be no end to the dangers and excitements of this eventful night. Goodman had called the things “flying lizards” because they bore some slight resemblance to lizards. Actually, they were very different. Reptiles, yes—reptiles of unimaginable size, with great, spreading wings. They were still a mile away from the airship, and coming straight on in a solid mass. Each one seemed to be as big as the Asterion herself.

“Amazing—truly amazing!” ejaculated Professor Bill, staring at the approaching armada through night glasses. “They are not lizards—and yet they are not birds. They bear some resemblance to the prehistoric Pteradactyl on earth. But their size! The accumulating evidence convinces me that this planet is in a far less developed state than the earth.”

“Forget developed states,” snapped Lord Chuffmore. “These blighting things are coming too close for comfort. They’re just like moths, as Wellman told us. They are being attracted by our lights—and they’re flying straight into us. Bill, you must do something! No wonder the Venusians shut themselves in their buildings every night and leave the town in absolute darkness. Why, the very act of lighting the city would bring destruction to it.”

There was no doubt that Chuffy was speaking the truth. The great, flying things were attracted by the airship’s searchlights. Their unswerving course proved this. They were flying straight towards the Asterion—and unless something was done at once, disaster would follow. The great things were flying into the eyes of

the searchlights as though mesmerised. In just the same way birds on earth will dash themselves to death against lighthouses; moths will fly straight into the open flame of a candle. There seemed to be some horrible hypnotic influence, compelling the gigantic flying lizards to hurl themselves straight for the Asterion—blindly, without a thought for their own safety.

If they struck, nothing in creation could save the airship from destruction. There were hundreds of the monstrosities, and they were much nearer. At short range, it could be seen that they were not entirely unlike pale-green frogs with far stretching wings and extraordinarily long tails.

Professor Bill, hurrying to the control room, was more interested than startled in the phenomenon. Skilful handling of the airship would obviate any possible disaster. These creatures were not attacking; they were merely flying blindly into the lights. It would therefore be a simple matter to avoid them by taking the Asterion direct into the upper air—and away from the giant lizards. Already, the airship was rising.

Lord Chuffmore had given the order for all searchlights to be switched off— But there was one unforeseen circumstance which, if it did not bring catastrophe, it certainly brought near-catastrophe. Unnoticed by anybody on board, a solitary giant lizard, flying alone, was full in the airship's path. Indeed, it was not the lizard which collided with the airship, but the airship which collided with the lizard.

As the vessel soared upwards, the enormous flying thing struck the bows with terrific force. There was a dull, jarring thud, and from stem to stern the Asterion shook and shivered. A great shudder passed through her metal hull, proving that the force of the impact was considerable. The next second she was falling, bows first—falling so precipitately that everybody on board was thrown off his feet.

"What happened?" gasped Bob Davis.

"We're crashing!" wailed Enoch Wicks. "We're all going to be killed!"

Nobody else had a chance to say anything. In that moment, when everybody believed the danger was averted, the sudden emergency was so staggering that brains became paralysed. The only fact which every-

body knew with a dreadful certainty, was that the airship was falling. She was falling like a stone—the giant lizard, stone dead, still entangled with the bows. It was the weight of the creature which had upset the airship's equilibrium, and which was causing her to make this sensational dive to destruction.

All hope seemed lost. If the Asterion struck the ground at this angle, and at such speed, she would be utterly destroyed, and all the humans on board killed in the crash.

Mercifully, a near-miracle happened at the last moment. The dead body of the giant lizard fell away, and that dead-weight was removed. Although Professor Bill lost no time in regaining control, and bringing the vessel back to an even keel, there was insufficient air space to avoid a crash landing. Just a hundred feet more, and all would have been well. As it was, the airship struck with a loud, jarring crash. Again, everybody on board was flung headlong.

They picked themselves up with a dazed feeling of tragedy. There was utter and absolute silence.

"My ship," muttered the professor in anguish. "She is badly damaged——"

Chuffy, with blood streaming from a graze on his forehead, came into the control room.

"That was lucky, Bill," he said coolly.

"Good heavens! You call it lucky? Are you crazy?"

"I might easily have been dead," retorted the other. "So might you—and all the rest of us. Don't you realise that we only escaped death by inches?"

"But we struck with terrible force," panted the professor. "You don't understand, Archibald! Something is wrong with the atomic mechanism. The controls are useless. I can't take her up again."

"Wow!" said Chuffy, standing very still.

Professor Bill made another attempt. But it was only too true. The controls were dead. When he operated them, nothing happened. The Asterion, crippled—and how badly crippled nobody knew—was lying on the ground like some winged bird.

There she lay, in that grim, Venusian darkness, with unknown perils all about her.

"Yes, Bill, I'll admit this is nasty," said Chuffy steadily. "I don't much relish spending the rest of the night

on the ground. I was rather hoping that we could get somewhere beyond the stratosphere. Hang on here—see what you can do,” he added briskly. “I’ll go round and see if anybody has been hurt.”

“You appear to be hurt yourself——”

“Only a scratch,” said Chuffy, as he went out.

He soon found that the only casualties were minor ones—bruises and grazes. Fortunately, every search-light had been extinguished before the airship had crashed, and she was lying in utter darkness. McRae had had the foresight to close the solid, metal shutters over the observation windows and the decks—so that the Asterion was now trimmed as though she were flying in outer space. Not a glimmer of light escaped; and in the same way, it was impossible for anybody aboard to see out. They were in a metal prison, as it were—and at the mercy of any Venusian monsters which might take a fancy to investigate.

Soon, faint sounds came through to the prisoners. Once the airship shook slightly, proving that some enormous body had pushed against it. The great brontosaurus-like sea creatures were probably still abroad. There was not much danger from the flying lizards.

“Are we really crippled, sir?” asked Dick Sylvester anxiously, as he buttonholed Lord Chuffmore.

“Your uncle and the Chief are now somewhere in the ship’s innards, trying to locate the trouble,” replied Chuffy. “I’m rather afraid there’s a good deal of damage to the hull—but we can’t be certain of that until daylight. Your uncle is more worried about the interior damage. Something has gone wrong with the works, and we can’t rise into the air.”

During that first half-hour, everybody expected a host of unimaginable horrors; but as time went by, and nothing happened, confidence was restored.

An hour passed . . .

Still the Asterion remained unmolested, and now it was becoming clear that her immunity from attack was due to the fact that not a glimmer of light was showing. The dreadful night things of Venus were only attracted by light— Yet this was not quite true. The giant beetles were repelled by light. But there was no danger from these creatures; formidable as they were, they could be driven off by machine-gun fire and cannon fire

—and no lights were required for the operation of these weapons.

It seemed, however, that the airship had fallen in a place where there were none of the giant beetles. For time continued to pass, and the silence was maintained.

As a natural result, the boys began to suffer a reaction, and their tense excitement was replaced by a sudden feeling of weariness. Chuffy advised them to go to bed as though nothing had happened, and although they scouted the idea of having any sleep, they obeyed. They were all sound asleep within five minutes.

Thus the night passed—with the boys sleeping, and Professor Sylvester and his engineers working untiringly to discover and repair the damage.

At last the dawn came, heralding a new day.

CHAPTER XIX

Only Just In Time

Dick Sylvester was the first of the boys to awaken, and he felt fresh and vigorous as soon as he opened his eyes. He did not trouble to arouse any of the others, but quickly dressed. He had no idea of the time, and he could hear a faint sound of distant hammering. Leaving his state room, he passed through the empty lounge and was surprised, on going on deck, to find the metal shutters open and full daylight streaming in.

“So it’s morning!” ejaculated Dick.

He went to the rail and glanced over. From this point of vantage he could see no damage. Collins, the engineer, and two other men were making an inspection. Some little distance away, the barren sea shore was within sight. So the airship had crashed within a comparatively short distance of the city—

“Hullo, kid! I didn’t know you were up.”

Dick turned and found himself gazing upon a tired, haggard, grimy Lord Chuffmore.

“I’m the only one,” he replied. “I didn’t disturb any of the others. I say, you look awfully used up, Chuffy.”

“Then I look exactly as I feel,” replied Chuffy, with a yawn. “Seven solid hours of hard work— Anyhow, we came through the night all right. No more alarms.”

“The ship, sir? Is she all right?”

"She ought to be, after the work we've been doing," said Lord Chuffmore, as he lit a cigarette. "Your uncle found a number of minor breakages in a particularly delicate part of the mechanism. Thanks to his foresight we have spare parts aboard, and these are now being fitted. It won't be long before we are able to make a test."

They were soon joined by Professor Sylvester himself; and the strained, worried look on his uncle's face gave Dick a moment of grave doubt.

"No go, uncle?"

"Eh? No what?"

"I mean, won't she fly?"

"I don't know—I hardly dare to contemplate the coming test," replied Uncle Bill wearily. "McRae and Banks are still working hard— Any report from Collins yet?" He turned to Chuffy. "I shall have to go down and make an inspection for myself—"

"Take it easy, Bill," advised Chuffy. "You haven't given yourself a minute's rest for hours. What about food? Breakfast is being prepared—"

"How can you talk of eating, Archibald, at such a time?" broke in the professor impatiently. "Good heavens, man, don't you realise that we may be doomed to spend the rest of our lives on this planet? I'm not sure—yet—that our repair work will be effective. As for the damage to the hull—I am more worried than I can say. The vessel suffered a great shock. Every bolt and plate must be examined— If there is damage to the outer hull which cannot be repaired, it would be madness to venture into outer space. I tell you, I'm more worried than I can say."

"There might be other troubles," grunted Chuffy.

"Eh? What other troubles?"

"Wellman, for one," replied Chuffy. "You haven't forgotten our genial pal, Grant Wellman, I suppose? After his funny tricks of yesterday, there's no telling what he'll be planning. I should think he'll be less friendly than ever this morning."

"I don't think Wellman is actually dangerous," said the professor, frowning. "A fanatic, yes, and desperately anxious to prevent us from returning to earth. But I hardly think he would commit any grave act of mischief—"

"Don't forget he still has six of our men, and he may use them as a lever against us," interrupted Lord Chuffmore. "We'd better be ready for him if he pays us a visit this morning. His idea, as you may remember, was to shoot the Asterion, plus Valescu, into outer space, and to leave the rest of us on Venus. Bill," said Chuffy earnestly, "after one night on Venus I rather fancy I'd prefer Brighton on a bank holiday."

Less than an hour after this conversation—while Professor Sylvester was making an examination of the exterior damage—somebody reported that a big party was approaching from the direction of the city. All the boys had been awakened by this time, and were on deck, eager and excited—and refreshed and restored by their sleep.

"Look—it's our chaps!" said Tim Charters eagerly. "The six men who were grabbed yesterday. Old Wellman is bringing them back."

"Well, I'm blessed!"

Everybody crowded against the rail. It was true. Grant Wellman was visible in the distance, his deformed figure looking more grotesque than ever. With him walked the missing members of the Asterion's crew. All around flew large numbers of Venusians as a kind of escort.

Professor Bill gave some sharp orders, and in a very short time, men were placed in advantageous positions, armed with tommy guns. The professor was taking no chances. He was irritated by this interruption, because he had been in the middle of his inspection, and he was not yet satisfied that the Asterion was airworthy.

"No further, Wellman," he shouted loudly, while the party was still some distance away. "It's only fair to tell you that I have several men armed with sub-machine guns——"

"Tut-tut! Such melodramatic nonsense," interrupted Grant Wellman. "What possible danger can threaten from me? My only companions are your own men. I hope you're not suggesting that my peaceful Venusians can harm you? I have brought your men back—for the simple reason that I don't know what else to do with them. Feeding them would be too much of a problem—and I can't allow them to starve."

The returned members of the Asterion's crew hurried forward and were soon on board. Wellman himself was allowed to come near. He declined to board the vessel.

"I guess I can say what I want to say right here," he growled, looking up at the figures leaning over the rail. "What fool games were you playing in the night? Do you know that you nearly brought disaster upon the city?"

"If we did so, Mr. Wellman, it was entirely unintentional," replied the professor coldly. "I would remind you of your attempt, yesterday, to hold us in your city against our will. You also seized my ship——"

"I am sorry about that," interrupted Wellman. "I was too hasty. Just one of my fits, gentlemen. I realise, now, that I should have acted in a different way. I have been informed that you crashed during the night and that your ship is damaged. If there is anything that I can do——"

"Nothing, thank you."

"Well, it's up to you," said Wellman, with a shrug of his hunched shoulders. "I can supply you with any amount of perfectly docile creatures—you saw them hauling the airship yesterday—if you want any hauling done. We were altogether too hasty yesterday. We must get together again——"

He broke off and glanced at a number of the flying Venusians. The strange creatures had come nearer, and they were making curious, clicking sounds. Wellman shaded his eyes and stared up into the sky. There was nothing particularly startling to see. The air was clear, as on the previous day, with high banks of misty clouds. The only indication of anything unusual was a queer, lurid glare in one direction—a glare which sent flickering shafts of light right up to the zenith, as though an enormous fire were burning hundreds of miles away.

"What is the meaning of that phenomenon, Mr. Wellman?" asked the professor, with interest.

"Oh, that? Nothing," replied Wellman. "A commonplace to this planet. Take no notice."

"I saw the same effect a couple of hours ago, although it wasn't so brilliant," remarked Lord Chuffmore. "After five or ten minutes it flickered out."

"Yes," said Wellman carelessly. "We often have it."

"Doesn't it mean anything?"

"Nothing—nothing at all," replied Wellman. "Now, gentlemen, about your ship. Apparently, you collided with one of our Venusian flying lizards—the mangled body of the creature is lying nearly half-a-mile away. You are very lucky to be alive, let me tell you. You were incredibly rash to fly about with all your search-lights blazing."

Chuffy, at least, noticed how abruptly Wellman had changed the subject. For some reason, known only to himself, the misshapen man had avoided all further talk about the queer sign in the sky—the lurid flickering, which was now dying down again. Chuffy also noticed that the flying Venusians were uneasy and excited. A large group of them, carrying Grant Wellman's unique "flying cradle," had landed quite close at hand.

"You say that we were incredibly rash," retorted Professor Bill, with some heat. "I would like to point out, Mr. Wellman, that we were not rash, but ignorant. You had an opportunity, yesterday, of enlightening us regarding the night perils of this planet—and you neglected that opportunity. You gave us only vague hints. Why? Why could you not have told us, straight out, that there would be great danger—"

"I did not tell you," interrupted Wellman impatiently, "because I had no wish to alarm you. At that time, please remember, I had made plans to detain you. If I had done so, you would have been perfectly safe. Further, I had taken steps to ensure the removal of the madman, Valescu—"

"Steps which included the hurtling of my ship into unknown space," interrupted the professor coldly. "Thank you very much, Mr. Wellman, but your efforts on my behalf do not appeal to me. It is very likely that your wish will be granted, and that I shall be compelled, with every member of my party, to spend the rest of my life on this planet. But if human ingenuity can repair the damage to my airship, we shall return to earth as soon as possible."

"The damage, then, is considerable?" asked Wellman eagerly—almost too eagerly.

"My ship is disabled, if that is what you mean," snapped the professor.

"Can't you take her into the air at all?"

"At the moment, no."

“Too bad—too bad,” said the misshapen man, with a twisted smile. “All I can do is to wish you luck.” He glanced at the sky again in a pleased kind of way. “At least, you will have no further hindrance from Valescu. That unhappy creature is dead.”

“Valescu—dead?” echoed Chuffy.

“The fool, in spite of my warnings, attempted to escape last night, and went out into the darkness,” explained Wellman.

“You mean, he was killed by the beetle-things?” asked Professor Bill.

“Yes, by the beetle-things, as you call them. Poor devil, he had no chance. He was dead within a minute.” Again Wellman glanced at the sky. “I must be going.”

He made some signs to the Venusians, and his “cradle” was brought nearer. A minute later Grant Wellman and his extraordinary escort were flying rapidly back towards the city.

“Bill,” said Chuffy bluntly, “I don’t like it.”

“You don’t like what?”

“That smooth gentleman’s behaviour,” growled Chuffy. “I can’t even be sure whether he was lying about Valescu, or telling the truth. Not that it matters—much. What I didn’t like was his smirk of satisfaction when he heard that we were so disabled that we couldn’t leave the ground.”

“Considering his views, his satisfaction is quite understandable, my dear Archibald—”

“Another thing I didn’t like was his abrupt changing of the subject when we were talking about the flickering in the sky,” continued Chuffy. “Believe me, Bill, there’s something dashed tricky about that blighter. We’d better keep our eyes open. If I can’t smell trouble, then there’s something wrong with my smelling apparatus.”

The professor did not seem to think there was much in Chuffy’s fears; he was, indeed, far too worried about the condition of his airship; and without further waste of time he continued his interrupted inspection. It was at about this time that a curious puff of wind came from the direction of the sea. It was a single blast of extraordinarily hot air—as though a giant furnace had sent forth a belching gust. It came across the ground like something solid and tangible, and struck the airship with

great force. Then, just as suddenly, it died away and the conditions became normal again.

"That was funny," said Chuffy, frowning.

"Not the only funny thing on this planet," remarked Mr. Mickie, who had joined him. "Gosh, Chuffy, I'm worried. What if the ship is permanently disabled?" He lowered his voice. "All these boys— The very thought that we can never return to earth is—well, rather frightening."

Chuffy did not seem to be listening.

"I wish I could fathom Wellman's mind," he said gruffly. "Why was he so pleased when he heard that we couldn't take off into the air? Why was he in such a dashed hurry to go back to the city?"

"Was he in a hurry?"

"If he wasn't, his precious Bat-Men were," said Chuffy, with conviction. "The way they kept looking at the sky, too—" Automatically, Chuffy himself glanced at the sky as he spoke. "Queer. That lurid effect has all gone."

There seemed, indeed, no reason for uneasiness, and presently the feeling of tension passed. Breakfast having been served in the main saloon, the boys were soon eating with hearty appetites. A sound sleep, and the return of daylight, had dissipated all the horrors and fears of the grim Venusian night. Lord Chuffmore himself soon went to the breakfast table and joined in the feasting.

"What I'm going to do right now," he said, after the meal, "is to go to my bunk and snatch a few hours sleep. I'm all in. Where's Bill? He needs sleep more than I do."

The professor was somewhere in the bowels of the ship. For over an hour, he and McRae and the other engineers had been inspecting the damaged plates and making a general survey. Judging by the professor's expression, when he appeared before Chuffy again, the inspection had been satisfactory.

"You're looking pleased, Bill—"

"Wait, Archibald—wait," advised Dick's uncle. "I am not going to be too hopeful—yet. I believe the exterior damage is only superficial; the outer plates are not strained and torn as seriously as I feared. In a word, we are still space-worthy, as I might call it. I am now

going to make a test. If all goes well, we should rise at once."

He took no notice of a burst of hot wind which apparently emanated from nowhere. There had been several such gusts in the last half-hour.

"How far are we going to rise?" asked Chuffy.

"I don't know—that is the anxious point," replied the professor. "If our repairs are satisfactory, we shall have full control. I intend to make exhaustive tests at a comparatively moderate height—not more than twenty or thirty thousand feet. Before venturing into the stratosphere, and outer space itself, there must be the most rigorous trials. The tiniest crevice in our hull would bring disaster. As you know, we manufacture our own oxygen while flying in the atmosphere-less blank of outer space—Hullo! What was that?"

The whole ship had quivered.

"Another of those hot gusts of wind," said Chuffy. "I don't like it, Bill. There seems to be something brewing. That strange flickering in the sky has started again."

"Quite remarkable," said the professor, as he looked at the sky. "But then, there are many remarkable things on this planet. Wellman assured us that the flickering has no meaning—"

"Yes, but was he telling the truth?"

"Does it matter?" said Professor Bill.

He went off to the control room, and it was soon known that the vital test was to be made. Dick Sylvester and the other schoolboys crowded on deck, eager and excited. They said very little—but each one knew, in his own heart, that the next few minutes were going to be vital. Were they doomed to remain on Venus for the rest of their lives, or would the Asterion prove worthy of taking them all back to earth?

"Here she goes!" gasped Stan Goodman suddenly.

The deck beneath their feet had heaved slightly, and the next moment the nose of the airship tilted slightly upwards. A shudder, a quiver, and the Asterion soared away from the ground with that extraordinary feather-like ease which was so characteristic of her.

"We're up—we're flying!"

"Hurrah!"

"Professor Bill has done the trick!"

There were many excited shouts. The airship was now rising steadily and sedately. In the control room, Professor Sylvester was wearing an expression of untold relief.

"Thank heaven, Archibald," he said huskily. "We are in the air—and she answers her controls perfectly. How wise you were to insist upon carrying ample spares! All we have to do now, is to make further tests in the rarefied regions of the upper air."

"Good old Bill—always worrying," chuckled Lord Chuffmore. "Didn't I tell you that everything would be all right? I have more faith in you than you have yourself— Whoa! What the dickens——"

He broke off and clutched at the nearest substantial object; for the Asterion had given a strange, unexpected lurch. Chuffy was sent slithering across the control room, to finish up with a jarring thud against the wall. The professor only saved himself by clinging to the control levers.

"What was it?" gasped Chuffy.

"Heaven knows!" said the professor anxiously. "I did not touch the controls——"

"Look out! Here we go again!" yelled Chuffy. "I say, are you sure that you put things right?"

He grabbed at the wall to steady himself. The airship was tilting alarmingly and dangerously—and rolling at the same time. It seemed, indeed, that she was out of control. Then Banks came staggering through the doorway.

"The wind, sir!" he panted. "We're mixed up in a kind of cyclone! It's the wind!"

"Look at the indicators!" shouted the professor, his voice rising with shrill incredulity. "We are rising at an appalling speed—yes, and twisting at the same time."

Somehow, Chuffy managed to go out on the open deck, and he clung to the rail, staring down at the Venusian ground. The first thing he saw, amid a kind of dizzy whirl—for the Asterion was twisting around like a top—was the mangled body of the dead, flying lizard—and that heavy mass of dead-weight was actually being lifted from the ground and whirled away, as though clutched by giant, invisible hands.

"Wellman—the dirty, tricky blighter!" gasped Chuffy.

Dick Sylvester, who was by his side, did not know what he meant at the moment. Somehow, it did not seem to matter. Their last moment was apparently close at hand. Dramatically, unexpectedly, a new and awful peril had hit them.

The airship was rising like a rocket, twisting and swaying, caught in a bewildering vortex of hot, choking air. The sky, during the last few minutes, had undergone a radical change. Clouds had appeared—low clouds, whirling masses of writhing vapour, twisting fantastically in cone-shaped spirals.

"It's more than a cyclone—it's worse than any tornado," ejaculated Lord Chuffmore, as he clung to the rail. "Ye gods! And Wellman knew——"

"Knew what?" panted Dick, as the other paused.

"Son, if we had been on the ground when this wind hit us—and we only left the ground in the nick of time—the air-ship would have been wrecked," replied Chuffy grimly. "And Wellman knew it! He didn't warn us—because he wanted the ship to be wrecked!"

Dick was unable to grasp the full meaning of Chuffy's words just then—for there were other things to think about. The airship was behaving in the most fantastic way; after shooting upwards for thousands of feet, twirling helplessly, it was now plunging downwards again. Apparently, a terrific down-blast of scorching air had struck the vessel from the upper skies. The force of the wind was almost more than the human mind could grasp. Lord Chuffmore and the boys who were near him were nearly flattened on the deck. Only by clutching at the rail did they succeed in standing upright. Down came that blast of wind, hot and devastating.

The Asterion was forced down with it—rolling helplessly, heeling over, twisting. All control was completely gone. The vessel was at the utter mercy of the Venusian elements.

She was struggling like a crippled thing, and diving to certain destruction—— The next moment, however, an upward blast caught her and averted the danger, sending her reeling skywards.

Lord Chuffmore, with set teeth, was remembering many things. Grant Wellman had seen the sign in the sky; and had known, from previous experience, what that sign portended; he had known that he and his Bat-

Men had time to go back to the city—to safety. Yet he had said nothing—knowing, all the time, that the incredible storm was about to break!

CHAPTER XX

The Fight for Life

"This is awful, you chaps," panted Stan Goodman, breathlessly. "The old crate will never stand it. I'm dizzy—I'm sick! What's going to happen next?"

"Goodness knows," muttered Bob Davis.

"It's just one dashed thing after another, what?" said Kenneth Pyne. "I mean, as soon as we're out of one spot, we're slap-bang in another! If you ask me, this dashed planet wasn't worth discovering!"

There were a few moments of comparative calm—meaning that the airship, although twisting and rocking alarmingly, was not in immediate danger of crashing. Lord Chuffmore came staggering amongst the boys, maintaining his equilibrium with difficulty.

"What the dickens are you kids doing out here?" he yelled. "Inside—all of you."

"We've tried to go inside—but we couldn't make it," gasped Goodman. "I thought we were going upside down a minute ago. We seem to be shooting straight upwards now, and there's a horrid feeling in the pit of my tummy—Whoops! What now? Here, I say—Whoa!"

The Asterion had given a queer kind of shudder through her whole bulk, and now she was dropping like a stone—actually being forced towards the ground by the strength of the great wind, which was coming vertically downwards from the upper heights. At the same time, the vessel spun round and round with greater abandon than ever. Several of the boys were swept helplessly across the deck; others clutched at them. Crawling, squirming, they somehow managed to stagger into the main lounge.

Just as they had accomplished this, the airship shot off at a violent tangent, her downward plunge brought to a halt. All this time the controls were fixed. Professor Bill had set them so that the vessel, under normal conditions, would have hovered. She would have neither

risen nor descended. Everything that was happening to her was caused by the Great Wind. The professor, in trying to combat the forces of the wind, had found that he was putting a grave and terrible strain on the mechanism. In despair, he left the controls alone.

This was no mere wind storm, such as is experienced on earth. The sudden, tremendous blasts came from all quarters, as though a very cataclysm were taking place. The next thing that Chuffy realised was that the airship was shooting across the surface of Venus at incredible speed, the whole air filled with a whining, screaming roar of the gale. Now, mercifully, she was on an even keel, and sufficiently far up to give those on board a feeling of safety.

They were right over the ocean—and the latter, as Chuffy could see, was churned up into a wild, raging mass of foaming waves. The shore, and the Venusian city, were fast fading from sight, amid a strange haze.

This wild flight was not instigated by Professor Sylvester—for, according to the controls, the airship should have been stationary. She was in the grip of the storm, like a mere feather in a gale. She was being forced along at ever increasing speed, and the howling of the blast was like a million demons let loose—until human ears became numbed.

Minutes dragged by—long, anxious minutes. Fortunately, there were no further dives, and the twisting motion had ceased. The airship was hurtling along on an even keel. It really seemed that she had come out of the storm centre, and was riding the tremendous gale.

“What about it, Bill?” asked Lord Chuffmore, when he entered the control room. “We’re still alive, anyway.”

“I don’t understand why, Archibald—I shall never be able to understand why,” muttered the professor. “Thank heaven we built this ship so solidly! The stresses she has recently undergone were terrific. What a storm! I would never have believed that such winds were possible—on Earth, or any other planet. Do you realise that we have travelled hundreds of miles in the the last quarter-of-an-hour? Listen! Can’t you hear the screaming roar—caused purely by the friction of our motion through the atmosphere? That’s not the gale, Archibald.”

"Whatever it is, I don't like the sound of it," growled Chuffy. "We might as well be a leaf in a gale. Bill, do you know what? Wellman knew this was coming—and he wanted us to be caught in it."

"He had his wish, then——"

"You don't understand," interrupted Chuffy. "He wanted us to be caught in it *on the ground*. Remember how pleased he looked when you told him that we were crippled and couldn't rise into the air? You don't need to use much imagination, Bill, to realise what would have happened to the old ship if we *had* been caught on the ground."

"Good heavens, no," said the professor, with a start. "Such a wind as this, sweeping across the ground, would have sent the ship rolling over and over until she was battered to a twisted mass of wreckage. Now I understand why the Venusians were so uneasy. Obviously, these winds are periodic—and the flickering in the sky is a warning. Wellman knew that he would have time to go back to the city— Another excellent reason, you will observe, Archibald, why the buildings of that city are constructed so solidly."

"Well, anyway, we did manage to rise into the air—and we're still whole," said Lord Chuffmore grimly. "It ever we see Wellman again—which I doubt—I'm going to have a heart to heart talk with the blighter."

"You would only waste your breath," said Professor Bill, with a shrug. "The man is not insane—indeed, he has proved to us that he is just the opposite. But he is obsessed with the fear that if we return to earth, we shall come back with a whole fleet of airships in search of conquest. A wild, fantastic fear, of course."

"Yet there's something in it," admitted Chuffy. "We wouldn't do anything like that—but others might. Perhaps it's possible to understand Wellman's point of view. Golly! Listen to that wind!"

"Yes, we're not out of trouble yet," said the professor. "There may be a second vortex for us to pass through—an additional storm centre. We can't tell. We are at the mercy of the elements—travelling at enormous speed and utterly helpless."

"Well, at least, we seem to have settled down to a straightforward flight—even if we *are* being carried

along by the wind," said Chuffy. "I'm going on deck again."

When he arrived there, he found all signs of land gone; the airship was right over the ocean, hurtling along at great speed. Once, the professor attempted to check the headlong flight by means of applying the atomic power; but he soon desisted. The strain was so great that vital damage would have been caused had he persisted. There was nothing to do but wait until the Asterion came out of this gigantic, storm belt.

Hours passed. . . .

Gradually, almost imperceptibly at first, the force of the gale slackened, and the airship's speed decreased. There were still writhing masses of twisting vapour in the sky, noticeable on several points of the compass. More than once, the anxious observers had seen water spouts of unimaginable size—water spouts reaching upwards for many thousands of feet. Fortunately, the airship had not collided with one of these startling phenomena.

No water spout had been seen for some time now. But, vaguely in the distance, a most curious effect had been noticed on the surface of the ocean. Great, humped masses of water—or what seemed to be water—rose upwards for several hundreds of feet, remaining there like giant hummocks. Nobody could explain the meaning of these latest manifestations.

After another hour, however, there was a hint of the truth. . . .

"There's something funny about the sea," said Tim Charters suddenly, as he stared downwards. "It's not wild and raging like it was—and it doesn't look like the sea. It looks like something almost solid."

"It's not so rough because the gale has died down," said Will Osborne. "That's the explanation—"

"It can't be," interrupted Dick Sylvester. "Chuffy told me, five minutes ago, that we're still travelling at the same terrific speed—we're still being carried on by the wind. Look at the sea! It seems to be heaving—"

"It's weed!" yelled Stan Goodman abruptly.

"Weed!"

"Yes, of course—seaweed," said Goodman excitedly. "Great crackers! Whoever saw seaweed like this? It's—it's like a tremendous forest."

All the boys stared fascinatedly. It was quite true, As far as the eye could reach, in every direction, there was a great island of seaweed—a veritable continent of the stuff. Mile upon mile of it. Great, tangled masses of slimy vegetation, pale green in colour. The boys could even distinguish enormous roots and tendrils which rose upwards like great, tree trunks.

“Those queer hummocks!” said Dick Sylvester suddenly. “Now we know what they were!”

“Do we?” said Bob Davis, staring.

“Of course. They were caused by whirlwinds—tornadoes, if you like,” replied Dick. “What is a tornado, after all, but a mass of whirling vapour? Over the sea, it becomes a water-spout. Those hummocks would have been water-spouts but for the weed. Get it? The whirlwinds were so terrific that they caused the weed to bunch upwards. Which proves, my sons, that we’re still in the danger zone. Look—there’s one of the dashed hummocks over there.” He pointed. “The biggest we’ve seen yet—and the nearest.”

“Hey!” yelled Goodman. “We’re going straight towards it!”

“Oh, my goodness!”

“Tell Chuffy! Tell somebody!”

“What’s the good? There isn’t time. In any case, we can’t alter our direction—we’re still at the mercy of the wind. Hang on, chaps—this is going to be mustard!”

It was curious that at that very moment, Lord Chuffmore was telling Professor Bill, in the control room, that the danger seemed to be past. They had ridden through the storm—or the worst of it—and would presumably enter calmer latitudes in due course.

“We’re lucky,” continued Chuffy. “We might easily have capsized— By the way, Bill, couldn’t you take the old ship higher? I mean, wouldn’t it be possible to go *above* this awful wind?”

“I’ve tried, and it is useless,” replied the professor. “As soon as I start the atomic motors, you understand, I am fighting against the force of the wind. The resistance is unbelievably strong, Archibald. I can neither lower nor raise the ship without grave danger. Let us be thankful that we are still more or less intact——”

“Are we?” yelled Chuffy.

For at that moment the Asterion had rocked like a creature in mortal agony. Actually, the airship had just struck against the terrific whirlwind which was causing the seaweed, far below, to hump itself up. In a second, the nose of the vessel tipped right up, until the stern was nearly pointing directly downwards. It was an awful moment. Accompanying the wild lurch came the sound of a screaming wind, like banshees howling in demoniac fury.

Professor Bill and Lord Chuffmore were thrown headlong, and the next moment the Asterion was dropping stern first with a sickening sensation. Every soul on board felt a deadly feeling in the pit of their stomachs.

The airship was dropping like a stone.

Flung out of the vortex, like a celluloid ball out of a fountain, she had lost all stability and was falling sheer. Something in that wind, too, caused her to commence spinning again. She was falling and spinning at the same time, dropping like a silver meteor out of the sky.

"Bill" croaked Chuffy. "Do something!"

The professor never knew how he regained the controls. Somehow, he managed to reach them, and he thrust over the levers in a last desperate effort to save the ship. By exerting the atomic power of his wonderful motors, he knew that there was a danger of destroying them altogether. But unless he took this action, destruction was inevitable, anyway.

At once, the effect was felt.

With a kind of shiver, the Asterion seemed to steady herself, and the headlong, downward plunge was stayed; but it was not completely checked. The airship was still descending, and now her very hull was groaning as though in anguish.

There came a tremendous, cushioned shock, accompanied by a sogging sound. The airship struck the weed at an angle, skidded, rose into the air again, struck once more and skimmed forward. She went tearing madly through the surface of the weed, great masses of the stuff surging up on either side. It was much softer and much spongier than it looked, and although the Asterion had struck with considerable impact, it was rather like a forced landing, and the cushioning effect was her salvation.

She drove deeply into this tangle until, finally, her bows were completely buried. Thus, at last, she was forced to a standstill. The elements about her screamed and raved with a tremendous volume of noise. The masses of weed fronds were torn from the surface in great, flying masses. The ship, although stationary, was still near the centre of the whirlwind.

"Well, we're still alive!" muttered Chuffy, as he painfully rose to his feet. "Next time we come to Venus, Bill, remind me to have all the walls padded! I'm a little tired of being chucked about."

"How you can be flippant at such a moment as this, Archibald, is more than I can imagine," said the professor, his voice full of anxiety. "Good heavens, is there no end to these dangers? I thought, this time, that we were— What is that extraordinary noise?"

"The wind, of course," said Chuffy. "Great Scott! Did you ever hear such a howling inferno? We're down, Bill—down on the weed. You knew we'd been flying over an exaggerated Sargasso Sea, didn't you? We've plonked down into the stuff."

Even while Chuffy was speaking, the torment of sound decreased, and now it grew less and less, and seemed to recede. Only the continuous sound of the gale itself drummed upon the hull of the airship. The whirlwind had passed.

Rather dizzily, Chuffy made his way up to the deck. He found many of the boys, pale-faced, staring overside.

"I thought we were going clean down into the stuff, sir, said Tim Charters, shakily. "We've sunk a little, as it is. Think we shall ever be able to get out of it?"

"We must get out of it," retorted Lord Chuffmore grimly.

One keen look was enough, and he returned to the control room.

"Better take her into the air, Bill," he said, his voice crisp and earnest. "That seemed to be the last spasm of the gale. It's only a strong wind now—and we're not scared of strong winds."

The professor nodded silently and applied the power. A surprised look came into his face as he watched the dials and indicators. The surprised look became an expression of anxiety after a minute or two—then

changed to consternation. Meanwhile, the Asterion throbbed and quivered like some great dynamo.

"Archibald!" ejaculated the professor hoarsely. "I have turned the power on to the full—and we should be shooting straight up into the sky. But we're not moving!"

"It's this infernal weed," said Chuffy. "We must be deeper than I thought. It's holding us down."

Professor Bill was obliged to cut off the power.

"I must go and look," he said briskly.

He went out and looked. Others were there—every available man. They saw something which filled them with a new dread. Slowly, relentlessly, the airship was being dragged down into the dense weed—deeper and deeper!

CHAPTER XXI

In The Grip of The Weed

"We must do something about this," said Lord Chuffmore decisively. "Phoo? What a smell! Well, anyway, it was better to dig into this stuff than hit the sea."

"I wonder," muttered the professor.

"Then don't wonder. If we had hit the sea with that force, we should have been smashed to bits," said Chuffy. "This stuff is soft and spongy, and we hardly felt the impact."

Even *he* did not realise the grim nature of the new peril which confronted them. Although the airship was clogged with weed, she was still intact, and it would surely only be a matter of time and ingenuity before they were free.

"Listen, Bill," said Chuffy, drawing the professor aside. "You tried a direct ascent, didn't you? Wouldn't it be better to send the ship *forward* at full power? After freeing herself, she might skid along the surface of this stuff, but it wouldn't do any harm—and as soon as we were fairly moving, you could raise her into the air. There would be no resistance then."

"It's an idea," agreed the professor.

They returned to the control room. Meanwhile, Dick Sylvester & Co. were still crowding against the rail, staring down at the expanse of weed. The immensity

of it awed them, and for some little time they stood there, gazing in silence.

"Never saw anything like it," muttered Tim Charters, at length.

"It's such sickly looking stuff," said Dick.

He was right. The weed, a great continent of it, extended as far as the eye could see. From thousands of feet above, they had been able to see the edges of the weed "island," but now, at weed level, the horizon was broken only by lumps of the foul stuff here and there. The weed growths were enormous—fantastic. At close quarters the boys could see that many of the great, pale-green roots were as thick as tree trunks, twisted and contorted. There were enormous fronds, too, measuring many feet across.

"It's so dense, so thick, that we can walk across it," said Stan Goodman. "Look at the way it's piled up over our bows. There's a regular mountain of the stuff."

The weed was sending forth a pungent, sickening smell—an odour of decay and stagnation.

"Well, we can't say that Venus hasn't given us plenty of surprises," said Dick Sylvester. "We're no sooner out of one spot of trouble, than we're in another. I say, doesn't it seem to you that we're sinking deeper?"

Before anybody could answer, a throbbing quiver passed through the airship. The professor had applied the forward motive power, and the vessel was driven forward into the weed. She moved slightly—slowly and ponderously—then there was no sign of movement at all. Only the faint throbbing.

"Look!" gasped Tom Pettitt, pointing.

"Eh!" said Crocker, in a frightened voice. "Look at what?"

"Those—those great, greenish cables of the stuff—stretched out taut," replied Pettitt. "They seem to have *stuck* to the smooth, metal plates! They're clinging there."

"Great Scott!" muttered Dick Sylvester. "Dozens and dozens of 'em! There must be suckers at the ends of those giant tendrils, and they've grabbed the airship—Hullo! We seem to be moving back now."

Professor Bill, failing to move the airship forward, had reversed the power. For a little time, it seemed that the move was going to be successful, for the bows

were freed from the humped, tangled masses of weed. But the Asterion only moved a short distance. Then it was seen by those on deck that the great tendrils were still attached to the underpart of the bows, and were now stretched out like great, elastic ropes. At the same time, other tendrils were rising up from the weed of their own accord. The horrible stuff seemed to be coming to life. The great fronds were opening, and the tendrils, each one as thick as a tree-trunk, were rising into the air—writhing, contorting and sinuously moving towards the underpart of the airship. The great suckers—two or three on the end of each tendril—were slowly opening and closing . . . As they reached the smooth metal, they made contact with a horrid, slapping noise—and stuck there.

“This—this is unbelievable,” muttered Stan Goodman. “It’s—it’s like nothing on Earth.”

“Well, that’s not surprising,” said Enoch Wicks, with shrill fear. “We’re on Venus, aren’t we? Oh, crumbs, what a mug I was to come! We’ll never get out of this mess! That old fool of a professor ought to be boiled in oil—”

“Another word against my uncle, and I’ll chuck you overboard into this weed!” snorted Dick. “It’s not my uncle’s fault, is it? You’re bold enough when everything’s going smoothly, but as soon as there’s a spot of danger, you start snivelling!”

“I’m not snivelling!” howled Wicks. “But we’re all going to die—and you know it! This time we’re doomed!”

“I hate to agree with the blighter,” murmured Kenneth Pyne, “but, by Jiminly Cricket, I believe he’s right. This dashed weed isn’t merely alive—it has an *intelligence* of its own! It’s—it’s like some monstrous animal!”

In the presence of this new horror, the boys became silent. They stared fascinatedly. While they were staring, Lord Chuffmore and Mr. Alexander Mickie came on deck and went to the rail. They stood looking down at the weed—looking at the insidious movement of the stuff—looking at the tendrils as they rose waveringly and attached themselves, one after another.

“I don’t like it, Chuffy,” murmured the schoolmaster.

"Well, I'm not exactly screaming with joy myself," admitted Chuffy. "Is this stuff seaweed—or a new kind of Venusian monster? It's hard to believe that it's vegetable. It's alive—it's capable of thinking, by the look of it. See how those suckers are attaching themselves, one after the other! No wonder Bill couldn't start the ship moving."

They noticed that the great tendrils—those which had attached themselves—were all taut and stretched—like massive, steel cables. The Asterion herself was still faintly quivering. Professor Bill had turned the power on nearly full—the power that should have sent the airship soaring skywards; and she was being held down, against that tremendous force, by the weed tendrils.

"It looks like a losing battle to me," said Mr. Mickie. "There are more and more of these tendrils coming up at us. What's going to happen when they start dragging us down?"

"You make the cheeriest of remarks, Mick," grunted the other. "Give me an elephant gun, and a rhinoceros to blaze away at, and I'm happy. But this kind of enemy beats me. How we're going to take the old ship out of this mess, is more than I can imagine."

"Would the machine-guns be any use?" ventured Mr. Mickie.

"I caught a glimpse of the Sargasso Sea once," went on Chuffy. "It's nothing much, really—a kind of tideless sea in the South Atlantic, where the drifting gulfweed forms an island of the stuff. There are all sorts of fantastic stories told about the Sargasso, and you can take it from me they are legends and fairy tales. But this weed island of Venus is a horrible reality."

The professor came hurrying out to join them.

"We can't shift, Archibald," he said, his voice shrill with anxiety. "Our engines are useless against this force. What are we going to do?"

"Search me!" said Chuffy helplessly. "Hey, what was that you said a minute ago, Mick?" He started. "Machine-guns! By Jove, that's not a bad suggestion! If this stuff is really alive—I mean intelligently alive—a blast of bullets might give it something serious to think about!"

"Make it relinquish its grip, eh?" said the professor eagerly. "It's an idea, Chuffmore! The machine guns!

You know more about such weapons than I do. Hurry the men to the machine-gun stations and set them to work."

"No sooner said," replied Chuffy briskly, "than done."

He hurried off. The boys, aware that something exciting was about to take place, asked all sorts of questions.

"I think you'd better all go inside," said Mr. Mickie, to their great disappointment. "There might be danger out here. These infernal weed tendrils may take it into their heads to come inboard, over the decks——"

"Oh, cheese it, sir," protested Dick. "The stuff isn't as brainy as all that. We want to see what happens."

Not many of the boys realised the awful danger; they did not understand that the airship was already being dragged slowly downwards, deeper and deeper into the weed. As more and more suckers attached themselves to the metal plates, the hidden force of the weed was exerting more power than the upward lift of the Asterion's engines.

To shoot at the weed with machine-guns seemed a futile thing—even an imbecile thing. But what else could be done? The weed was not inanimate, like any ordinary marine growth; it was alive—it was active—it was like some colossal, intelligent creature.

Zurrrrrrrh!

With a devastating rattle, the first of the machine-guns opened fire. Almost immediately two others started up. Sprays of bullets went hurtling at point blank range into the tautened tendrils.

"Look—look!" panted Bob Davis.

Two of the tendrils within view had twisted and shivered as the bullets struck them; the suckers were released from the airship, but only for a moment. With loud, slapping noises, the tendrils re-attached themselves. From many punctures in the pale-green cables oozed a sticky, yellowish liquid. But that was the only effect. After the first shock, the deadly things clung on with greater tenacity than ever.

Now, from every part of the ship came the devastating rattle of the machine-guns. All to no effect! But no—there *was* a change. It was seen that the vast bulk of the weed itself, all round the airship, was rolling and heaving. The boys had a horrific notion that they were

on the back of some gigantic sea monster, and that it was going to rise right up and attack the vessel. But this was not the case, mercifully; the uneasy heaving ceased as the machine-gunning ceased.

"It's no good, Bill," said Lord Chuffmore, ten minutes later. "We might as well use pop-guns. These tendrils are so thick and tough that machine-gun bullets have little or no effect. The blighting things cling tighter, if anything.

The professor, haggard, glanced at the sky.

"Have you noticed that the wind has completely ceased?" he said abstractedly. "The storm centre has passed on. I am thinking of the coming night, Archibald."

Chuffy started. The night! On land, the Venusian nights had been deadly enough, and the adventurers had already had a taste of what the Venusian sea could offer after daylight had fled—the sea near the coast. What chance would the Asterion have out here, many hundreds of miles from land, caught in the meshes of this deadly weed? What ghastly new horrors would crawl out of the weed after darkness had shut down?

The atomic motors were now going at full power—tugging with amazing force, and yet incapable of releasing the airship from the weed's grip.

"It is beyond my comprehension, Archibald," said Professor Bill tensely. "What power can this be? By all the laws of science, we should be shooting up into the outer ether."

"The weed has an extraordinary power of suction," replied Lord Chuffmore. "That goes without saying. Gosh, if we escape from this, Bill, I vote we make tracks for England, home and beauty! We'll take the boys back to Whitelands—they never ought to have been on board in the first place—and when we make a return trip to this planet, we can come better prepared."

"I am glad to hear you talking of making tracks for home," said the professor, shaking his head. "But I am not so sure, my friend. Look! These green ropes of slime are actually twisting round the bows now. Some of them are spreading over us like steel cables. What hope is there?"

"Well, I don't know," said Chuffy. "But it seems to me that the ship is a little higher than it was half-hour

ago. Perhaps the strain is proving too much for the weed tendrils. Anyhow, our motors can keep it up indefinitely without any harmful effect. It's like a tug of war. I should think the weed is bound to become weary of the fight sooner or later."

He spoke cheerily, but the professor was not cheered. He was thinking that the weed was slowly but surely winning the battle. Before very long, the entire bulk of the Asterion would be gripped by the weed tendrils.

"It's the night I am worrying about," said the Professor anxiously. "We are already past noon. The night is not far off. What if we are not free before darkness? Archibald, I am horrified. When I think of these boys on board——"

"Hatchets," said Chuffy thoughtfully. "What about hatchets and axes?"

"What!"

"We've plenty of 'em on board," went on Chuffy, becoming more alert. "I won't force the men to go, but call for volunteers. Why couldn't we hack at these weed tendrils with hatchets, and free the ship in that way?"

"But the danger!" protested Bill Sylvester. "Have you thought of the danger?"

"It's the one thing I'm thinking of more than another," retorted Chuffy grimly. "If we don't do *something*, we're sunk. Better sacrifice a few lives and be free, than all go down in this.

"Your own life included, no doubt," said the professor quietly. "Well, I insist upon handling a hatchet, too——"

"You can insist all you like—but that's as far as you'll go," snapped Chuffy. "You're needed on board, Bill. You're the skipper. Where should we be if you were lost?"

The volunteers were quickly forthcoming. Chuffy had only to go among the crew and tell them of his project, and they came forward willingly. Yet they knew that they were about to take their lives into their hands. They were more awed by the weed than afraid of it—there was a quality in the stuff which hinted at abominable peril.

"My hat! What's going on now?" asked Stan Goodman, as he noticed the preparations. "Look—hatchets! They're not going overboard with hatchets, are they? They're crazy! They'll sink right into the stuff."

"No fear!" said Dick promptly. "It's too solid. An army could march over the weed in perfect safety. I say, why shouldn't we have a go, too?"

"Yes, rather!"

The boys eagerly volunteered—but Chuffy, for once, was hard and stern.

"Nothing doing, kids," he said. "I admire your spirit, but you're not appearing in this act. In any case, we haven't any more hatchets. The best way you can help is by keeping out of the way. Mick, see that the young beggars don't take any unnecessary risks."

Mr. Mickie made a non-committal reply. It had been suggested that he should remain with the boys, to keep them in order. But he was determined to take his own share of this new danger.

A minute later, the attacking party, armed with hatchets, climbed over the rail and descended by means of ropes to the slimy, mysterious weed.

CHAPTER XXII

The Horrors of the Night

The new move in this grim battle was a failure—and nearly a tragedy.

Lord Chuffmore and his men, as they went overside, felt that the very fate of the Asterion rested upon their efforts. Unless the weed were conquered, unless the ship were disentangled from the dreadful stuff, everybody on board would perish. What hope was there of surviving the coming night? In the minds of many of the boys were recollections of stories they had read concerning the Sargasso Sea; they had read of hulks found there—Spanish galleons and other ancient craft. Heaven alone knew what terrible battles their crews had had to face before death had come to release them—and the Sargasso Sea was a mere joke—indeed, a fiction—compared to this great weed-continent of Venus.

It was not surprising, therefore, that every soul on board the Asterion was filled with a wild anxiety. The boys, as they watched, felt their hearts thumping; and for once they were silent. They watched breathlessly.

They had plenty of reason to be anxious!

Chuffy and his men were already at work with their sharp weapons, hacking away at the great tendrils. It had been found that a secure foothold could be obtained on the weed. One after another the tendrils were severed—great, gaping gashes appeared as the hatchets swept down; a number of heavy, gaping wounds oozed masses of the foul-looking yellow liquid. The broken tendrils writhed and twisted, and seemed reluctant to die.

Then a new phenomenon took place. Smaller tendrils rose up from the weed on all sides. One of these fronds, opening out like a leaf, reached towards the nearest man. It touched him, the frond closed and took the man in its grip. Next moment, although the victim struggled madly, he was compelled to drop his hatchet and fight for his life. The frond was enveloping him like a great, folding blanket. Insanely he struggled to free himself from the grip.

“Look!” yelled Goodman, breaking the silence among the boys. “Those fronds are rising everywhere!”

It was seen that all the men were in danger. As they hacked away at the giant sucker-tendrils, the frond tendrils rose up to attack them with a kind of evil intelligence. Only by ceasing their efforts and dodging back, did several men escape the fate of the first.

Lord Chuffmore wielded his axe with mighty effect, and cut the frond tendril with one sweeping blow. The man who was in the grip of the frond was released. As white as death, he staggered away—avoiding another enveloping frond by mere inches.

After that, all thought of freeing the airship by this means was abandoned. Chuffy and his men were obliged to fight their way back to the Asterion, foot by foot. No longer did they attack giant tendrils—they were compelled to exert all their efforts to hack through the fronds which were now rising in ever-increasing numbers. Even as they reached the ropes, and climbed upwards towards the decks, the deadly frond-tendrils followed them, reaching out, touching them, gripping them. Utterly exhausted, the men reached the deck at last, after an experience they would never forget.

“Thank heavens you are all alive,” said Professor Sylvester breathlessly, when the last man had been dragged aboard. “This thing has happened in front of

my very eyes, yet I find it difficult to believe. The weed is alive—alive like some hideous monster. I am reminded of the Upas tree. The Upas tree of the Earth jungles, which attacks and sometimes kills unwary travellers who linger beneath its branches.”

“Yes,” agreed Chuffy, breathing hard. “This ghastly marine weed seems to be a Venusian counterpart of the Upas tree. It is really alive, in the sense that it possesses an animal intelligence, and it has the cheery quality of gripping and destroying everything that comes within its grasp.”

The airship remained fast—a prisoner. She was still safe and sound—which was one consolation. Her powerful motors were holding their own against the deadly suction of the weed. Machine-guns and hatchets, however, were powerless to free her, and it seemed that a deadlock had been reached. While the airship was unable to free herself, the weed was equally unable to drag her down.

So the hours passed—until, like the shutting of a giant trap, the Venusian night swept down.

An hour later, it was difficult to believe that any danger existed. The dining saloon was brilliant, and even bore a festive appearance. Chuffy, with his usual light-heartedness, had suggested that dinner should be served exactly the same as in normal times; he felt that a hearty meal would put strength and courage into them all—and perhaps dispel some of the unknown fears which were besetting men and boys alike.

During that first hour of darkness, nothing happened. Every door and window of the airship was hermetically sealed. The tug-of-war went on exactly as before. With the coming of darkness, the weed tendrils had not ceased their exertions. Neither had the Asterion's motors.

“Well, we're still alive,” said Lord Chuffmore, as he took his seat at the table. “Somebody pass the rolls. Do you want them all for yourself, young Goody?”

Goodman gave a sickly smile.

“I don't want any,” he muttered. “I'm not hungry.”

“Rats!” said Chuffy. “Once you start eating you'll be all right.”

It was a good guess. Most of the boys had felt that food would choke them; but as soon as they started the

meal, they discovered that they were really hungry. Very soon, spirits began to revive. Perhaps their imaginations had been running riot—perhaps the night would not bring any new perils, after all. At all events, everything was very quiet and peaceful.

“What are we going to do after dinner?” asked Dick Sylvester. “Shall we go on deck again——”

“The decks are out of bounds,” interrupted Lord Cuffmore. “In any case, the metal shutters are closed. The best thing you boys can do is to go to bed in the ordinary way.”

“A sensible suggestion,” said the professor. “We can do nothing further until the morning——” He paused, for he was thinking that they would be equally helpless with the coming of a new day. “In any case, Dick, my boy, there is nothing that you and your friends can do.”

“But—but if we go to sleep, sir, we may never wake up again,” faltered Oswald Crocker, shivering. “Some awful thing may come out of the night and destroy us——”

“In that case, my lad, you’d far better go to sleep,” said Chuffy, promptly. “If we have to be destroyed, let it come swiftly, while we’re asleep——”

He broke off and laughed.

“But what’s all this rot about being destroyed?” he went on, after a pause. “We’re letting this thing take too great a hold. Wait until a new danger arises before we grapple with it. The airship is still holding her own.”

There was a silence. Everybody knew that Chuffy was forcing himself to speak light-heartedly; everybody knew that everybody was listening—waiting tensely for the first sign of the new danger—which would inevitably come. No one was fooled. They instinctively knew that this period of quietness would not last long.

“What—what was that?” muttered Charlie Hunt, suddenly.

“What was what?” asked a dozen voices.

Men and boys sprang to their feet—a sure proof of the great tension which existed.

“I thought I heard a kind of dull, thudding sound,” said Hunt sheepishly. “Must have been my imagination, I suppose. It was like something hammering against metal.”

"One of the engineers, probably," said Chuffy carelessly. "Messing about in the stoke-hold——"

"There isn't any stoke-hold," protested Hunt.

"Well, somebody in the kitchen," said Chuffy. "What's the difference? Why quibble——"

"There it is again!" shouted Hunt, in a half hysterical voice. "I'm sure I heard it."

"Quiet, everybody," said the professor tensely.

Thud-thud-thud-thud!

There was no mistaking the sound. It came from several quarters of the ship, and it seemed to the boys that they could feel the very metal of the floor quivering. The thudding sound was mysterious—muffled and yet heavy.

"What can it be?" muttered Sam Kennedy.

"Sounds like a lot of men bashing the sides of the ship with sledge-hammers," said Goodman. "Yet how can it be anything outside?"

The dining saloon doors burst open, and Collins, the engineer, burst in.

"Better come, sir!" he panted, looking straight at Chuffy. "There are some queer things climbing up over the bows. We can see them quite plainly from the observation dome. They're shaking the whole ship."

"Oh, my hat!"

"You can see them?" said the professor sharply. "Have you switched on the searchlights, then?"

"One of the forward searchlights, sir——"

"It's all right, Bill," said Chuffy, as he made for the door. "I gave instructions for a bow searchlight and a stern searchlight to be switched on for a minute, at half-hour intervals—just in case there was something to see."

"There's something to see now!" said Collins grimly.

Professor Bill and Chuffy hurried out.

"If they have a searchlight on, perhaps we can see something from the windows," said Tim Charters eagerly. "It wasn't any good looking out before because of the darkness—Here, stop shoving Goody, you ass!"

Everybody crowded to the windows—the enormously thick, transparent plastic of which, was as strong as steel. The single searchlight, forward, was throwing a beam down upon the greenish, slimy weed. Slowly, the beam was moving—then something came into view. An object. —Several objects.

"What are they?" panted Dick Sylvester.

Nobody could tell him. Nobody could be quite sure that they had seen anything.

Thud-thud-thud!

The blows were becoming harder—more insistent. The unknown things out on the weed were now keeping up a continuous tattoo on the Asterion's metal sides.

"What in the name of wonder is attacking us?" asked Professor Bill anxiously, in the control room. "My ship cannot stand such a bombardment as this."

Crash—crash—crash!

As the professor hurried to the observation dome, the sounds grew louder. They were no longer thuds—but deafening blows which filled the ship with sound. They came not merely from one quarter, but from every quarter. The Asterion was surrounded by the hammering enemy.

"This is ridiculous!" said the professor harshly. "There is nothing to be seen from here. The creatures, whatever they are, are attacking the underside—We should have been better off in the saloon."

He rushed out, full of alarm for the safety of his beloved ship. Chuffy only paused a moment to close the heavy metal covers over the observation dome. Immensely strong as the transparent plastic was, Chuffy had more confidence in the steel-hard metal.

When he reached the saloon, he found the professor and the boys breathless with a new excitement.

"Crabs!" Stan Goodman was shouting. "Anyway, they look like crabs—only they're as big as elephants!"

"Good heavens!"

"They're not crabs," said Dick Sylvester. "They're lobsters."

"Lobsters—crabs—what is the difference?" panted the professor. "They are crustaceans. They appear to be a cross between a lobster and a crab—with enormously powerful front claws. Archibald, for heaven's sake! Look at the claws! Each one is as big as a steam hammer! The creatures are indeed as big as elephants, and they are coming across the weed in their hundreds. The weed is alive with them."

"They are attacking the ship," muttered Chuffy. "Collins tells me it can't be the searchlights—I mean,

the light is not attracting them—because they started their attack before the searchlight was switched on.”

“But we shall never be able to withstand such an onslaught as this,” said the professor, in dire alarm. “These crustaceans are unbelievably huge. I was afraid that the night would bring something dreadful. These horrors, no doubt, roam over the weed in droves. They did not attack until nightfall. They are trying to smash the sides of the vessel——”

“But they’ll never do it,” said Chuffy quickly.

It was a shocking thought. Already, the giant Venusian crustaceans were swarming around every quarter of the straining Asterion, held fast by the weed-suckers. The awful things were hammering against the metal sides with their powerful claws.

“They can’t do much harm as long as they stay where they are,” continued Lord Chuffmore, with an anxious glance at the scared boys—and relieved to see that they were keeping their heads admirably. “There’ll be no real danger until the foul things climb all over us, and perhaps they won’t be able to do that. This continuous hammering sound is more frightening than dangerous.”

“A few of them could do us no real harm, I agree,” said the professor. “But there are hundreds—and I’ve no doubt that before long there will be thousands. In the mass, Archibald, they will be able to destroy us completely.”

Other searchlights were blazing now, and the crustaceans could be plainly seen. Great, crawling, giant things of blackish-green colour, their armoured bodies shining. With their tremendously powerful front claws, each one several feet in length and as hard as wrought steel, they were battering against the airship’s sides.

“We must do something,” panted the professor helplessly. “Archibald! Have you nothing to suggest?”

Chuffy shrugged.

“I’m done,” he confessed. “Give me a rifle and a tiger and I’m your man—but what in heaven’s name can anybody do against monsters of this sort? Our machine-guns are useless—no better than pea-shooters. The bullets would slide off their shells without effect.”

“But the cannon guns——”

"We dare not use the cannon guns at such short range," interrupted Chuffy impatiently. "We should only destroy ourselves. The shells would explode and do more damage to the airship than to the lobsters."

"But the wretched things will soon overwhelm us——"
Craaaaaaash!!

The professor broke off with a startled gulp. There had been no mistaking the sound of that ominous crash.

"That's done it!" said Chuffy, between his teeth. "Ye gods! That was one of the windows!"

"But it sounded like glass, sir," muttered Dick.

"Which is exactly how the smashing of a plastic window would sound," retorted Lord Chuffmore. "It means that one of the lobsters has clawed its way up——"

He stopped. Everybody was transfixed and motionless. The crustaceans had broken one of the windows—and were in!

CHAPTER XXIII

Desperate Measures

"Oh, my goodness!" gurgled Stan Goodman. "They're in! The horrible things have broken in."

Stanley Horatio Goodman, ever aggressive, whirled round and grabbed the nearest object—which happened to be a metal chair. He swung it over his head.

"Come on," he yelled. "If they're in, we must fight 'em! We're not done yet!"

Chuffy started to say something, but stopped. It seemed so useless. It was characteristic of Goodman to act like this, for he never knew when he was beaten—. But when Chuffy thought of the size of the crustaceans, and when he pictured Goodman fighting the things with that chair, he had no words. No human power could drive the crustaceans out, once they were in. The shells of the creatures were as strong as armour-plating—

Then, before anybody could make a move, one of the stewards came staggering into the saloon. His eyes were wild, his whole manner terror-stricken.

"Take it easy," said Chuffy, leaping towards the man. "What have you seen out there?"

"Nothing, sir——"

"Nothing!"

"There was an awful hammering just as I was coming out of the pantry, sir, and I stumbled," said the man. "I dropped a whole trayful of glasses——"

"You did what?" roared Chuffy. "You mean, that splintering crash we heard——"

"I'm sorry, sir. I did that," gasped the scared man.

"Well, don't do it again," growled Chuffy, wiping the perspiration from his forehead. "You scared the living daylight out of us. We thought—— Well, never mind what we thought"

The relief was so enormous that nearly everybody in the saloon felt physically sick. Chuffy himself was inclined to laugh, and he did laugh—but there was no humour in that sound. They had believed the worst, and their excited imaginations had done the rest.

"Well, we're in no acute danger as yet, it seems," said loud that it echoed in everybody's ears; it had become The brutes are increasing in numbers, and they are attacking with more force than ever."

He was right. The thud-thud-thudding was now so loud that it echoed in everybody's ears; it had become a continuous booming roar, throughout the entire length and breadth of the airship. The great vessel, strong and stout as she was, was shivering and shaking under the mass attack. It was a sure proof of the terrific strength of the giant crustaceans.

Crash—crash—crash!

Louder and louder became the attacks. Every massed crash meant that the Asterion was being strained and jarred. The onslaught was so persistent, so fierce, that the end must come very soon. Something would go. The outer plates of the ship would cave in.

Never in his life had Chuffy felt so helpless. The weapons they possessed were useless against such enemies as these. The crustaceans were not the only enemies! There was the weed itself. The weed, independent of the giant lobsters, was maintaining its tenacious grip, and endeavouring to pull the vessel down into the entangling masses.

"I have decided!" said Professor Sylvester, his face pale and drawn. "I cannot stand here and hear my ship battered to pieces. There is only one thing to be done—and that is so drastic that it will probably mean death for us all."

“Spill it, Bill,” said Chuffy briefly.

“I warn you—it is a chance in a thousand,” said the professor, his voice now calm and steady. “It would be better, indeed, to call it a chance in a million. I thought of it hours ago, but dismissed it as fantastic. Only our present acute peril compels me to adopt the plan.”

“But what is it?” insisted Chuffy.

“If we remain here, on the surface of the weed, at the mercy of thousands of these crustaceans, we shall be inevitably doomed——”

“But, man alive, we can’t get off it!”

“No! But we might be able to go *under* it!”

“Under it!”

“It is our only chance.”

“Under the weed, uncle?” said Dick Sylvester, with a catch in his voice. “But—but the airship isn’t a submarine——”

“This vessel is capable of conquering outer space—she is hermetically sealed in every pore,” interrupted the professor sharply. “No, she is not a submarine, in the ordinary sense of the word—but if we can reach the sea bed, we shall be perfectly safe. I am suggesting that we should reverse the power of our motors—and reverse it suddenly, abruptly.”

“Wow! Have you thought what the effect would be?” asked Chuffy.

“Yes. Everybody will have to lie flat and clutch hard at some fixed object,” replied the professor. “The shock will be tremendous. But if the shock is tremendous for us on board, it will be equally tremendous for the weed. I firmly believe that this weed is a floating mass—hundreds of feet thick, possibly, but floating nevertheless. The sudden reversal of power will take the weed by surprise, as it were. There is a distinct chance that we shall tear ourselves free and plunge straight down into clear water.”

“And, perhaps,” muttered Chuffy, “to certain death.”

“I told you it was a desperate chance,” said Professor Bill quietly. “Certain death will be ours if we remain as we are. But we are wasting time. Everybody here lie flat and clutch at something. Archibald, tell the rest of the men. I am going to attempt this drastic step at once.”

“Go ahead,” said Chuffy steadily. “And good luck.”

The Professor strode purposefully out of the saloon. His proposed expedient was desperate, indeed. But in all the circumstances it was the only possible thing to be done—for it held a faint chance of success. To remain on the surface of the weed, as he had said, was fatal.

But the dangers would be appalling. Even supposing the Asterion broke through, and found clear water beneath—what would be in store for her and her precious freight of humanity? What awful dangers were they likely to meet in the depths of the Venusian ocean? However, the desperate venture was welcomed by everybody—it meant action. Anything was better than remaining still, waiting for the inevitable end. Not only was the weed gaining a deathly grip on the vessel, but the monstrous crustaceans were hammering and battering harder than ever. The stout plates of the vessel had withstood an enormous strain already, but in the end they must give way.

“Well, you chaps, this is going to be a tough spot,” said Stan Goddman, as he lay on the floor, his eyes glittering. “Better hang on with your eyebrows.”

“It’s suicide—that’s what it is—plain suicide!” wailed Enoch Wicks. “We’re all going to be killed!”

“It isn’t suicide,” moaned Crocker. “It’s murder. Your uncle’s murdering all of us, Sylvester. How the dickens can we dive through the weed? It’s crazy!”

“Shut up, you blighter,” said Goodman aggressively. “Things are bad enough without you making them worse. Can’t you understand, blow you, that if we stay here we shall never last until the morning? This is our only chance.”

They had to shout, in order to make their voices heard above the tremendous battering of the crustaceans—which were now undoubtedly attacking in greater numbers than ever.

“There they go—hard at it,” said Dick. “I wish uncle would buck up. He’ll be too late unless he’s careful. Why is he wasting all this time?”

Lord Chuffmore came hurrying in, and he promptly flung himself flat on the floor and clutched at a fixed table.

“We’re for it, chaps,” he said briskly. “I just came along to see that you were obeying orders. Get ready

for the big shock. It's going to happen at any second now."

"What's going to happen to us, sir?" asked Crocker feebly.

"No good asking me that—I'm just as much in the dark as you are," replied Chuffy. "It's in the lap of the gods, my sons. In about two ticks, the professor is going to reverse the motors—and he's going to do it suddenly. You can take my word for it that there'll be a mighty jolt."

"But—but that jolt might smash the whole airship," protested Sam Kennedy. "Why couldn't the motors be reversed gradually?"

"No good at all. Our only chance is to dive with such a jerk that we shall free ourselves from the weed. We don't know how thick the floating weed mass is, either—and if this stunt is going to have any success, we must go clean through it. Chins up, chaps. Everything's going to be all right."

Something of Chuffy's confidence transferred itself to the boys. They little realised that he had scarcely any confidence at all. Admittedly, this move was desperate and hare-brained. But it was the only move possible.

That period of waiting was dreadful. It seemed to the boys that many minutes passed. Actually, only a few seconds elapsed before the great shock came. The thudding and crashing was growing louder than ever—deafening in its intensity.

Then—the dive.

Everybody was hanging on to some fixed object. Everybody was tense and expectant. In the control room, Professor Sylvester had roped himself to the main levers, and he was ready to push over the vital switches. Everything would depend upon the next ten seconds.

With tightened lips, and a muttered prayer, he suddenly flung the switches over, completely reversing the power in one drastic motion.

The effect was staggering.

The Asterion gave a wild lurch, and it seemed that the very vitals were being torn out of her. The boys in the saloon were flung with tremendous force across the floor, dragged away from the objects they were holding. Then the floor fell away from them, and they

seemed to be floating in mid-air. They crashed down, bruised, battered and dazed. The airship was dipping, plunging, and from every side came a screeching sound of friction against the outer hull.

A few moments of this, and then down—down! The vessel was dropping swiftly—but in a diagonal dive. The shrieking roar of conglomerated sounds faded away. The Asterion was plunging down by the bows. It seemed to the boys that they could hear a rending, tearing sound, and they knew what it meant. The ship was forcing its way through the mass of weed. The full power of her motors was driving her downwards.

If any of the boys had been at the windows, and if there had been light, they would have seen the weeds slipping past—a confused, tangled, pale-green mass. The heavy thudding had ceased— Then, abruptly, there was no longer any tearing sound—only a smooth, peculiar drumming.

“We’re through—we’re through!” shouted the professor, in a choking voice.

He was more excited than he had ever been in his life. Yet, at the same time, he was deadly calm. The first part of the experiment was successful. But the airship was in greater peril than ever—unless the man at the controls kept his head. There was no telling how deep the ocean was—how near the bed. At any moment, they might crash to utter destruction. The professor operated the levers as though no danger existed. He checked the headlong plunge. He caused the airship to behave sedately in this new element.

Already the vessel was on an even keel, but she was still descending. Down—down—

There came a jarring, jolting lurch. The Asterion shook from stem to stern, then became still. A complete and absolute silence followed.

“Archibald!” yelled the professor, running to the door, his eyes were aflame, his haggard face flushed. “Success! We are through the weed—we have successfully landed on the ocean bed.”

“Hurrah!”

It was a wild, hysterical cheer—and it came, not only from the throats of the schoolboys, but from every member of the Asterion’s crew. When the professor staggered into the saloon, he found Chuffy and the boys

dragging themselves to their feet—bruised and dizzy, but still more or less whole.

"Are we safe, uncle?" gurgled Dick.

"I would not say we are safe—but at least we have surmounted one peril," replied the professor. "We are free of the weeds—and we are away from the crustaceans. We are lying on the solid bed of the ocean."

"As they say in the movies, what are we waiting for?" asked Lord Chuffmore. "We can trundle forward on the tractors, can't we? All the forward searchlights blazing, too. Our only hope is to travel on the sea bed until we have left the weed island behind."

"Ridiculous, Archibald," scoffed the professor. "What ever put such a crude idea into your head? Trundle forward on the tractors? Certainly not!"

"Then what are you going to do?"

"A much speedier move than that," said the other, his eyes glittering. "Don't forget that the ship can operate in water, just the same as in the air. I shall raise her eighty or a hundred feet from the sea bed, then move forward—not rapidly, of course, but certainly at a faster speed than we should attain by using the tractors."

"Well, go on with it," said Chuffy impatiently. "Put it to the test, and put us out of our misery."

A great sigh of relief passed through everybody, when a minute or two later, the vessel slowly and obediently rose in answer to the professor's touch. The motors had come unharmed through the great ordeal. Then the Asterion moved forward, gliding through the water.

"Safe—safe so far," muttered the professor, as he stood watching the "television" window. "If we escape from this mess—if we find ourselves in the upper air again—I am going to fly right off into space, and back to Earth."

It was a firm resolve, and nothing was likely to shake him from his purpose. Now a period of acute anxiety followed—not only for Professor Bill, but for everybody on board. Boys and men stood at the windows, staring out into the murk. The forward searchlights were turning the water into a greyish blur, and through this strange objects could occasionally be seen. Everybody was expecting huge and dangerous sea monsters to attack the vessel—and it was rather an anti-climax that

nothing of this sort happened. Occasionally, huge, black sea creatures would surge past, but nothing attempted to make an attack.

Perhaps there were plenty of dangerous monsters in this ocean, but they were startled and frightened by the airship's searchlights. At all events, the only possible thing to do was to continue on and on, hour after hour.

When at last the professor believed that they had gone beyond the zone of the weed mass, he decided to make an attempt to rise. He was taking a chance—but he had to take a chance. The longing to get into the air, to restore the Asterion to her native element, was becoming overpowering; and surely, the weed-continent must have been left behind by now.

Chuffy was brought in to help. The metal covering was removed from the observation dome, and Chuffy and McRae were stationed on the gallery to watch.

"Go ahead—take her up!" said Chuffy briskly. "Two of the searchlights are directed straight upwards, and we can see nothing but clear water. At the first sign of weed, we'll yell out, Bill—and that'll be the signal for you to take us down again."

It was an anxious time. The airship continued to rise through the water, and Chuffy and McRae kept their eyes glued upwards. Suddenly, there was a great splashing and foaming, and for a moment the two watchers were puzzled. Then they jumped to the truth.

"We've broken surface!" shouted Chuffy. "We're free of the weed—we're out! For the love of Mike, Bill, take her straight up—and don't stop!"

A minute later, the Asterion had risen from the water like some fantastic object out of a nightmare. It was, indeed, uncanny, the way this great vessel of metal could conquer water and air and outer space alike. She rose sheer, streams of water dripping from her.

"Thank heavens!" muttered the professor fervently. "After rigorous tests, Archibald, I am going straight back to earth. It had been my hope that we should be able to explore other parts of Venus; but with all these schoolboys aboard, I am not going to take any more risks. I am not going to invite any more dangers."

"That goes for me, too," said Chuffy.

Half-hysterical cheers were sounding from the saloon.

The boys were aware of the change—they knew that a near-miracle had been achieved.

"We're in the air!" yelled Stan Goodman. "And—look—it's nearly daylight!"

"Hurrah!"

"What about your croaking now, you blighters?" said Tim Charters, glaring at Wicks and Crocker. "Didn't we say, all along, that the professor would do the trick?"

There was a rush for the windows, for nobody was interested in Wicks and Crocker.

"What are those things clinging to the side?" asked Bob Davis with a shudder. "Oh, my hat! They look like great slugs!"

His description was not far off the mark. Scores of enormous sea slugs were attached to the airship. But, presently, they began to fall away—and they were the last of the Venusian creatures which the schoolboys saw

The reaction was tremendous

Many of the boys fell dead asleep just as they stood; or, rather, they dropped to the floor, relaxed, and slept. Others crawled to their state-rooms. Members of the crew came along, lifted the sleeping boys, and put them to bed. They slept solidly for thirty-six hours—a sure proof of the tremendous strain they had undergone.

It was during this period that the professor, fighting against sleep and exhaustion, put the Asterion through a series of tremendous tests. He would not venture into the outer space until he was perfectly satisfied that the ship was space-worthy. Hour after hour was spent in this way, and at last he was satisfied that the ship, although dented and battered, could be taken safely on her long journey back to Earth.

Indeed, even Chuffy had no desire to remain on Venus any longer. Enough, he considered, was as good as a feast. It would have been rather nice to have another chat with Mr. Grant Wellman, but this could easily be deferred for a later voyage—when a newer and better Asterion could be built for the trip.

When the boys at last awakened, and found themselves completely refreshed, they hurriedly dressed and turned out. They hardly knew what to expect.

"Anything happened while we were asleep, Chuffy?" asked Dick Sylvester, encountering a freshly-shaven and

immaculate Lord Chuffmore in the main lounge. "Where are we now? Flying back towards the city?"

"Flying back towards Whitelands would be nearer the mark," replied Chuffy, with a grin. "My poor young ass you're behind the times. Do you realise that you have slept for thirty-six hours?"

"My only hat! All that time?"

"Yes, and the old Asterion is in outer space, hurtling towards the Earth at I don't know how many hundreds of miles per second," said Lord Chuffmore. "A little the worse for wear, but still sound in the wind. Your uncle and I thought, on the whole, that we'd give the rest of Venus a miss."

There is no need to tell of the wild excitement which sped through Great Britain—and, indeed, the whole world—when the supposedly lost airship was sighted. She returned to her exact starting point—the meadow adjoining the playing fields at Whitelands. Under perfect control, the airship, guided by Professor Bill Sylvester's steady hand, approached Earth in perfect safety, then flew down through the stratosphere into the familiar atmosphere of Mother Earth. The great voyage was over when the airship landed with scarcely a jar in the meadow.

The adventure was over, and there was joy in many homes, for the parents of most of the boys had believed their sons to be lost for ever. Battered and bruised and scarred, the Asterion was home again, bearing evident testimony of her battles and tribulations on the planet Venus.

To most of the schoolboys, afterwards, it all seemed like a crazy dream. Yet, on the whole, they were rather glad to go back to the humdrum round of school life.

THE END.

Swan's 3/6 Albums

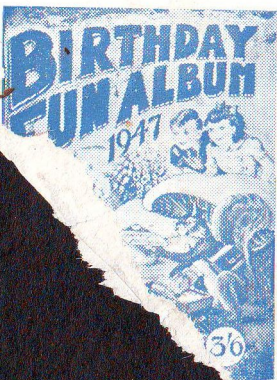
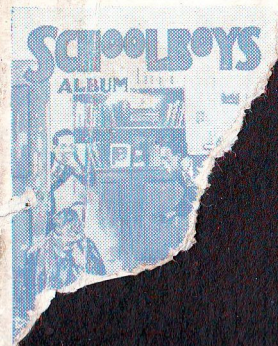
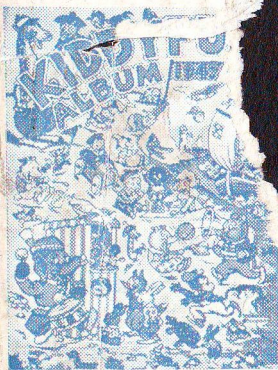
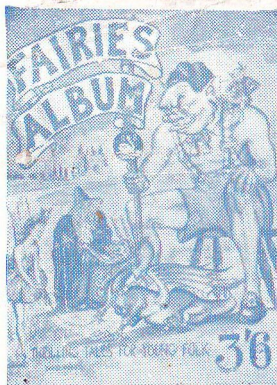
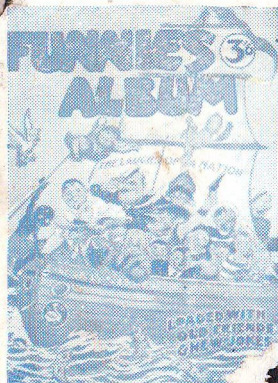
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