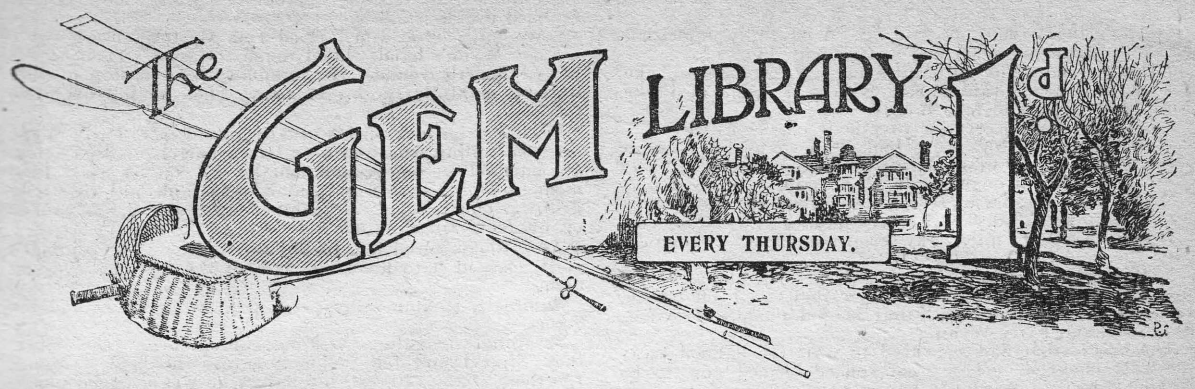

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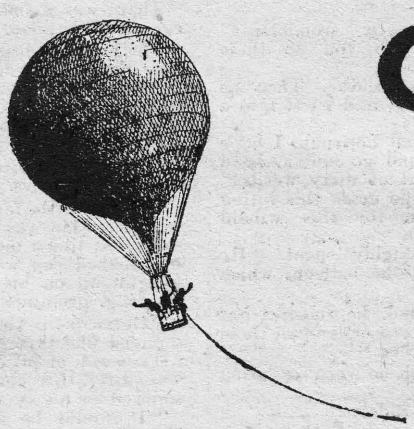
THE TERRIBLE THREE'S AIR-CRUISE



A Grand Long Complete School Tale of

TOM MERRY & CO.

By

MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.

The Great Balloon Appears.

"BAI Jove! Wun, you chaps—wun!"

Tom Merry and Blake sprinted to the crest of the hill above St. Jim's.

There stood D'Arcy. He was greatly excited. He had dropped his eyeglass. He was pointing wildly towards the sky. Tom Merry looked up, but could see nothing.

"Poor old Gussy!" he exclaimed pityingly. "The heat must have got up into his head. He's begining to see things."

"Your wudeness is quite uncalled for, my deah Mewwy." D'Arcy spoke with dignity; then pointed again over the trees. "If you wipe the cobwebs out of your eyes, deah boys, and look over there, you'll see a gweat balloon."

"By Jove, D'Arcy's right!" Blake exclaimed excitedly.

Clear in sight—indeed, not more than a couple of miles away, and about a thousand feet from the ground—hung a big yellow balloon. Its netting and car were easily visible.

Merry shaded his eyes with his hand; then he shouted:

"My hat, it's coming this way, too—right across the fields! I believe he means to come down! I can see the chap in the basket!"

"Spwint, then—spwint like anythin'! It's gweat fun to see a balloon come down!" And D'Arcy set off down the slope, greatly excited.

"I really do believe the fellow is going to make a descent," said Tom Merry, as he and Blake set off after D'Arcy.

"Hurrah!" cried Blake.

Straight across country the chums chased, the big balloon getting nearer and nearer. Such a half-holiday "rag" as this had never been imagined.

An awkward hedge came in sight. There was a ditch in front of it, and a gap, with a rail near the top to get hold of. D'Arcy, his coat-tails flying, was still in front. He jumped the ditch, reached up for the rail, missed it, and slid back.

His leg, up to the knee, was plunged in dirty, stagnant water, with a green slime on the top of it.

"Ow! Bai Jove! How beastly!" He forgot the balloon for a moment, surveying his grimed, patent-leather shoe, and evil-smelling trouser-leg, with horrified eyes.

"More haste less speed, you silly duffer!" cried Tom Merry, jumping over him, and swinging through the gap, Blake panting at his heels.

"This is beastly wotten! Do wait a minute, you chaps! I must get this w'etched, beastly stuff out of my shoe!" Arthur Augustus was the picture of woe as he wailed after his disappearing chums.

"Not much!" shouted back Merry.

"It's fwightfully wotten luck! Ugh!"

The mud squelched up D'Arcy's legs as he put his foot to the ground. But he plodded off manfully, none the less, his grimy trouser-leg flapping, panting and out of breath.

The great balloon swung nearer across the fields. It was now not more than five hundred feet above the ground. The man in the basket could be seen, moving excitedly from side to side.

Suddenly there were shouts far back from a wood near St. Jim's. Tom Merry and Blake turned round, breathing heavily, and saw three figures running madly.

"It's Monty Lowther, old Skimpole, and Fatty Wynn!"

gasped Blake. "They'll be lucky if they get in at the death!"

D'Arcy caught them up, panting. A painfully unpleasant odour of stganant ponds was wafted with him.

"Don't stand right up against me! For goodness' sake, get to windward!" said Merry, with a sly wink at Blake, while they paused to take breath.

"It's jolly wotten of you to pile it on, Tom Mewwy!" declared poor D'Arcy. He looked down at his clinging trouser-leg, and shivered. Then he looked hopeful. "If I keep on wunnin' it ought to dwy," he said.

"And there's going to be some hoof-padding done before we come up to it!" declared Merry, pointing to the balloon.

It seemed quite a mile away, even now, floating languidly over the fields.

"He's got a long rope hanging down; it's almost touching the ground!" cried Blake, as they sped off again, swinging more to the right. Far behind plodded Lowther, Skimpole, and Fatty Wynn.

The breeze that had appeared to waft the balloon away suddenly changed. The great sphere seemed now to be moving directly towards the boys.

"Stop!" shouted Merry. "It's no good running on! Let's see really which way he is heading!"

"Isn't it great? Give me balloon hunting after this!" said Blake, with a relish.

"Bai Jove, this wotten twouser-leg's spoilin' the whole thing for me!" exclaimed D'Arcy. "It feels extwemely uncomfy, and there is a feahful week about it. Bai Jove, we're gettin' neawah now!"

There was no doubt about it, the balloon was now coming straight towards them. It was so low down that the hanging rope was trailing over the fields and hedges.

Monty Lowther broke through a hedge. Skimpole was hopelessly tailed off. Fatty Wynn was far in the rear.

"He's coming down!" yelled Lowther.

"Bai Jove, deah boy, that's weally wonderful!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "How do you do these things?"

"You dry up, Gussy!" answered Lowther. Then he caught sight of D'Arcy's dirty trouser-leg, and burst into a laugh.

"The next ditch you fall into, my deah Lowthah, I hope you have your vewy best clothes on, and go undah, head and all, besides swallowing a mouthful of dirty weeds!" D'Arcy looked pleased with himself as he made this biting retort. "I see absolutely no weason for this wibald mewwiment!"

Skimpole came shambling up, thoroughly spent. He polished his spectacles; then peered at the balloon, which was coming straight towards them.

"When the aeronaut wants to descend, he releases gas from a valve at the top of the gas-bag, and calls upon those below to hold his trail-rope," he remarked.

Skimpole spoke thoughtfully, as though he were repeating something he had learned.

"Good old guide-book!" said Blake rudely.

"Skimpole's right. What we've got to do is to make a grab at that rope as it comes by," said Merry.

"Then I vote Fatty Wynn gwabs before anybody else," said D'Arcy. "He's the heaviest."

Fatty toiled up at the moment, dreadfully tired; terribly excited, too.

"He's making signals! Look, look!" he gasped.

The balloon was now near enough for the boys to see the man in the wickerwork basket distinctly. He was waving his arms.

CHAPTER 2.

The Queer Little Man from the Clouds.

THE great balloon was not more than three fields away.

"It looks as big as a haystack," said Fatty Wynn wonderingly.

"Spread out, you fellows!" ordered Tom Merry. "Then, as he comes over, jump for the rope. And, don't forget, Fatty"—he pointed a stern finger at the perspiring Wynn—"when you once get hold, hang on like grim death!"

"And if you do get carried up, and come down with a fearful bump, you won't hurt yourself," said Blake consolingly.

"Some of you other chaps will jolly well have to grab, too!" said Fatty Wynn, blinking apprehensively at the approaching monster. It was now two fields away, and not more than twice the height of the trees from the ground.

Then things happened quickly. The balloon bore down; the trailing rope dragged over the nearest hedge with a swish; it swung across the field towards the panting group of boys like a snake; the aeronaut up above leant over the side of the basket, gesticulating.

By chance the rope did flick right towards Fatty Wynn. The others came dashing up, but he sprang sideways, and grabbed it first.

"My hat, look at him!" cried Tom Merry, aghast.

Fatty Wynn's hands closed round the rope. Then he was jerked smartly round. He stumbled along a step or two, striving manfully for his balance. Then he fell over and rolled.

With a grim look on his usually placid face, Fatty Wynn held on, rolling over and over like a barrel, his legs flying. He bumped on the ground, but he did not let go. In a moment Tom Merry was rushing to his aid, and his strong grip was on the rope. He gripped it hard, and was yanked off his feet, still clinging.

Jack Blake seized it a little lower down; D'Arcy jumped at it, clasped it to his arms, and bit the dust, his eyeglass flying.

Skimpole, looking sadly perplexed, swung on behind the others.

Scraping, struggling, kicking, rolling over each other, they slipped and fell pell-mell across the field. Monty Lowther, at the tail-end, lay flat as he was dragged along, gasping in astonishment.

It was like a tug-of-war with a giant; but the weight of the boys, who hung like leeches to the rope, slowed up the balloon.

It came to a standstill overhead. The boys struggled to their feet, still hanging to the rope. Fifty yards up above was the basket. An excited face looked over the basket, and a shouting voice was heard.

"I can't hear a word he says!" gasped Merry. "But he must want to come down. Now then, all together!"

"Yo-ho!" chanted Blake.

Dusty, dirty, with perspiring faces, the boys tugged and hung, and pulled.

There was a smell of gas, a creaking overhead from the car of the balloon, and it began to come down with a run.

The huge gas-bag seemed to fill the sky; the basket swung over the boys' heads.

"Look out! Let go!" shouted Tom Merry. The others scrambled back.

The car came down softly, bumped on the ground, rose a foot again, then came to a standstill.

A weird apparition boobed up over the side, staring at the group of boys.

It was a little fat man, with a very big head, and a very red face. He was wearing a suit of yellow leather clothes, somewhat like a motorist, buttoned up close to the neck. A big peaked cap was on his head. He pushed a pair of goggles up on his forehead, and stared at the boys with blinking, prominent eyes.

"Gerswitz! Gerhowden! Elglunk!" What he said sounded like that—with a splutter.

The swell of St. Jim's stepped forward, bowing. His face was dirty, his collar broken open at the neck; but he screwed in his eyeglass and observed:

"It would be a gweat help, sir, if you could speak English."

D'Arcy bowed again.

The others raised their caps—at least, those who had them did. Fatty Wynn had lost his, and had a rip down the leg of his trousers.

"Gerplunken! Gersmowken! Plompz!" The aeronaut waved his arms.

D'Arcy started back. The queer little man seemed to explode each time, instead of talk.

"Sounds to me suspiciously like German," said Merry.

"Try signs," remarked Lowther.

Skimpole, the thoughtful one, stepped forward. The aeronaut fixed him with a glassy stare.

Skimpole waved an arm towards the cottages in the distance that marked the village; then up at the sky; then to his friends.

"Mowgenbleroltz!" the little man spluttered savagely.

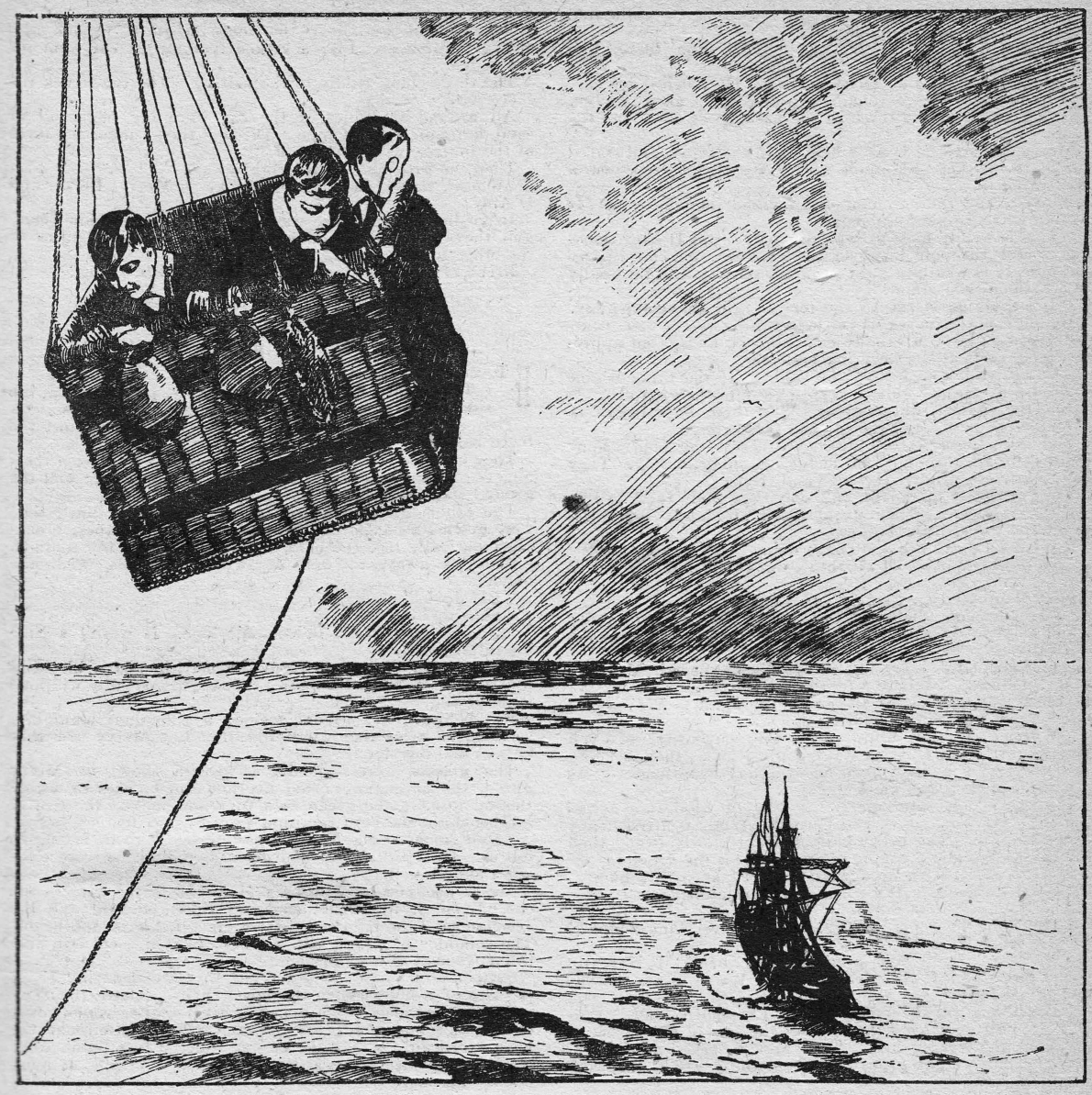
Then he dived down, appearing with pencil and a telegraph-form in his hands. He waved his arm towards the village; then went through the pantomime of writing.

"He wants to send off a telegwam; his fwiends are gettin' anxious about him, I expect," said D'Arcy.

Skimpole nodded his head like a mandarin, striving to convey to the excited aeronaut that there was a telegraph-office in the village.

It was a curious sight—the boys grouped round in the field, the big balloon, the gesticulating, queer little man in the basket.

Suddenly he began an elaborate pantomime. He pointed to himself; then away towards the village; then at the balloon, making a gesture as though it were rising; then, one after another, held up three fingers, and pointed to the boys.



The St. Jim's juniors looked straight down upon the deck of the ship. But strange to say, not a soul appeared to be on board. "Jove!" exclaimed Tom Merry, "I believe it is a derelict ship!"

"Pfflerslingen! Plersgrunten! Phitz! Persplatz!" That's what it was he seemed to say.

"I see," said Tom Merry. "He wants to go up to the telegraph-office, and for three of us to get in his balloon, so that it doesn't rise from the ground when his weight is taken out of it."

"Not for me," said Fatty Wynn apprehensively. "I don't mind an ordinary, decent rag; but no climbing into balloons for me!"

"Rot!" said Blake. "It's a chance we should not get again in a host of terms."

"But why can't one of us wun with his telegwam for him?" asked D'Arcy politely.

The aeronaut interrupted the conversation. He gesticulated violently, beckoning the boys up.

"Of course! I see!" said Monty Lowther. "He can't get out till we get in!"

"Hop in, then, Monty!" said Merry.

"Not me!" said Lowther. "Who knows but what the old bounder has some kidnapping game on?"

To which Arthur Augustus D'Arcy replied:

"Wats!"

CHAPTER 3.

Carried Skywards.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY stepped forward with a courtly bow.

"Wascal or not, I'm goin' to accommodate him," he said. "He's a gentleman in distwess, askin' us to mind his balloon while he sends off his telegwam."

The aeronaut spluttered.

Catching hold of the ropes suspending the basket to the balloon, D'Arcy climbed in.

"After you!" said Tom Merry, climbing in also. There was plenty of room in the basket, which was padded warmly with felt.

"After you!" said Blake, clambering in at Merry's heels.

"I'm not preaching funkiness, but I hope you chaps know you're running a risk," said Skimpole warningly.

"Wisk or no wisk," answered D'Arcy, "the gentleman wants to send off his telegwam."

The aeronaut's face puckered up in a smile; then he patted D'Arcy on the back, and began to climb laboriously out, impeded by his corpulency and a pair of very fat legs. The basket rocked to and fro.

"Do the polite thing, Monty," cried Merry; "show him the way to the telegraph-office."

"That's wight," said D'Arcy. "Take him there, and bwing him back, Monty."

Lowther could not do anything else. He touched his cap, and pointed. The aeronaut grunted and, after waving warning hands at the three in the basket, set off across the field.

Merry, Blake, and D'Arcy held on to the ropes, and stared out of the basket; Skimpole and Fatty Wynn drew nearer and stared in.

Lowther and the aeronaut disappeared into the road. It was an extraordinary situation.

"This is weally most extwaordinawy!" said D'Arcy, looking round through his eyeglass. "Vewy extwaordinawy indeed. It is weally a most peculiah sensation to be weally in a balloon, you know!"

"It's the biggest rag of the term," said Blake solemnly. "We shall never, never, never beat this."

Skimpole picked up the thick trail-rope and gazed apprehensively aloft at the towering balloon.

"Catch hold, too, Fatty," he said. "If the thing begins to go up, we may be able to keep it close to the ground."

But the balloon did not stir. The three boys began to examine the interior of the car and the cordage.

Suddenly there were wild shouts across the field. Four figures broke through the hedge, running wildly. They were Manners, Digby, Herries, and Glyn.

They sprinted up to the balloon; then their faces fell in sheer amazement. They were struck absolutely speechless to see the three in the basket.

"What on earth are you chaps doing?" gasped Manners.

"How in the name of all that's wonderful did you get in there?" asked Herries.

Glyn smothered amazement in his curiosity.

"An enormous balloon," he said, glancing upwards; "and a car fitted out for long-distance travelling," he added critically.

"For goodness' sake, tell us what's happened, Merry!" said Manners. "Where are the people who were in it? Is there any chance of its going up again? We saw it miles away, and came sprinting down."

"Weally, I can appweciate the cuwiosity of you youngstahs," said D'Arcy, waving his arm, as though being in the car of a balloon were an everyday experience. "As a mattah of fact, you know——"

He was rudely interrupted. A gust of wind tore across the field. Clouds, which had been gathering, spurted heavy drops of rain. The great balloon leant slowly over; then the car was jerked a couple of yards across the ground.

D'Arcy was thrown up against Jack Blake with a bump.

"Good gwacious! It's wisin'!" he exclaimed.

Another gust swept down.

"Hang on the rope, you fellows, till everything's blue!" shouted Tom Merry.

"Nothing'll hold this great hulking brute if it really comes on to blow," observed Blake. "We're in for it now, and no mistake!"

"Until our fwiend comes back, I'm gettin' out," said D'Arcy, putting a leg gingerly over the side of the basket.

"You unutterable ass!" Tom Merry jerked him back. "With your weight gone, the whole thing would shoot up like a rocket."

"Wocket or——" began D'Arcy, when the balloon gave another fierce tug under the force of the wind, blowing now in ugly gusts.

"There's only one thing to do!" shouted Bernard Glyn. He was hanging at the head of the rope; Skimpole, Manners, Fatty Wynn, Herries, and Digby, with wild, astonished faces, digging their heels into the ground behind him.

"Out with it, then, Glyn!" shouted back Tom Merry.

The three in the car were hanging to the netting. The car was bumping like a ship in distress.

"Let her drag to the fence over there, and anchor her by the trail-rope; we shall never hold her here!" shouted Glyn.

"One for Glyn!" yelled Blake. "Hurrah!"

Under the Liverpool lad's directions, the boys eased off the rope. The balloon bumped and swung across the field. The three in the car were shaken together like peas in a pod.

"Oh! Tom Mewwy, you clumsy wuffian! You've twodden on my foot!" shrieked D'Arcy. "Ow! I am hurt, you ass; and you have uttahly wuined my boot!"

"Never mind your big feet!" said Tom Merry brutally. "Look out you don't get spilt in the field."

"My hat! Look over there!" Blake suddenly shouted excitedly.

In the distance, from the village, sped the aeronaut, waving his arms skywards, as though giving things up for lost. Lowther sprinted at his heels.

Then the unexpected happened.

The balloon was near the fence when a vicious gust swung it far over. Like a kicked football the car went for the hedge.

The three clung wildly to the netting The car struck the fence with a crash.

All around the sides of the car were big bags full of sand, hung on loops of rope. Three of them, under the force of the impact, were jerked off.

Then the ground dropped right away.

At least, that's what it seemed like to Merry, Blake, and D'Arcy.

In an instant the fence was ten feet straight below them, and they were looking down into the astonished faces of the other fellows.

Freed of three ballast-bags, the balloon was rising!

CHAPTER 4.

In the Balloon.

IT was amazing!

Tom Merry, Blake, and D'Arcy peered over the side of the swaying basket, speechless.

They saw a struggling heap of boys dragged against the fence below.

They saw the rope whipped with a giant's pull from their fingers. Then there was a dizzy jerk, and a swing; and the ground shot away below faster and faster.

The other fellows receded instant by instant, until they were gesticulating dots. The aeronaut and Lowther, breaking frantically into the field, looked the size of toy soldiers.

Slanting away, as well as swiftly upwards, went the balloon.

"Bai Jove!"

"Shut up!"

Merry's voice was a fierce undertone. It wasn't a time for talking, this.

Hanging in their case from the netting above his head Merry saw a powerful pair of field-glasses. He whipped them down.

Far below, the aeronaut seemed a ridiculous mannikin, waving his arms like windmill-sails. But Merry saw that he was making signals.

The glasses were splendid. Through them, as Merry gazed, the aeronaut seemed magnified ten times or more. Behind him, in the green field that now looked the size of a table-cloth, the boys ran, and waved excitedly.

"Pull some rope! That's what he seems to be trying to tell us. He's jerking up and down as though he were ringing a church bell."

Merry dropped the glasses, and turned to the gear in the car. Even in that brief space of time the field and the aeronaut and the boys faded from view, far back and below. The shoulder of a hill, and a wood, blotted them out, like the movement of a panorama.

Sixteen stout ropes held the car to a wooden ring about the size of a hoop above the boys' heads. Above the ring, radiating upwards, were a network of smaller ropes going outwards round the great gasbag, which blotted out the view overhead. Where the gasbag tapered to a point, some distance above the ring, it was not closed in at all. It hung open. Through the opening, down into the car, came a rope. A second one came through a little opening in the gasbag about a foot away, and also descended into the car.

"See here, you chaps," cried Tom Merry. "That chap below meant me to pull one of these ropes to let out the gas, and bring us down. But which one is it?"

Poor D'Arcy was too exhausted and surprised to say more than "Good gwacious!"

It was Blake who scored.

"Don't touch 'em, Merry," he said. "I remember distinctly in a book in the library it saying that there are just two such ropes as these in every balloon One lets out gas in small puffs through a valve at the top, for coming down slowly. The other, called a 'ripping-cord,' is only used close to the ground, for it tears out a long, thin panel sewn in the top of the balloon before each trip, and lets all the gas out in a great rush, so as to prevent the balloon bumping along the ground. If we pulled the wrong one, high up, we should go down like a stone."

"Good for you, Blake!" replied Tom Merry tersely. "I don't know which is which; and if I pulled the ripping-cord by mistake, and let out all the gas, we'd be done for."

"Howwible!" D'Arcy shivered. "But what on earth's to be done, Mewwy? Will this howwible contwaption come down by itself?"

"We can't do anything for the moment," said Tom Merry quietly. "Keep a stiff upper lip, Gussy. We're not in danger so long as we sit tight."

"Right-ho!" said Jack Blake. "If the rotten thing

doesn't soon come down of its own accord, we shall have to see about risking pulling one of these cords."

Blake looked downwards. The country below looked like a map in relief. There were woods, and tiny strips representing roads. Far away to the right was a cloud of smoke, evidently a big town.

"We're a mile high, I should think," he said. "Moving fast, too; but there's no way of telling what direction we're going in."

Down below the basket, for a hundred feet and more, dangled the trail-rope.

"Weally, I don't like this!" confessed D'Arcy. "Suppose it keeps on goin' up and up. We shall be fwozen, or there won't be air to bweathe."

"I'm not going to meddle with these ropes yet!" said Tom Merry decidedly. "I believe a balloon gets to a certain level, and then moves along without either going up higher, or coming down, until its gas is used up."

The balloon, indeed seemed to have stopped rushing up; but, looking over, the boys could scarcely see the ground. Mist, or cloud, had passed between the balloon and the earth.

"We may come down with a tewwible bump in the sea, or on the woof of a house." D'Arcy looked dismayed. "Anyhow, we sha'n't possibly be able to get back to St. Jim's to-night!"

"Look here, Gussy," said Tom Merry, "we're in for it, I know. If we catch sight of the sea ahead, we shall have to pull one of these ropes, and hope for the best. If the balloon comes down on a house, we shall have just to sit tight, and wait for things to happen."

"I say this," chimed in Blake. "When it gets evening-time, and the air chills off, I believe it will have some effect on the gas, and bring the balloon safely down."

"I congwatulate you, Blake. Your ideahs are weally encouwagin'. I don't want you fellahs to put me down as a wet blanket; but it's all so suwpwisin', and I nevah feel comfortable in such stwange contwaptions as these. Now, if that boundah Glyn were heah——"

"Jove, yes!" said Merry. "Glyn might have known which of these confounded ropes to pull."

The balloon passed into a sort of mist.

"There's absolutely nothing to be seen below," announced Blake. "The ground's gone clean out of sight."

"Let's have a forage round," suggested Tom Merry. "It's no good standing staring at each other."

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy. "Bai Jove!" he added, in an inspiration. "When we weach tewwa fiwma again, you fellahs, we shall all be intahviewed by chaps from the newspapahs. You haven't thought of that!"

"Or have an unpleasant half-hour with the Head for ever getting in this affair," said Merry grimly.

"My hat! Here's a find!" cried Jack Blake, holding up what was evidently a very powerful electric torchlight. Even in the daylight it shot out a fine silvery-white beam when he turned the switch on the side of it.

"And here's another," said Merry. From a pocket on the inside of the car he drew forth a nickel-plated six-chambered revolver. "Loaded, too," was his comment, as he opened the breach. Then he popped it back in its resting-place.

Arthur Augustus stretched out his hand.

"Pway hand me that revolvah, Tom Mewwy!"

"Rats!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"My dear ass——"

"I wefuse to be called an ass."

"You don't want a revolver to play with. I don't want my roof blown off all of a sudden, and I don't suppose Blake is tired of life yet."

"I should be extwemely careful——"

"And if you didn't pot Blake or me, we can't have you committing suicide," said Tom Merry, with a serious shake of the head. "You would blow your own brains out, as sure as a gun."

"Impossible!" said Blake. "I really must say that I don't agree with you there, Merry."

"Bai Jove, I am glad to see that you back me up, at all events, Blake, deah boy. You agwee that I had bettah have the wevolvah?"

"Hardly. You wouldn't blow your brains out, because ——"

"Because I am a vewy weliable sort of chap."

"Oh, no! Because you haven't any."

D'Arcy jammed his eyeglass into his eye, and looked at Blake fixedly.

"Blake, I wegard that wemark as absolutely wotten, and I uttahly fail to see what Tom Mewwy can find to laugh at in it. I considah the imputation extwemely oppwobwious, and if we were not in such an extwemely dangewous situation, I should wegard it as impewative to give you a feahful thwashin'."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, pway do not cackle, deah boy! Undah the circs. I shall not chastise you, but pway undahstand that I wegard you with just as much contempt as if I had given you a feahful thwashin'."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus turned his back upon Blake. It was useless to argue with that cheery junior.

"Tom Mewwy, pway hand me the wevolvah."

"More rats!"

"I should think, Tom Mewwy, that you might wemembah the time we were in Amewicah, and I cawwied a wevolvah thwough the Wocky Mountains," said D'Arcy, with dignity. "You will wemembah that it was vewy handy."

"But that one wasn't loaded," said Tom Merry, with a laugh. "If this weren't loaded, you should have it at once, Gussy. Now, look here, old son, there are only three of us here, and we've only got one life each. It's better to leave the revolver where it is."

"If you are nervous of firearms, Tom Mewwy——" began D'Arcy sarcastically.

"I am, jolly nervous, when you're handling them," said Tom Merry promptly. "It's no good, Gussy; we'll leave the revolver alone. But if you want to arm yourself in case of accidents, there's an axe in the car. You can stick it in your watch-pocket, or hang it round your neck by the string of your eyeglass."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake.

"I wegard this mewwiment as wibald and untimely. It is only our extwemely pewilous poshish, that saves Blake fwom a feahful thwashin' at this moment. However, as you are nervous of fiaharms, pewwaps it would be wisah to leave the wevolvah in the case. Bai Jove, the gwound is quite out of sight!"

"It's getting colder up here," remarked Blake. "Blessed if I know why Gussy didn't think of bringing an overcoat!"

"My dear chap, how could I guess we should be cawwied away in a balloon?"

"Oh, don't argue! Let's have a look round, and see if there is anything of the sort in the car."

"What pwice this?" Tom Merry and Blake turned to D'Arcy. From the bottom of the car the swell of St. Jim's had fished up a great fur motor-coat, and had donned it promptly. "I weckon that's a bit swaggah—eh?" he asked. "That'll impwess the natives when we come down."

Blake at this moment discovered a small steel anchor, evidently for anchoring the balloon to the ground.

Tom Merry investigated the rows of sandbags hanging round the sides of the car.

"When you want to go up, you empty out one of these sacks," he remarked.

"It would be wippin'," said D'Arcy, "if we only knew what to do to bwing the blessed thing down."

Before a strong breeze, however, the great balloon tore on. It was growing colder. Arthur Augustus was comfortable enough in the big motor-coat, but Tom Merry and Blake were beginning to shiver. Arthur Augustus looked distressed.

"Bai Jove, you fellows will catch cold!" he exclaimed. "It is a gweat pity there weren't any more coats."

"Oh, that's all right!"

Arthur Augustus shook his head.

"It is not all wight, deah boy."

He began to take off the coat.

"What the dickens are you doing, Gussy?" demanded Blake, in astonishment.

"I cannot make myself comfy while you haven't any coats, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus. "Sink or swim together, deah boys."

"Shove that coat on!"

"Wats!"

"Look here, ass——"

"I wefuse to be called an ass."

"Hallo, here are some rugs! They'll be all right for us. Shove that coat on!"

"Oh, vewy well, deah boys! Undah the circs., I shall be vewy pleased to do so."

And D'Arcy donned the coat again, while Tom Merry and Blake wrapped themselves in the rugs.

CHAPTER 5.

Supper in the Clouds.

DUSK began to creep on. It became cold, too; but still the balloon swept on. It came no nearer the ground, but went no higher. It seemed to have come to a balance. Tom Merry and Blake found themselves warm enough in the rugs they had wrapped round their shoulders.

Far below, every now and then, lights gleamed, as though they were passing over a town.

"What's the time, Mewwy, old chap?" asked D'Arcy,

breaking a silence. He seemed to have been dozing in the big motor-coat.

Merry took out his watch.

"Eight o'clock," he said. "We went up about four, I should think. We've been going through the air for quite four hours."

"Bai Jove! I wondah how far we are away fwom St. Jim's?"

"Well, with a wind blowing twenty miles an hour, we should be nearly a hundred miles away by now," answered Merry.

"Good gwacious!"

"I'm getting jolly hungry," said Blake. "I say, D'Arcy," he added, "is there grub by any chance in that box you're sitting on?"

"I will see, with pleasah, old chap!" said D'Arcy. The chums were growing more accustomed to the strangeness of the situation. "Oh, I say! Wippin'!"

D'Arcy had turned back the padded lid of the box. Inside was a sight that would have made the heart of Fatty Wynn rejoice. In a neat metal box reposed row after row of tempting-looking little sausages, browned over on the surface, and crisp. In another box were any number of pieces of cake. Standing up around the sides of the box, each in a special clip to prevent it from shaking about and breaking, were a number of bottles of ginger-ale.

"Corn in Egypt!" gasped Tom Merry.

"Bai Jove! A well-meanin' old boundah that balloon chap. If he'd only left us instwuctions how to bwing this contwaption to the gwond, we'd have given him a testimonial."

D'Arcy took a sausage and a good-sized piece of cake, and Tom Merry followed his example.

"Open a bottle of the drinkables, Blake," he said.

Diving into the box, Blake gave a whoop.

"Look here!" he exclaimed, holding up a row of little horn drinking-cups, each one fitting into the other.

Pop! With his knife Blake had cut the wire holding in the cork. Three glasses of ginger-ale were poured out. The chums were now munching the little sausages, which tasted as nice as they looked.

"Give us a toast, D'Arcy!" said Tom Merry, cup in hand.

"Heah's hopin' we begin to come down before it gets dark, and dwop nice and softly in a big field," said the swell of St. Jim's.

"They've probably telegraphed to places along the way they thought we've been coming," suggested Blake. "People will know all about us when we come down. Can you imagine the state of mind the Head is in?"

"Blessed if I can!" said Tom Merry. "It's the biggest rag in the history of St. Jim's. But what I don't like about it is being carried along like this, helpless and not able to be doing anything."

"That's just the rotten part of it."

"Weally," said D'Arcy, helping himself to another sausage, "I think we're puttin' a vewy good face on it. A lot of chaps, not knowin' what was goin' to happen, like us, would have wowwied most fwightfully."

"You weren't very happy at first, you know, Gussy. It wasn't till the grub turned up that you began to think things were brighter."

"If you wish to infer that I am a glutton, Tom Mewwy, I must say that the wemark is in wotten taste," said Arthur Augustus.

It was growing darker every minute, and chillier.

"A little more ginger-ale, please," said Tom Merry.

"Good gwacious! It's gettin' dark wemarkably quick!" remarked Arthur Augustus.

It was indeed. Tom Merry leaned over the side of the basket. A dim, chilly, grey expanse, far below, indicated the ground. The cordage holding the basket to the ring overhead was wet and clammy to the touch.

What was the altitude it was impossible to guess. The earth looked thousands of feet below. A sort of haze of light here and there evidently indicated where a town or village lay. The balloon, from the way these faded away behind, was still moving quickly forward.

Tom Merry peered ahead through the mist.

"This is getting pretty rotten!" he said anxiously. "We might get carried out over the sea, or anywhere, in fact, at this rate.

Rapidly the darkness closed in. There was a long silence in the car. Blake looked steadily downwards.

"We may be getting nearer the ground, you know," he said at length hopefully. "I'm perfectly certain of reading in some book that cold air brings a balloon down, so long as no ballast is thrown out."

"Mewwy, old chap, what's the time?" It was getting bitterly cold.

"I can't see my watch," said Merry. "Shine that torch-light thing here, Blake, old chap!"

There was a gleam of vivid white light as Blake switched the torch on. It illuminated the gloom, in a ghostly way, far out beyond the balloon. Tom Merry held out his watch in the light.

"Jove," he said, "it's nearly ten o'clock! We've been jolly nearly six hours in the air!"

Blake wouldn't give way to despondency.

"I'm sure we're sinking down gradually," he said.

"That light's a gweat comfowt, at any wate," said D'Arcy.

Then there was silence again. Night settled down. Thicker and gloomier it grew round the floating balloon.

"Bai Jove!" remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, as he glanced over the side of the car, and shivered. "We might be floatin' in space, you know, for all we can see of the earth. I wondah where we are, you know?"

He pulled up the coat about his ears. In spite of the thickness of it, he could feel the cold.

"Well, we must keep our pecker up," said Blake philosophically. "Never say die! I vote for another chunk of cake."

"Yaas, wathah! Anothah chunk of cake, Mewwy, deah boy?"

"Certainly; likewise ginger-ale."

"There is one fortunate circ. in this deplowable mattah," said Arthur Augustus thoughtfully, between the munches of the cake.

"Blessed if I can see it!" grunted Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah! It's the lucky circumstance that I didn't have my new clothes on to-day. My tailah has just sent them down, you know, and it was weally by chance that I wasn't wearin' them. If these things are wuined it will be vewy wotten, but suppose I had had my latest on."

And the terrible possibility was enough to reduce Arthur Augustus to thoughtful silence.

CHAPTER 6.

The Balloon Comes Down.

"MORE torchlight, Blake!" said Tom Merry. There was a beam of light. "Just on eleven o'clock," announced Tom Merry.

"Where on earth have we got to?" asked D'Arcy suspiciously, as though he had been asleep.

"I know my teeth are chattering with the cold," said Blake.

D'Arcy was curled up in the motor-coat on the box that contained the provender. Tom Merry and Blake sat on the bottom of the basket, enshrouded in the rugs. Tom Merry jumped up, peering downwards.

"By Jove, you chaps," he cried, "I really believe we are beginning to come down now!"

Blake and D'Arcy craned over, too. Looking straight down, there was dull blackness, with an occasional lighter patch.

"Look over there!" said Blake, pointing ahead.

A straggling gleam of light was coming nearer. Clearly the balloon was much nearer the ground.

"It's a village!" said Tom Merry. "Those are the lights in the houses and cottages."

"That's right," agreed Blake; "we're slanting downwards as we move along."

"At this wate, then," observed D'Arcy, who had been looking ahead too, "we shall come down with a wun on the woof of somebody's house. Pwobably they'll be in bed, and we shall fwighten them to death."

It was an exciting moment. The great balloon swept on through the darkness. Nearer and nearer came the lights.

"We shall sail right over the village, and land the other side, I believe," said Merry.

"How would it be to flash the torch, Blake, old fellah?" suggested D'Arcy.

"Right-ho!" said Blake quietly. He leaned his arm down over the side of the basket, and turned the switch. A bright beam of light pierced the darkness below.

"Stand ready, you chaps!" cried Tom Merry.

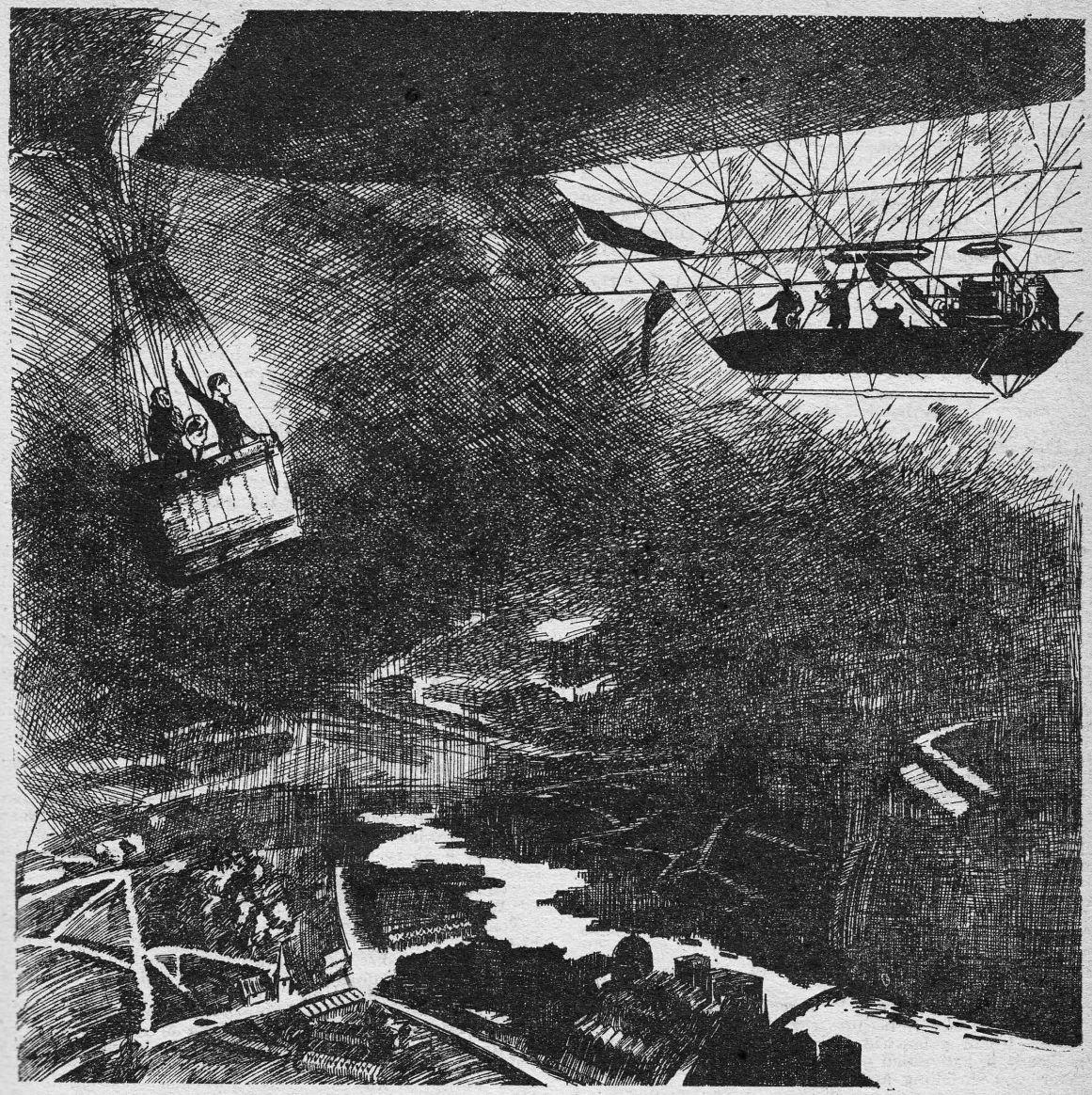
There was no doubt now that they were coming down. Below, in the darkness, patches of trees were visible, and a thin streak of lighter colour that indicated a road. The little lights, twinkling below, took the square shapes of lighted windows, set in a larger black square that denoted the house.

"Hallo! Hallo!" Tom Merry shouted. The other two joined in.

The lights were almost directly below now. Evidently, as Tom Merry had said, the balloon was going to sail over the village, and not come down there.

There came the sound of barking dogs, the mooing of a cow. The boys could see distinctly, not many hundreds of feet below, the outline of the straggling village street. The balloon was moving slowly right across it.

"Hallo! Hallo, up there!" Two or three voices suddenly sounded faintly from below.



The captain of the air-ship waved his arm and shouted: "What balloon is that? Do you want any help? What's the matter?"
"Yes!" shouted Tom Merry. "We want to come down, sir!"

"Where are we? What place is this?" Tom Merry leaned downwards, shouting at the top of his voice. He could not see anyone below; the balloon was even yet too high up for that.

There was a pause, then a fainter jumble of voices. But it was impossible to grasp the words. The lights moved away behind.

Swish! Rattle! Swish! The car of the balloon gave a tremor.

"What on earth's that!" cried Merry.

The noise continued. The car swung slightly from side to side.

"It must be the trail-rope dragging over the tops of some trees below," said Blake, with a sudden inspiration.

"That's wight! Blake's wight!" said D'Arcy excitedly. The lights of the village were some distance behind them now. Tom Merry looked down.

"My hat!" he shouted. "We're nearly on the tops of the trees. Look out, you fellows! There's going to be a jerk in a minute."

Slowly the monster swept on. It moved slowly, majestically. Clearly to be seen below, were the dim shapes of fields and trees.

"What's that straight ahead?" asked Blake. A dim white patch loomed up.

"It's a big, white house, standing on a lawn, I think," said Tom Merry, as he peered ahead.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Crash! The trail-rope swung over the trees again, impeding the movement of the balloon, and swinging the basket to and fro.

"Gweat Scott!" gasped D'Arcy. "It's worse than bein' in a swingboat."

"Hold on, all!" cried Tom Merry. There was a gap below, evidently a field, then a thick patch of trees. Then another shadowy open space, apparently a lawn, on which stood the white shape, that was now clearly a big grey or white mansion.

"Look out!"

"Bai Jove!"

"We're coming down on these trees!"

The balloon slanted down, crossing the open space, and approaching the trees. Then there was a strange scraping and tugging at the bottom of the basket. The chums held on like grim death. Suddenly, leaves and branches thrust themselves over the side of the car. There was a terrible jerk. Then the car moved up again sluggishly, coming down a moment later.

Bump, bump, bump! With three soft thuds the car moved across the lawn in the darkness. Then, after a

short slide, and a nasty tilt sideways, it came to a sudden pause.

"We're down!" gasped Tom Merry.

The car had come to rest near some stone steps. Right beside it stood a white statue. Blake shone his torch. The trail-rope lay loosely across the statue.

Instantly Tom Merry had an idea.

"Help me twist this rope round the statue, you fellows!" he said. "That should hold the affair down while one of us nips out and digs the anchor in the ground."

By leaning far out, Tom Merry and Blake managed to twist the thick rope four times round the middle of the statue, aided by the light from the torch that D'Arcy held. Then they brought the rope back into the car of the balloon, fixing it securely to the side ropes.

"Now, Blake, you're the lightest," said Merry. "Hop out carefully, old chap; but don't let go the side of the basket."

Blake threw a leg over and landed on the grass, keeping his hands, as Tom Merry directed, on the sides of the basket. It gave a quick heave up, pulling over slightly, but the rope on the statue held.

Tom Merry quickly handed out the anchor. Blake took it a few yards away, and dug the prongs into the grass. Then Tom drew the rope from it tight, and fixed it as he had secured the trail-rope. D'Arcy moved the light of the torch here and there, as it was wanted.

"Can you find a big stone anywhere?" asked Tom Merry, peering over the side of the car.

"Shine a light over here!" directed Blake from the lawn. D'Arcy sent a penetrating beam across.

"How's this?" Blake came staggering back through the gloom with a big, stone vase.

"The very thing," said Tom Merry. "Drop it over in the basket. Now the thing shouldn't rise."

"Here you are! Stand clear!"

"All wight, dear boy! Dwop it in!"

Blake rolled the heavy stone vase over the rim of the car, and let it slide in. It bumped in the bottom of the basket.

Arthur Augustus gave a yell.

"Ow! Wow!"

"What's the matter?"

"Yow! Ow!"

"Great Scott, he's hurt!" exclaimed Tom Merry, springing towards the swell of St. Jim's. "If that thing's dropped on his foot it must be squashed. Let me look at it, Gussy, old chap. Quick!"

"Look at what?" asked D'Arcy, calming down.

"Your foot."

"Bai Jove! What do you want to look at my foot for?"

"To see how much it's hurt, of course."

"It's all wight, deah boy. My foot isn't hurt."

Tom Merry glared at him.

"You—you utter ass! What were you making that row about, then?"

"I wasn't makin' a wow! I was uttahin' a startled exclamation, pewwaps, because the thing bumped so near my foot. I had a howwid feelin' of what it would have been like if it had fallen on my foot, you see."

"You—you shrieking ass!"

"I wefuse to be chawactewised as a shwiekin' ass. I must wequest you to withdraw that expwession, Tom Mewwy, or I shall have no wesource but to administah a feahful thwashin' as soon as we are out of this balloon."

"You duffer!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"You frabjous ass!" said the hero of the Shell, in measured tones. "You burbling dummy!"

"Blake, hold this electwic torch! I have no wesource but to thwash Tom Mewwy. I——"

"Keep quiet, ass!"

"Do you want me to thwash you, too, Blake?"

"Quiet, duffer, or I'll—I'll roll you in the wet grass, and wipe my feet on your waistcoat. Get out of the car, and don't jaw!"

"Undah the circs——"

"Oh, ring off!"

"I uttahly wefuse to wing off. I considah——"

"Shove him out, Tom Merry!"

"Right-ho!"

"I decline to be shoved out. I—— Ow! Hands off, you wottah!"

"Are you getting out, then?"

"I wefuse to be huwwied! I—— Hold on! Undah the circs, I will alight at once, but I shall give you a feahful thwashin' when we get back to St. Jim's."

Tom Merry grinned.

"Good! I shall be wiping up the ground with you about the same time! Now get on your feet, or you'll go out on your neck."

And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy clambered out of the car, and dropped into the dewy grass. Tom Merry followed him.

The balloon, relieved of the weight of the juniors, moved a little; but the anchor and the weight of the heavy stone vase held it fast.

It bellied out above them like some huge bird in the gloom.

Round the juniors of St. Jim's the gloom was thick, the silence oppressive.

Dimly they could make out the form of a gaunt, grey house, on the other side of the lawn, a house that was dark and silent as the grave.

Where were they?

What was this grim-looking building that rose before them in the darkness, without a light and without a sound to hint that it was inhabited?

"Blessed if I like the look of the place!" muttered Blake. "I suppose they're all in bed?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

And for some moments the chums of St. Jim's stood looking at the gaunt building without making a move to approach it.

CHAPTER 7.

The House of Mystery.

THE grass on the lawn was soaking wet, the gaunt, grey house, through the gloom, looked grim and uninviting.

"Ugh!" said Blake, in an undertone. "It's creepy!"

"Weally," said D'Arcy, wrapping the big motor-coat round him, "such wemarkable things have been happening that I don't feel surpwised at anything now!"

Tom Merry silently tried to pull upon the anchor-rope, and saw that the rope round the statue could not slip. Then he looked up critically at the great gasbag swaying gently in the wind.

"Unless a very high wind springs up she'll ride safely enough here," he remarked.

"But why not let out the gas, Tom Mewwy?" whispered D'Arcy.

"Because we might want to go up again, duffer!"

"You mean, old chap——" began Blake, not feeling very comfortable.

"I don't know exactly what I mean," interrupted Tom Merry. "But there might be strange people in a great deserted-looking place like this. We might want to get away in a hurry. Anyhow, it's always well to be on the safe side."

"Good man!"

"What's the pwoject now?" questioned D'Arcy.

Tom Merry shivered, then wrapped a blanket round him. He went to the balloon, took the revolver from the lining of the basket, and slipped it into his side pocket.

"We'll just go quietly up these steps and have a careful prospect round," he said. "Come on!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy tapped him on the shoulder.

"Eh? What is it?" muttered Tom Merry.

"Bettah let me have the wevolvah, deah boy."

"Oh, dry up!"

"I wefuse to dwy up. On a pwevious occasion, I have been gweatly benefited by cawwyin' a twusty wevolvah, and undah the pwesent circs——"

"Ring off!"

"Blake, don't you think Tom Mewwy had bettah hand me the wevolvah?"

"I think you'd better ring off, or you'll get a thick ear!" grunted Jack Blake.

"Weally, Blake——"

"Oh, cheese it! Come on, and don't give the alarm!"

And the juniors, in silence, crept up the stone steps.

They approached the silent house, making no sound but the hurried gasp of their breath. They were growing curiously excited now, and their hearts were beating hard.

There was not a sound to be heard. Not a light twinkled in the rows of blank windows facing the three on the lawn.

Tom Merry tiptoed up another row of steps on to a terrace facing some French windows, and beckoned the others to follow his example.

The three stood silent for a moment; their breathing seemed loud in the oppressive silence.

"What's the next move, Merry?" queried Blake. "Shall we find the front door and knock?"

"Blessed if I know," said Tom Merry, in perplexity.

"Pewwaps," suggested D'Arcy vaguely, "it would be a good thing to see the time."

"Good for Gussy!" So saying, Merry took out his watch, and Blake directed a quick flash of light on its face.

"Jove!" exclaimed Merry. "It's twelve o'clock!"

As he spoke a distant chime slowly announced the hour.

"Weally," gasped D'Arcy, with a shudder, "it would be a bit wotten to wake people up at this time of night."

"And then tell 'em we've just come down in a balloon," Blake chuckled.

"They'd pwobably think we were despewate wobbers," added D'Arcy.

The night air on the terrace struck a cold, damp chill. The juniors felt it keenly.

"What are we going to do, you chaps?" said Blake, at last.

"Weally, the most weasonable thing seems to me to go back to the balloon, and spend the west of the night there, waitin' till we can intwoduce ourselves decently as thwee wespectable visitahs fwom the wegions above."

"I don't know. I'd rather get a snooze in a bed if it could be worked."

"That sounds inviting, especially just now, doesn't it, Gussy?" asked Blake, hankering after the blankets.

"If one could see a light in a window I'd say knock," answered the swell of St. Jim's. "But it seems a bwutal thing to bang people out of bed and explain that you've just dwopped, without askin', fwom a balloon in their back garden."

"There's some sense in what Gussy says, although he says it," Tom Merry remarked, "particularly when one remembers that the reception we might meet with, even if we managed to wake the people up, might not be exactly cordial."

"Boots or bulldogs?" suggested Blake.

"At any rate, let's take a discreet crawl round the house before chucking the thing up."

In Indian file, therefore, with stealthy steps, the three turned a corner of the house. Pitch darkness again rewarded their gaze. The effect was weird. There was the same deathly stillness.

Swish! Crunch! Swish! There was a sudden movement from the bushes near by, a terrifying sound.

"What's that, you chaps?" D'Arcy jumped and stumbled with a clatter.

"Hush, you idiot!" commanded Merry, in a stern whisper.

"It's a cat, I expect, Gussy," explained Blake.

"My hat! But look there!" Tom Merry suddenly caught hold of the other two, and pointed in the gloom.

A row of windows had come unexpectedly into view, low down on the right of the bleak, black pile. From one of them, apparently, came a queer, flickering light.

"Jove, but that's eerie!" murmured Blake.

"Wottenly uncanny, I call it!" whispered D'Arcy, peering at the irregular flicker.

"Come on!" said Tom Merry, without hesitation.

Forward they crept again, silent and on tiptoe, past rows of black, void windows towards the one which winked and blinked curiously.

"Steady!" said Tom Merry, in an undertone. He moved sideways behind some bushes, then stepped out quickly before the lighted window, standing motionless. Blake and D'Arcy were at his heels.

The window was half sunk below the ground. It was also barred, and the aspect was forbidding enough. The chums, out in the cold night, gazed spellbound at what they saw.

They saw a great, gaunt room with walls of white. All round those walls, seen dimly from the flicker of a strange blue-white light that gleamed from a sort of brazier in the centre of the room, was a medley of strange machinery —glistening rods, domes of glass, pieces of clockwork.

At the far end, still more dimly seen, was what looked like a big cage, with some strange, dark form apparently moving uneasily behind bars.

At the central table, where the light guttered and flared, were many large glass retorts. Bending at the table over some intricate piece of work was a queer-looking little old man in a long, dark dressing-gown, and with thin, white hands.

As the boys gazed, although they had not stirred and had made no sound, the old man swiftly turned his head.

Then he put something back on the table, and came quickly over towards the window, peering out into the darkness.

So he remained for an instant while the boys outside stood rooted to the ground. Then, with a mysterious wave of the hand, he moved quickly towards a door in the side of the weird room, and disappeared. As he did so, the flickering light went out.

Black darkness rushed upon the vision of the juniors.

For a moment they stood spellbound.

"Bai Jove!" muttered Arthur Augustus.

Tom Merry gripped his shoulder.

"Quiet!"

"But——"

"Quiet! Listen!"

And in the blackness, with staring eyes and beating hearts, the juniors stood silent, so silent that the thumping of their hearts seemed audible.

CHAPTER 8.

Inside the Strange House.

SUDDENLY, from the darkness, came a gleam of light. A small door, half underground, and approached by a flight of steps, had been noiselessly opened.

Behind the half-opened door there was a light; in the opening, half leaning out, as though listening, was the figure of the little old man in the dressing-gown.

The chums did not move; for amoment they did not know what to do.

Then a high, quavering voice broke the stillness: "Who is there? What do you want?"

It was the old man who cried out. He threw open the door wide.

"Leave it to me," whispered Tom Merry, hastily. Then he answered back in a clear voice:

"Three boys are here, sir—three schoolboys. We've just come down in a balloon in your garden."

"Come here—so that I can see you." The old man did not move from the doorway.

Tom Merry, Blake and D'Arcy moved into the beam of light.

They must have looked quaint in the extreme, and somewhat forlorn too—D'Arcy in the motor-coat, many sizes too big for him, Tom Merry and Blake swathed in rugs.

The old man gazed hard at them. Then, expressing no surprise, he merely said, "Come in!"

Without hesitation, the boys followed him, going down the steps and through the small doorway.

A lamp hung on a bracket. The old man took it down. Then, with no further word, he led the way down a long, black passage, the ends of his dressing-gown waving queerly.

Up some steps, across a wide hall—dim, carpetless, apparently without furniture. Then through a doorway, which stood open amidst a number of closed ones.

"This is the limit," Blake managed to whisper to Tom Merry. "Have you got the revolver handy, old chap?"

"Yes," said Tom, in a whisper also. "But the old chap is perfectly harmless, I think."

The room they entered was large, very poorly furnished. The walls were bare; there were only pieces of carpet here and there upon the floor. There was a white cloth upon the table in the centre of the room, on which stood a lighted lamp. Also upon the table were the remains of a meal.

The old man turned to the boys. He had a pale face; his eyes were rimmed by big, round-glassed spectacles. He had long, grey hair and a straggling grey beard. His expression was kindly.

He eyed the chums, curiously enough, without any great surprise.

When he spoke, his voice was quavering, high-pitched:—

"You boys say you have come down from a balloon? Then where is it?"

A suspicious look crossed his face.

"It is anchored now in your garden, sir," said Merry. Then he spoke up quickly, and told their adventure.

The old man tapped his fingers on the table.

"Strange! Very strange!" he said. "And do you want shelter?"

"Weally, sir," said D'Arcy. "We scarcely like to intwude at so late an hour. We were wonderin' what we should do when you asked us in."

"Here," said the strange old man, waving his arm, "I am alone—all alone. I cook my food alone—I sleep in this great house alone. I can bear no one near me when—when my experiments are in progress. But I can see you are

honest lads, and you are travellers in distress. So you must eat—and afterwards sleep in one of the big rooms upstairs. I may not be able to find you sheets, but you shall have rugs.

"It's awfully good of you, sir," said Tom Merry.

"Extwemely kind of you, sir."

"Help yourselves! Ah! you want knives, forks, and plates."

The old man hastened to a big oaken sideboard, taking the lamp in his hand. He brought back three dusty plates, with old-fashioned knives and forks.

D'Arcy placed his motor-coat carefully over the back of a chair; Tom Merry and Blake threw off their rugs. They all looked the worse for wear, with their dirty faces.

"Weally, sir," said D'Arcy, "it would be wippin' if we could wash our hands and faces."

"Here!" said the old man, briefly.

In a corner of the room was a basin, a jug of water, and towels. The chums quickly got rid of the dust of their aerial travels. Then they ate—sitting side by side at the big table. There was cold meat, and bread and cheese. They were hungry, even after their supper in the clouds.

"Pewwaps you could tell us, sir," said D'Arcy, "what subject you are studyin'."

The swell of St. Jim's broke the silence.

The queer old man was standing surveying his unexpected guests with a far-away gaze, as though lost in thought.

He started. "Yes—yes, certainly, my boy," he said. "My subject is—is the origin of man. That—that and many other matters, even—even more obscure." He sighed wearily.

The chums ate in silence again. Then Blake asked: "Have you no housekeeper, sir It's lonely, isn't it?"

"I notice no trivial things about me when I am studying," replied the old man. "Perhaps," he added courteously, seeing that the boys had finished their meal, "you would like to glance at my laboratory before retiring."

Through another dark corridor they passed into the great gaunt chamber they had seen through the window.

There, in a flash, they saw what it was they had noticed moving behind the bars.

It was a gorilla, tall as a man, and with hairy arms like iron bars. It half walked, half ran from side to side of a big strong cage, near the door of the laboratory.

"This—this creature," said the old man, quietly holding up his lamp, "I am studying in—in connection with my work."

The gorilla shook its bars, and chattered with apparent rage at those who watched it.

CHAPTER 9.

The Tumult in the Night.

"IF we evah weach St. Jim's again, none of the other fellahs will believe a word of this, you know!"

D'Arcy, blinking owlishly, stated the case tersely.

The chums stood in a strange, gloomy bedroom on the first floor. The candle which D'Arcy held aloft illuminated it but vaguely.

There was a mattress on the old-fashioned four-poster bed, but no blankets or sheets. Apologising for the lack of these, the old man brought a number of rugs.

"Good-night, my lads! I will arouse you early. Then, no doubt, we can communicate with your school." With these words, he had hastened away down the corridor.

Click! Merry turned the key in the lock and slipped the key in his pocket.

"Well! Of all the rags——" Blake stopped. Words seemed inadequate.

"Extwaordinawy!" That was all D'Arcy could say.

"Now, there's going to be no talking, or anything else," chimed in Merry, positively. "It's past one o'clock. Slip in between those rugs, you chaps, without undressing. I'm just going to doze, across the foot of the bed, and keep this revolver within reach, in case of accidents, or strange things happening."

"But what price me mounting guard?" asked Blake.

"I'll wake you to take your turn," said Tom Merry.

Dead tired, Blake and D'Arcy passed from a doze into sleep, despite the strangeness of their position.

Some distant clock struck: it was two o'clock.

Suddenly Tom Merry found himself sitting bolt upright. From somewhere in the queer house, tumult had broken out. There were crashes and thuds, accompanied by strange uncanny murmuring sounds.

Blake and D'Arcy woke with a start.

"What on earth's that?" exclaimed Blake.

Merry was on his feet. The light of the electric torch shot round the room: it was empty.

"Downstairs—somewhere," said Tom Merry in a whisper.

Crash! Thud! The chums held their breath.

Crash!

"It might be safer to stay here, but, but—we ought to see what's the matter."

Blake answered Tom Merry with an emphatic nod.

D'Arcy, half asleep but game, said nothing—but slipped into the great motor-coat.

"Bring your rug," whispered Merry to Blake, handing him the torch. Then he turned the key in the lock, and led the way down the dark passage, holding the revolver carefully in his hand.

In the hall, near the room where they had had supper, the boys paused. Blake shone a quick beam of light. They were facing a door that evidently led into the garden.

Smash! There was a renewed rumble of sounds.

Tom Merry turned, leading the way down the passage they had traversed to reach the laboratory.

The noise rapidly increased.

"Keep behind me; we may have to scoot," whispered Tom Merry. "Goodness knows what's up."

A light suddenly shone ahead. Through some glass panels the friends found themselves looking directly into the laboratory.

A wild, snarling noise greeted their ears; this is what they saw.

The laboratory was lit unevenly, as it had been before, by a blue-white light from the central table.

Peering through the glass, the chums distinguished two dim forms rolling over and over on the floor, crashing into tables, and bringing down instruments and glass receptacles with a rattle.

Shrieks mingled with an intermittent and vengeful snarl.

It was the aged savant, locked in the vice-like grip of the gorilla; the shattered bars of the creature's cage showed the method of its escape.

Standing to its full height, then crouching upon all fours, the beast was dragging the apparently lifeless body of the old man hither and thither with a terrible, purposeless brutality.

What happened was the work of an instant: Tom Merry jerked out the revolver, making a step towards the door of the laboratory. He scarcely knew what he did. It was an instinctive impulse of rescue.

D'Arcy sprang to his arm. "Mewwy! Mewwy!" he cried. "It's madness——"

Blake seized his other arm in a frenzy. "Out of the house—back to the balloon," he screamed. "That brute's got the strength of ten men. Do you hear, Merry. I say——"

A silvery beam of light shot out!

Blake had accidentally switched over the button of his electric torch.

From the laboratory came a louder snarl.

The gorilla turned towards them, head thrust forward, standing motionless, as though listening.

Then in the eerie light, it lifted the old man's form aloft, throwing it away like a broken toy—and came ambling swiftly towards the door.

Breathless, without a word, the chums turned, and rushed pell mell back down the passage.

Out into the hall on one another's heels!

Thud! Behind them came an ominous noise.

Blake's torch flickered over the door. Seconds seemed like hours.

Merry jerked back a heavy bolt with all his strength. D'Arcy, breathing hard, threw back a chain with a clatter.

There was a moment of acute suspense, a fierce tug by all three, and the door swung open with a creak of little-used hinges.

Patter! Patter! Patter! From the passage behind came a sound that was unmistakable. It was the noise made by the gorilla, shambling rapidly over bare boards.

Like shadows the three boys slipped quickly through the door.

Crash! With a noise that reverberated through the empty house Merry flung it back behind them.

Blake's torch shed a ghostly penetrating gleam across the lawn.

"There!" he gasped. "There's the statue!" A dim white shape showed up across the lawn; dimmer still, beside it, towered the outline of the balloon.

They panted across the lawn. "You—you jump straight in the car, D'Arcy," cried Merry as they ran. "You Blake," he added quickly, "pull up the anchor and run with it to the car; then you jump in and shine the light while D'Arcy and I are unhitching the trail-rope."

There was a mad scramble in the darkness. Blake did his work swiftly and neatly.

Merry and D'Arcy struggled with the rope round the statue in the darkness. Then Blake's light helped.

It was the work of seconds only.

"Out with the weight, Blake!" panted Merry. "We're clear!"

The weight fell with a thud on the grass.

"Unhook a bag of sand, and drop it!" was Merry's next gasping command.

The fall of the two bags on the grass was followed by a tremor of the car.

"She's rising!" cried Blake. But the car gently bumped the ground again.

There was a sudden crash of glass from the silent house, a scrambling sound on the terrace.

Then a dark form came swiftly across the lawn in the gloom.

With frenzied haste Merry unhooked and threw away another sandbag.

The basket swung a little, then the statue moved sharply downwards as the boys gazed.

The balloon was rising!

CHAPTER 10.

The Peril from Below.

"THAT brute must have jumped clean through a window, smashing the glass!"

The speaker was Blake. The three chums leant over the side of the basket, trying to pierce the darkness below.

The balloon was rising sluggishly. The roof of the grey house was just beneath. A dim void told that they were just above the lawn, flanked by dark fringes which denoted the trees.

"By Jove! That's what you'd call a near squeak!" Merry was still breathing heavily.

"You—you would have—have twied to shoot the howwible monster, would you, Mewwy?" D'Arcy was gasping after the strenuous rush.

"My hat! Yes. But one bullet, perhaps two, might not have bowled over a hulking great beast like that."

"Poor old fellow!" Blake was thinking of the old man, not of the gorilla. "A death like that—and all alone! Oh, I can't think of it! It's too horrible!"

"The creature must have broken through its bars, and sprung on him like a flash," said Tom Merry. "Don't think of it—better not!"

"What's the pwogwamme now, Mewwy?"

"Don't ask me, Gussy! Drift on till daybreak, I suppose, and hope to come down in a spot where there are friendly human beings—not wild gorillas. I wish I could get that scene out of my head."

"We've not the faintest notion where we are; that's the rotten part of it," said Blake.

"Except that the wind's carried us a good hundred miles or more from St. Jim's."

An altogether unexpected interruption stopped the talking.

The balloon had apparently been moving up very slowly, but smoothly. Suddenly it stopped with an alarming jerk.

The basket quivered. The chums were nearly shaken off their feet. They grasped the netting in astonishment.

"The—the twail-wope must have caught in somethin'."

D'Arcy stammered out the suggestion.

"That's it!" echoed Blake. "That must be it! Gussy's right."

Merry leant over the side of the basket. His fingers sought the trail-rope in the darkness, and found it.

"It's drawn quite tight," he said. "It's caught somehow in the trees."

"Good gwacious! That wotten gowilla cweature might shin up the twee, and begin to pull us down!"

"Rot!" said Merry. But it wasn't a pleasant thought.

"Throw over another bag of sand; that might give us a pull upwards enough to rip the rope clear."

It was Blake's suggestion.

"We're stuck fast. It's the only thing to do."

Merry suited the action to the words. He bent over, swung a sandbag clear of its hook, and let it fall.

There was a second's pause, then—crash! The heavy bag fell among the trees below.

But the rope still drew taut.

"You heave one over, Blake."

Blake let fall a bag from his side of the basket. This time there came a dull thud from below; the bag, missing the trees, had evidently struck the grass.

Merry peered downwards.

"We're hanging motionless," he said. "I can see the shadow of the house just below. There's nothing else to do. Try another bag, Blake."

The third bag hit the trees, like the first.

"That's done it! That's done it!"

Merry craned over the side of the basket.

"The house is beginning to get dimmer, and to shift away sideways," he cried. "We're moving now!"

The next instant his voice sounded puzzled.

"But the rope's still pulled quite tight. There must be something hanging to it."

"We may have ripped off the branch of a tree," ventured Blake.

"Can't we pull the wope up, and see?" queried D'Arcy.

Merry strained a moment.

"Can't move it an inch!" he exclaimed. "It must be a confoundedly heavy bough!"

"Gwacious! Wot's up now?" D'Arcy gripped the side-ropes.

Suddenly there began a violent series of tremors in the basket.

It shook from side to side, and up and down in a strange and perfectly alarming way.

"What's the mattah, Mewwy?"

"What on earth's happened?"

"Can't make it out! Extraordinary! We must have gone down again. The rope must be dragging across a fence, or something."

Merry again craned over the side, but could make out nothing. The shaking continued; indeed, it seemed to get more violent.

"Here! Merry! What about shining the light of the torch downwards? It might show up something."

Blake leant across, and slipped the torch into Merry's hand.

The latter put his arm over the side, pointing the torch downwards. Then he flashed it on.

There was a moment's pause.

"It's—it's—— My hat, you chaps! The gorilla!"

"What do you mean?"

"The gorilla's swung up into the air on the rope, and—and——"

"Well?"

"It's climbing up hand over hand!"

Blake and D'Arcy flung themselves to the side, peering downwards.

In the path of the narrow beam of light, fifty or sixty feet below, was the gorilla, swinging to and fro on the rope, and making the car jerk from side to side as it moved one great hairy arm above the other in its upward course.

Hand over hand it ascended towards the balloon.

In the car, while ten could have been counted, there was utter silence; words seemed to fail in this new peril Then:

"The wevolvah, Mewwy!"

D'Arcy, in a whisper, voiced the thought that had flashed into the minds of all three of them.

"Wait, Merry, old chap! Don't try now! Wait till the brute comes up to the basket. Or else you'll miss."

Merry gave Blake back the torch; then he drew the revolver from his pocket. The shakings of the basket grew worse.

"Quick! You fellows agree? There's only one thing to do." Merry's voice shook.

"Shoot the brute!"

"Kill it, Mewwy! You must!"

"Blake," cried Merry, "hold this torch so. That's right! Switch on when the beast comes level with the basket. Hold it steady, remember."

"Steady as a rock, old chap!"

"Then I'll fire!"

They crouched away to the side of the basket opposite to where the trail-rope came over.

Jerk! Jerk, jerk! The basket swayed from side to side like a tiny boat on a rough sea.

"This—this is—this is rotten for shooting, Merry!"

"Don't—don't talk, Blake. It worries me. I sha'n't miss!"

The basket twisted half round. There came a scratching sound from the bottom of it.

The car whirled back.

Click! Blake switched on the light.

Over the side of the car came a brown, ugly arm. Then another! The basket jumped and swung.

The beam of light did not waver.

"Now! Now!"

"Quick, Merry, I say! Don't wait!"

Slowly the head of the gorilla drew up over the side of the basket. The light gleamed upon its teeth.

Shoulder high it came, reaching a long arm into the netting, then——

Bang! A vicious spit of flame.

A wild snarl rang out, ending in a shriek.

Blake's light went out; he was thrown backwards.

Tom Merry, the smoking revolver clasped in his hand, fell on top of D'Arcy at the bottom of the car.

The balloon, suddenly rid of the gorilla's weight, gave a mighty upward bound.

The beast, shot through the body, had thrown up its arms, and fallen.

Over and over through the darkness it whirled, then——

Crash! It struck the trees far below.

The balloon rushed skyward.

CHAPTER 11.

Over the Sea.

IT was a minute or so before the chums sorted themselves out.

They had all fallen in a heap when the balloon shot upwards. Merry drew himself up first, still with the revolver in his hand.

"Hit him!" he exclaimed. "Must have hit him! The brute's fallen clean away—down to the ground."

Blake dragged himself from the bottom of the basket.

"We shot up like a stone out of a catapult. I saw the flash, got an idea of the brute's jerking backwards, and then——"

"Then, Blake, deah boy, you stwuck me a cwuel blow in the back with your gweat feet."

D'Arcy drew himself up with a look of dismay, rubbing the small of his back. Then he solemnly:

"Mewwy—Mewwy, old chap, we owe you our lives! Weally, we do! The way you kept cool was gweat!"

"It's a fact, Merry; you were splendid!" Blake chimed in, with unfeigned admiration.

"I should never have had the nerve!"

"That's enough, you chaps! Thanks awfully, all the same. But haven't you noticed it's getting colder and colder?"

"Yes."

"Well, with the weight of that beast gone, I believe the balloon's going to rise to an enormous height."

"How high do you think? So high that we can't bweathe?" asked D'Arcy anxiously.

"Jove, I hope not! But I wish I knew properly what the limit was."

An icy chill seemed to creep into the air.

"Good gwacious! One twouble come after anothah!"

D'Arcy turned up the collar of the big motor-coat. A damp clamminess on the balloon ropes grew to a white film.

"Look!" cried Blake, turning his rug up over his head. "Look, Merry—frost!"

The surrounding darkness appeared to be growing gradually grey. Then a whitish tinge appeared here and there. Merry, snuggled in a corner of the basket, drew out his watch. "Five o'clock," he said. "That's daylight coming."

"I wonder if we're still wisin'? If it gets much colder, my nose will dwop off. Ugh!"

D'Arcy strove to make the best of things; but he looked fearfully cold, in spite of the big coat, and his eyes were drooping with sleep.

Blake, sitting on the floor of the car, with his back propped against the side, did not say a word. His head bobbed up and down; he had dropped off to sleep.

"Look—look at Blake, the silly boundah!"

D'Arcy's voice trailed away. His eyes blinked heavily. He struggled with sleep, then gave in, and dropped his head on his chest.

It was a case of sheer fatigue—the sort of sleep that will not be denied.

The cold was icy. Banks of damp, grey mist enveloped the balloon; then cleared away, to be followed by others. Tom Merry's eyelids kept closing of their own accord.

"Must keep awake—must keep awake!"

He murmured the words mechanically, gazing at his sleeping chums; but he could not fight the overpowering drowsiness; his eyes refused to remain open. Tom Merry slept.

Through icy-grey vapours the balloon mounted up, up to an immense height, and the three boys, huddled in the basket, slept on.

Every instant it grew lighter—from dull grey to light grey, and from grey to white. Then white gave place to a transparency that denoted the coming of day itself.

A warmer tinge came into the atmosphere; the balloon, having exhausted the impetus of its upward course, began slowly to descend. A distant, hollow, roaring sound had long been in the air before Merry opened his eyes, and shifted his cramped legs.

Half awake, he listened in perplexity to the strange sound. Then he rose. The movement disturbed Blake and D'Arcy, but they only grunted, sleeping on.

Tom Merry rubbed his eyes, peering below. The noise became far clearer. It was light all round, but there was a film of grey below.

The noise broke into a roar that it dawned upon Merry he had heard from afar many times. It was the hoarse murmur of the sea! A violent shake aroused the sleepers. Blake sat up, rubbing his eyes owlishly.

"What's the matter—what's the matter?" he asked dreamily.

"Wake up, you lazy beggar! We're over the sea, and the balloon's coming down!"

"My hat!"

Blake was awake in an instant.

"There's nothing to be seen yet, but the noise can't be mistaken!" said Merry.

"Yes," said Blake, listening, "that's the sea, right enough!"

D'Arcy came uneasily out of a dream.

"It was wotten of you, Skimpole," he was saying—"wotten bad form!"

"Wake up, Gussy! We're over the sea!"

"Eh? Good gwacious!" The swell of St. Jim's came reluctantly from his slumbers. "Now, I suppose, after escaping that gowilla bwute, we're goin' to be drowned! Ovah the sea! We might dwift anywhere now!"

"What's the best move, Merry?" questioned Blake.

"Let her keep on descending till we can see the water. We can't be far from land. Probably we'll sight a ship."

"And if we don't, Mewwy?"

"Throw out some ballast, go up again, and trust to luck. There's nothing else to be done."

"Merry's right."

Louder and louder grew the roar. Suddenly, as though drawn aside by a conjuring-trick, the mists below them parted. The balloon was directly above the sea. The chums were looking intently upon a panorama of white-topped waves.

No land was in sight; there was water everywhere. But straight in the direction in which the balloon was descending lay a ship—a sailing-ship with three masts, and sails flapping idly for want of a breeze.

The suddenness of the apparition was amazing. Before Merry could have thrown out ballast, even had he thought of doing so, the balloon settled down right over the ship. The trail-rope rattled across the deck.

With a jerk the balloon came to a halt, the basket bumping gently against the mast high above the deck.

CHAPTER 12.

On the Derelict Ship.

THE boys looked straight down upon the deck of the ship; but, strange to say, not a soul appeared.

Sailors might have been expected to come running on deck at the strange apparition of the balloon entangled with the gear aloft; but the deck was deserted. The sails continued to flap idly. There was no man at the wheel.

"Jove," exclaimed Merry, "I believe it's a derelict ship, just drifting about without a soul on board!"

"Fancy our coming straight down on to it like this! What on earth's to be done now?"

Blake looked perplexed.

"I weckon we'll climb down and pwospect ourselves. Nobody seems in a huwwy to come out and talk to us. What do you say, Mewwy?"

"I don't know which is worst—to be in a drifting ship or a drifting balloon. We'd better try and make the balloon fast, then get down on deck, and decide what we're going to do. I fancy it would be better to keep on in the balloon than stay here."

"As a matter of fact, we're in a jolly tight corner, and that's all there is to be said!" exclaimed Blake. "Cheer up, kids! Let's shin down on to the deck!"

The only thing to do was to twist some of the ropes from the balloon more round the mast than they already were, and then hitch some of the netting up above to one of the cross-poles that projected near it.

This the boys did; but it took them some time, and the job did not look very secure.

"One at a time; that's how we must get out," declared Merry; "and if there's the suspicion of a wind springing up while we're down below, we must get up into the basket again as quickly as we can."

A rope-ladder was the only way down to the deck. It hung near the mast.

"You'd better go first, Blake," said Tom Merry.

Blake put his leg over the side, leant out, and caught hold of the ladder. Then he swung clear, and began to go down. The ladder moved from side to side. It did not look easy.

"Bai Jove," exclaimed D'Arcy, screwing in his eyeglass, which he had not worn for some time, "that looks vewy wisky, Mewwy, old chap! Why on earth can't they make those things wigid? Not wobblin' all about like that, I mean."

"Over you go!" said Merry. "But, for goodness' sake, leave that greatcoat behind you; you'll never get down with that on."

"Vewy well."

The swell of St. Jim's threw off the coat reluctantly; then he put a gingerly hand over, and grasped the snaky rope.

"Right-ho—right-ho!" from below came Blake's voice. He had reached the deck, and was looking curiously about him.

"Weally, I don't like this! Ugh! Wotten!" D'Arcy swung out. He took three steps down the ladder instead of one. His leg shot out. He swung backwards perilously.

"Wescue!" he panted. "Wescue, Mewwy!"

"Don't miss rungs like that, you ass?" bawled Merry. "Shift one foot down at a time, and hold on above your head."

Step by step, with an anxious face, D'Arcy went down. The ladder seemed as though it was taking a vicious pleasure in twisting about him.

"Blake, deah boy, catch hold of the bottom of this wotten contwaption, will you? I—I feel just like a jelly!"

"All right—all right!" cried Blake from below.

He duly hung on to the ladder. The effect was beneficial. It ceased to swing so violently, and, emboldened, D'Arcy began to step down more quickly.

He was only a few feet above Blake's head when he looked down to judge his distance. He missed his footing altogether. The jerk shook his hands off the side ropes.

"Gweat Scott!"

"Look out, you ass!"

D'Arcy came down with a run. He was in a sitting position, with his legs outstretched and his arms waving, when he hit Blake on the shoulder.

It was as if a cannon-ball had struck him. He doubled-up with a shout. Then he rolled across the deck, which sloped towards the bulwarks.

Washing about around the bulwarks was a lake of dirty-looking, stagnant water. Blake, rolling over and over, saw what was coming, and tried to stop himself; but he could not, and went with a splash into the stream. He scrambled up on to his knees, dripping with water.

Crash! D'Arcy, also rolling over and over, struck him, and both went down in the water.

They had stripped off their coats, and were arguing heatedly, their faces close to each other, when Merry reached the deck.

"It's absolutely wotten of you, Blake, to say it was my fault. Why on earth didn't you catch me?"

D'Arcy looked a picture of woe.

"Catch you? You idiot! You nearly broke my neck! We're both drenched! Of all the——"

"Take your coats and waistcoats off, and leave 'em on deck. You'll have to let the wind dry the rest of you. Hurry up!"

Tom Merry hustled away towards a flight of steps leading below decks.

With garments flapping, and water dripping from them, Blake and D'Arcy followed him.

From cabin to cabin they went. The doors were open; things were scattered about; but not a soul was to be seen.

D'Arcy walked first into a cabin near the bow of the ship.

"Gweat Scott!" he cried, recoiling upon Merry and Blake, as if he had seen a ghost.

What he had seen looked very like a ghost, indeed. From a bunk, sitting up, in dirty, ragged clothing, was a Chinese sailor. His face was painfully thin. He waved his arms, as though terrified.

CHAPTER 13.

The Chinaman's Questions.

"VELLY funny, velly funny, velly funny; but you no alive—you no alive!"

The weird-looking Chinaman, uttering the words like a chant, stared at them wildly.

"Mad!" murmured Merry. "He may have been alone on the ship for days."

At the sound of the voice the Chinaman sprang up. Tom Merry's hand went to the revolver in his pocket; but it was a look of joy that came over the Chinaman's face.

"Yes, yes! Alive, alive!"

He babbled the words, fawning towards them. His clothes were in rags. His hands looked like those of a skeleton.

Before the boys could say anything, he pointed upwards, waving his hands. Then he sprang towards the deck. Merry turned quickly on his heels, with Blake and D'Arcy following.

The Chinaman staggered on deck. He seemed almost too weak to walk. He reeled when he had gained the deck; then he caught sight of the great balloon up aloft.

His eyes rolled wildly again.

"What that? What that?" he cried.

He turned to Merry with an expression of fear. Blake and D'Arcy, forgetting their wet clothes, stood staring at him in astonishment.

"Balloon."

Merry uttered the word slowly, but it conveyed nothing to the Chinaman. He shook his head wearily.

"You savee me—you savee me?" he queried, in a wailing voice.

"Yes, yes!" cried Tom Merry soothingly. "We'll look after you."

"Havee you anything eatee? This poor Chinaman starve!" He pointed to his mouth with a despairing gesture.

"Good gwacious! Poor fellah!" D'Arcy's voice was full of pity. "Let him have some of our sausages."

"Of course," said Tom Merry. "He looks famished. Do you mind shinning up, Blake, and bringing something down? But wait a minute! We'd better all have a meal. I'll come up with you."

The Chinaman gazed in amazement as the chums followed each other up the rope.

"You no leavee me?" he cried, in sudden fright.

"Wathah not. That's all wight, old chap!" said D'Arcy.

He felt uncomfortable at being left alone with the strange creature.

Merry and Blake soon came down again. They had stuffed their pockets full. Blake carried a little satchel round his neck. In it were bottles of ginger-ale.

The Chinaman eyed them longingly as they stepped on the deck.

"Where can we eat it?" asked Merry, looking round.

"In here," suggested Blake, pointing to a little room on the deck.

It looked like the captain's cabin. Merry and Blake spread out the provender on the table—sausages, cake, and ginger-ale.

It was a pitiable sight to see the poor Chinaman when he tasted the delicious sausages. He seemed in the seventh heaven of delight. The ginger-ale he drank wonderingly. He had evidently never tasted anything like it before.

In next to no time the repast was finished. The chums had been hungry enough.

Then, almost at once, all three began to feel sleepy again. They had had no proper rest. There was the reaction after great excitement, too.

"Gwacious!" said D'Arcy. "I can scarcely keep my eyes open."

He yawned prodigiously; so did Blake. Then Merry had to follow suit.

The Chinaman had wandered out on deck. Merry looked out after him. He was staring up wonderingly at the balloon overhead.

Merry came back into the cabin.

"Look here, you chaps," he said, "it won't be safe for us all to go to sleep. I don't distrust this poor Chinaman chap, but it wouldn't be safe. You two take an hour's snooze in here. Then I'll call you, Blake, and you can take a turn on deck."

"But why not me on deck first?" asked Blake stoutly, although he could scarcely keep his eyes open.

"Rot! Do as I say!" said Tom Merry decidedly.

D'Arcy, nearly asleep as he did so, stretched himself on the floor. There was nowhere else. Blake followed suit.

"In an hour I'll come back," said Merry, turning on his heel.

The Chinaman came hurrying up to him, and began to walk up and down the deck by his side.

"How you makee that great thing fly?" he asked, in a persuasive voice.

Merry looked at the fellow narrowly. He did not quite like the eager way in which he asked the question.

"Gas," he replied vaguely. "That up there full of gas." He pointed to the gas-bag.

"And what bringee thing down again?" asked the Chinaman, with an appearance of innocence.

"Oh, let out gas!" answered Merry. He made up his mind that he would not tell the Chinaman too much.

"Those bags round cage-thing—you throwee them out, eh, makee balloon go up in air?"

Merry was astonished at the Chinaman's question.

"You know something about balloons—eh?" he asked.

"Me only readee something," answered the Chinaman. "Is throwee bags over way to make him rise?"

"My dear chap," said Tom Merry, "if you throw out bags when you're in a balloon, something is bound to happen."

The Chinaman nodded, and asked no more questions.

CHAPTER 14.

The Balloon Adrift.

"WAKE up, Blake!"

Merry touched his chum on the arm.

"Wake up, Blake, I say!"

Gradually Blake's eyes opened. Then, when he saw Merry, he jumped up smartly.

D'Arcy slept on peacefully, with one arm behind his head. The swell of St. Jim's would have astonished his friends as he lay. With dirty, draggled clothes and weary face, he looked just like a tramp from the roadside.

"My turn?" asked Blake alertly.

"Yes," said Tom Merry. "I was nearly asleep walking about! That Chinaman chap's lying down on deck. He's gone to sleep; but keep an eye on him, Blake."

"What do you mean, old chap?"

"Well, he's been asking me a lot of questions about the balloon. He may mean nothing wrong—probably he doesn't—but, half crazy as he is, he might try to get off with the balloon, or cut it free, or do something. If he does anything, call me."

"Right-ho! I won't let him out of sight."

Blake turned out upon the deck.

"I say, Blake!" Tom Merry called after him.

"Yes, old man!"

"Keep your eyes skinned for any rise in the wind, will you? There's a danger of the balloon's blowing free, you know, if the wind rises."

Blake had scarcely turned round before Tom Merry, throwing himself down, had dropped off to sleep.

How long he slumbered he did not know. It was with an unpleasant feeling that he awoke. He felt as though something were happening—as though some danger, approaching, had dragged him from sleep without any noise having been made.

He sat up.

"Confound it!" he murmured. His eyes felt so heavy that he could scarcely rouse himself.

He blundered to his feet. He felt almost as if he were sleep-walking—as if he were in some nightmare.

He found his way out on deck, and looked up, scarcely knowing what he did.

In an instant he was awake—wide awake, painfully awake! He gave a shout of astonishment.

Instead of being anchored to the yards, the balloon was a hundred feet high in the air, hanging free, and apparently rising.

Leaning over the side of the basket, waving and gesticulating, and bobbing into sight and out again, was the Chinaman!

Jagged ends of rope, hanging from the car of the balloon, showed how it had been hacked free with a knife. Another thought sprang into Merry's mind. He turned cold.

"Blake—Blake! Where are you, Blake?" he cried out in fear.

There was no answer. Tom Merry stumbled hastily across the deck. Then he stopped, transfixed. He scarcely cared to move, either forward or backwards.

Blake lay stretched with his head on a coil of rope, apparently fast asleep. For an instant the terrible fear came over Tom Merry that his chum was dead.

He sprang to him, shook his arm, and shouted out his name. D'Arcy, aroused by the noise, appeared sleepily at the doorway of the cabin.

Slowly Blake moved one arm, then another. Then he opened his eyes in a dazed, weary way.

"What's happened, Blake, old man?" asked Merry.

D'Arcy came running across the deck.

"What—what's the matter? I—I——" Blake gazed at Merry vaguely.

"Aren't you well? What is it, old chap?"

Merry shook his arm gently. D'Arcy came up, and stood by in amazement.

Blake sat up. He looked round stupidly. Then his eyes wandered upwards, and he saw the balloon. Very slowly it was rising.

In an instant he was fully awake.

"Why—why——" he stammered, and gazed at his chums in bewilderment.

"Quickly! Tell us what happened, old chap!" said Merry.

"I—I talked with the fellow for a little while; not long, I know. Then—then he got me a cup of tea. And then—and then—then you came shaking my arm. I can't have gone to sleep, and let him cut the balloon free. No, no——"

Blake shook off Merry's arm in a sudden frenzy.

"What was I doing—what was I doing? I was put on duty, and I must have gone to sleep. Oh, I say——"

"That's enough, old chap!" interrupted Tom Merry. "You weren't to blame. It's clear the brute put something in your tea to drug you. After you had drunk it you must have slipped straight down on the deck."

Jack Blake blinked at his chums shamefacedly.

"My hat! What an ass I was!"

"Yaas; I must admit that you were wathah an ass, old chap!" said Arthur Augustus, with a nod. "It was wathah an ewwah of judgment on Tom Mewwy's part to put you on guard. Considewin' that we were dealin' with a wotten heathen, it would have been bettah for me to take the watch. What is wequired at a time like this is a fellow of tact and judgment!"

"He drugged me!" muttered Blake, rubbing his forehead.

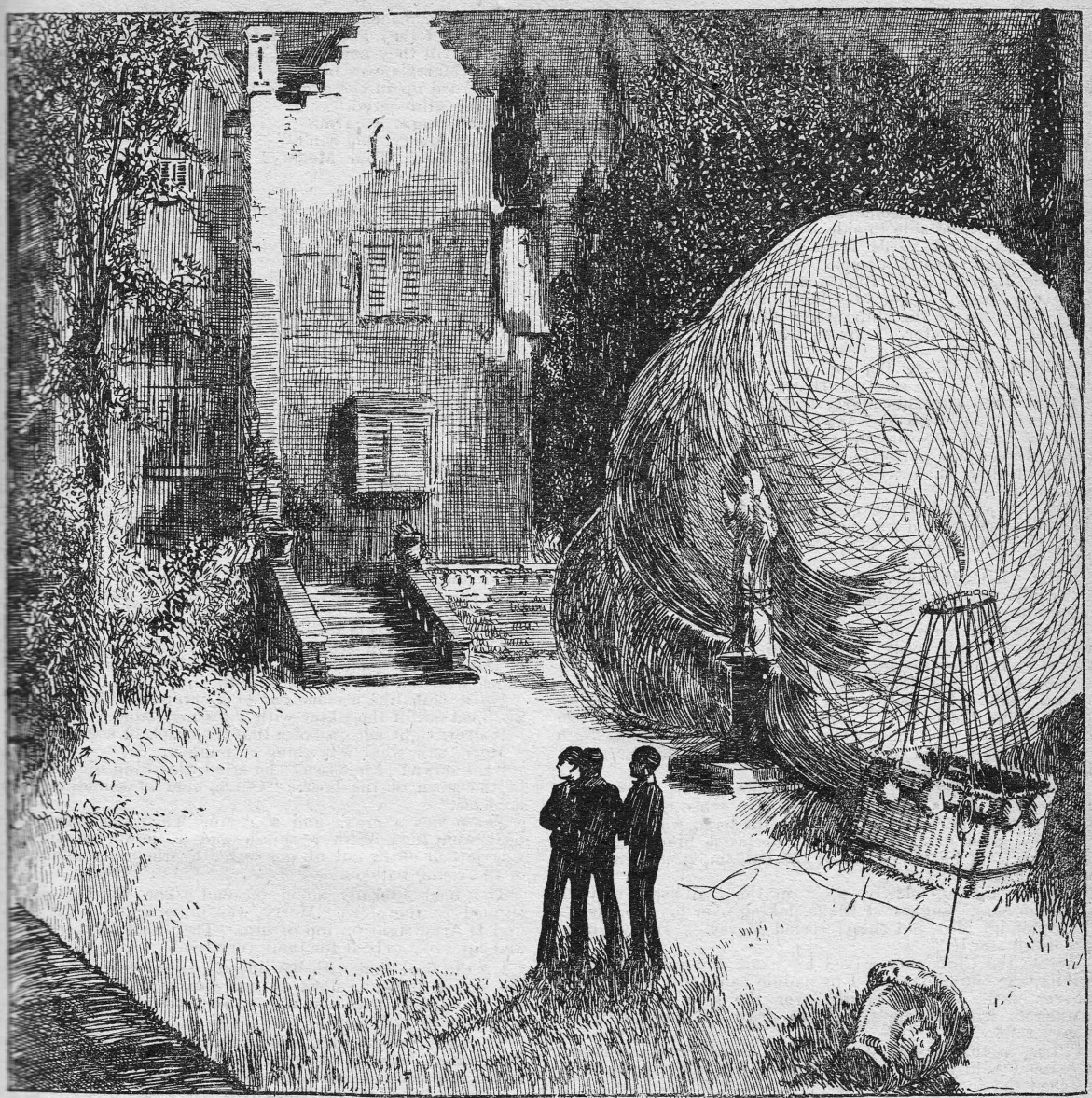
"Yaas, wathah!"

"Never mind," said Tom Merry. "It can't be helped now. But the rotten heathen bounder has bolted with our balloon!"

They looked upward, D'Arcy with his monocle jammed in his eye.

Over the edge of the car appeared the curious face of the Chinaman, blinking and gesticulating at them.

He had evidently intended to take the first opportunity of escaping with the balloon, and he was grinning with triumph over his success. The bad turn he had served the lads who had helped him did not seem to trouble his mind at all.



"Blessed if I like the look of this place," muttered Blake, as the juniors, having anchored the balloon, stepped out of the car. Before them the grim-looking building rose up in the darkness, without a light or sound to indicate that it was inhabited.

CHAPTER 15.

A Queer Predicament.

TOM MERRY looked up at the balloon with a hopeless expression. There was no means of reaching it, and the Chinaman was master of the situation as far as the balloon was concerned. As the chums stood on the deck, looking upwards, the balloon continued to rise slowly. It was almost directly overhead.

"There's not a breath of wind," said Merry.

"That means," added Blake, "that he can't drift far away."

"Not vewy much comfort in that, you fellahs," commented D'Arcy. "Wot we want is do is to bwing the thing down."

"We've been put in this rotten position all through my carelessness! What a simple, double-barrelled ass I was!"

"Yaas, wathah! I must agree with you there, deah boy."

"Can't be helped now," said Tom Merry. "No good bothering about that. The only question is, What's to be done?"

"That's wight, Tom Mewwy."

Tom Merry peered upwards at the balloon; it was not very high up, even now. Indeed, it seemed scarcely to be moving at all. The Chinaman's head could be seen bobbing over the side of the basket, and then going back again.

"There's a hope, you chaps—not much of a one, perhaps, but a hope, all the same."

"What is it?" asked Blake. "It seems to me we're fixed here, with the balloon gone clean out of reach."

"Let's hope there's some gwub on board this wotten boat," interrupted D'Arcy feelingly.

"Dry up, Gussy," said Merry. "You're getting as bad as Fatty Wynn. What I was going to say is this——"

"Yes, go on, Merry. Don't take any notice of Gussy," observed Blake.

"Bai Jove!——" D'Arcy was stopped by a sudden and painful dig in the ribs.

"What I was going to say," continued Tom Merry, "is that the scoundrel of a Chinaman, after what I told him while we were walking about the deck, may not dare to throw over any ballast."

"I see! You mean that the balloon——"

"I mean that, with the damp air there must be over the water, the balloon may take it into its head to come slowly down again, pretty nearly in the same place it went up from."

"And what shall we do with the heathen chap in the basket, Mewwy?" asked D'Arcy.

"You're really previous, Gussy," answered Merry. "We shall have to act on the spur of the moment, more or less."

"Well, old chap, you needn't get wude, as well as Blake. I think——"

D'Arcy's remonstrance was cut short quickly.

"My hat! You're right, Merry! It's beginning to come down."

Blake, who had gone across to study the angle of the balloon with one of the masts, shouted with excitement.

What he said was true. Slowly, but none the less surely, the balloon began to come down. The Chinaman could be seen rushing from side to side of the basket.

Not a hundred yards from the side of the ship the balloon began to settle down.

Then Merry, with Blake and D'Arcy helping him feverishly, began to get very busy indeed.

At the stern of the ship Merry observed a rowboat was trailing in the water. Looking over, he saw oars lying in it.

A little way along the side of the ship an iron ladder reached down to the level of the water.

In less than a minute Merry had unhitched the rope from the stern, and, with the eager help of his chums, towed the boat round opposite the steps. Luckily, there being no wind, the sea was perfectly calm.

"Down first, Blake!" said Merry. "Then hold the boat against the steps."

Without a word as to what the plan was Blake nipped down obediently, and sprang nimbly into the boat.

"Now, you, Gussy!" said Merry, still holding on to the rope.

"But what's the idea, Mewwy? Are we goin'——"

"Jump in, you argumentative beggar! There's not a minute to lose."

D'Arcy clambered down without another word. Merry was close on his heels. Blake whipped up the oars and struck away from the side of the ship.

"Steady!" cried Merry, gazing towards the balloon.

Less than a hundred yards away the basket struck the water. The bottom of it only was immersed. Then the balloon moved up a foot or two, only to descend again.

Finally it settled down. The basket, however, rested lightly on the water.

The trail rope lay drifting on the water, part of it immersed. The Chinaman waved his arms threateningly towards the chums in the boat. In his hand was a knife.

"He's gone mad, I believe!" declared Merry, leaning forward. "If he jumps out of the balloon, it will shoot up and be lost altogether."

"Let's edge up slowly, pick up the trail-rope, and fix it in the boat," suggested Blake, loking over his shoulder.

"Splendid idea, old chap!" cried Merry. "But we must go ahead slowly."

While the Chinaman waved his arms and rolled his eyes wildly, the chums managed to paddle cautiously nearer and nearer until Merry, leaning over the side of the boat, managed, with D'Arcy's help, to draw in the end of the heavy rope.

"Leavee that 'lone! Leavee that 'lone!" the Chinaman screamed wildly, but Merry, with a few deft movements, hitched the rope round a ring in the bow of the boat.

CHAPTER 16.

The Fate of the Chinaman.

"LOOK!"

"Gweat Scott!"

"My only hat!"

Tom Merry had scarcely fastened the rope to the boat when there came a sudden and unexpected movement on the part of the Chinaman.

He clambered up the side of the basket, and balanced himself by gripping the ropes above his head.

"Bai Jove!"

"He's got the knife in his teeth!" muttered Blake. "What on earth is he going to do? He must be mad!"

"He's climbin' out of our weach, deah boys——"

"Or he's going to cut a gash in the balloon!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Stop!" shouted Tom Merry. "Stop! We're not going to hurt you! Stop!"

The Chinaman had grasped the side ropes to climb.

He turned his head for a moment at Tom Merry's shout, and snarled savagely in the direction of the boat.

The expression of his face was clear proof enough that he was not in his senses. The solitude and privation on the derelict had unhinged his brain.

He gritted his teeth and climbed higher into the ropes.

His intention was plain enough.

He intended to rip open the balloon, and the juniors of St. Jim's turned white at the thought of it.

The balloon meant possible safety to them; abandoned on the derelict they might drift for days or weeks unseen, unrescued, till they perished of hunger and thirst.

Tom Merry's eyes blazed.

He stood up in the stern of the boat, and in his hand the revolver glimmered.

Blake caught his arm.

"Tom Merry, you can't!"

"Bai Jove, Tom Mewwy! You can't shoot him, you know."

Tom Merry nodded.

"I know that. But I'm going to make him think so."

"Good wheeze!"

Tom Merry raised the revolver.

"Stop!" he shouted.

The Chinaman turned his head again.

He blenched at the sight of the levelled revolver.

"Stop! This pistol is loaded!"

The Chinaman hung in the netting. Then slowly he began to descend. The boat forged nearer the floating car of the balloon.

"Bai Jove! He's givin' in!"

But Arthur Augustus was deceived.

The Chinaman, gripping the knife in his hand, turned upon the rim of the car, and made a sudden spring towards the boat.

The action took the boys quite by surprise.

Had the ruffian landed in the boat, there was no telling what would have happened.

But he had miscalculated his strength. Wasted by want, he failed in the leap.

There was a splash.

For an instant the wild face of the Chinaman glimmered from the water beside the boat, and then it disappeared.

"Look out!"

"By Jove! Hold on!"

The chums had scarcely time to realise what had happened. The balloon sprang up into the air directly it was relieved of the Chinaman's weight.

Up it shot, like a stone out of a catapult. The trail-rope whipped out of the water with a hissing sound.

It drew tight with a noise like the crack of a gun.

Merry saw what was going to happen.

"Lie down! Lie down!" he cried, throwing himself down in the stern of the boat. "Catch hold of something, and hold on!"

There was a creak and a groan. Then the nose of the boat went up. With a splash and a shower of spray it was jerked clean out of the water by the tremendous pull of the rising balloon.

The boat literally stood on end. The chums fell and slipped to the stern. Merry was underneath, with Blake and D'Arcy right on top of him. They held on to the seats and sides of the boat for their very lives.

Up the boat shot with bewildering speed—up, up, beneath the rising balloon, until it was nearly forty feet in the air, dangling above the water, and spinning madly round and round.

Then the weight told. The balloon lost its mad impetus. It recoiled. Almost as quickly as it had gone up the boat began to descend again towards the water.

"Hold on! Hold on, you chaps! We—we're going to get a ducking."

Merry just had time to gasp out the words of warning.

The stern of the boat dug itself into the sea. There was a great swirl of water. Under the boat went. The chums crouched down and held their breath.

In an instant they were immersed. The boat sank its own length into the water. Then it rose up again, dripping. The boys were drenched to the skin, but they hung on like leeches.

"Wescue! Wescue! I'm dwownin'! Ugh!"

Tom Merry and Blake, gripping the rear seat of the boat, did not say a word.

"Mewwy! I say, Mewwy! The thing's goin' up again."

The boat was, indeed, nearly pulled out of the water again. Then it fell flat on the water, with a tremendous smack and a fearful jerk.

"All over!" cried Merry cheerfully, wiping the water out of his eyes. The boat floated quietly, with its bow pulled slightly upwards. About fifty feet overhead hung the balloon, drawing the trail-rope tight, but apparently securely anchored.

"My hat!" cried Blake, looking upwards. "There's going to be a pretty shaky climb up that wet rope."

"Up there! You don't weally mean it?"

D'Arcy, fumbling with his sodden waistcoat in search of his eyeglass, which was really right round under his coat at the back, gazed fearfully aloft.

"That rope's got to be climbed," said Merry grimly. "Can't you manage it, Gussy?"

"Don't you fellahs think I'm fwightened, because I'm not. I don't care weally vewy much whether I'm dwowned or not. We're wet thwough, and we've got no othah clothes to put on. Ugh!"

Tom Merry was gazing round over the water.

"There's not a sign of that wretched Chinaman," he said quietly.

"Has he swum back to the ship?" muttered Blake.

"He could scarcely have had time. Besides, there's no one to be seen. I'm afraid he's gone under."

"Shall—shall—shall we wait to see if he wises?" asked D'Arcy.

"I don't think it would do any good," answered Tom Merry. "He sank like a stone. He will never rise again."

Merry looked up at the balloon.

"I say, you chaps," he announced, "I don't believe we shall all have to climb up. If one of us gets up the extra weight, with the others pulling below, should bring the basket down right to the boat."

"That's weally good news, now."

D'Arcy looked quite relieved. The swell of St. Jim's—a swell no longer in his draggled clothes—did not fancy that wet climb.

But the "gym." instructor at St. Jim's would have been proud to see the way Tom Merry, throwing off his wet coat, and rolling up his sleeves, took a grip of the rope and went smoothly up it hand over hand.

"Bravo! Great, Merry!"

Blake shouted approval from the boat, as Merry, slipping an arm over the side of the basket, swung himself into it.

The basket rocked from side to side rather alarmingly. Then Merry leant over.

"Now pull on the rope, you chaps!" he shouted.

CHAPTER 17.

Back in the Balloon Again.

"HEAVE-HO!"

"Put your back into it, Gussy!"

Taking as firm a grip with their feet as they could in the wet boat, Blake and D'Arcy pulled and tugged upon the rope.

There was an immediate effect.

"That's right! Pull hard!" shouted Merry, from above. "She's coming!"

"Gwacious!" D'Arcy's foot slipped, and he bumped against Blake, but he pulled heroically.

"This—this will circulate your blood, D'Arcy, and stop you from getting a cold!" panted Blake. "But you needn't tread on my foot, all the same."

The juniors pulled till the basket swung right over their heads. Then, with a final tug, they were able to reach up, and put their hands over the sides. The car settled so gently across the boat that it did not dip any more deeply into the water.

"Can you bend down and unhitch that trail-rope? It will be better than cutting it," asked Merry.

"Yes," said Blake.

"You keep hold hard, D'Arcy!" cried Merry, as Blake bent down.

The balloon moved a little, but stood still again. D'Arcy hung on with all his weight.

"Right-ho! She's free!" cried Blake, standing up with a red face after his exertions.

"Now," said Merry, "listen, you chaps. D'Arcy must jump in first. As he does so, I shall throw out a bag of ballast, so that the balloon doesn't dip down into the water. Then you, Blake——"

"Good! I understand, old chap."

"As you nip in, Blake, I shall throw over another. Then, if she doesn't rise, we'll get rid of one or two more."

"Ready!"

"Wight, Tom Mewwy, I'm comin'!"

Throwing a leg over the side of the basket, the swell of St. Jim's clambered in.

Splash! Merry threw a bag of ballast over into the water.

The basket rocked from side to side.

"Quick, Blake!" shouted Merry.

Blake moved with a quickness that an acrobat might have envied. In a trice he was in the basket. As his weight fell on the car, Merry threw out another bag of ballast. The car seemed to stand still, quivering slightly.

"She's not rising an inch yet, old chap!" cried Blake. "Over with another."

"Here go two," answered Merry, unhitching a couple more bags, and letting them go.

That did it! Slowly, but surely, the car was swung up away from the boat. Steadily, almost straight up in the air, the balloon went. Ship and boat below began to shrink in size.

"Huwwah!"

"What are you cheering about, Gussy?" asked Tom Merry, with a grin.

"Now you ask me the point-blank question, old fellah, I don't weally know," confessed D'Arcy. "But we're off again, and away fwom that Chinaman cweature, and the howwid ship, and——"

"Gussy means that while there's life there's hope," said Blake. "I feel more cheerful—at least, I should do if I didn't feel so confoundedly damp."

"She's still rising, and moving, too. Look!"

Merry pointed downwards.

The derelict ship—the little boat seemed almost invisible now—was a great distance below, and some way behind, also.

"My things seem to be dwyin'," said D'Arcy. "I expect it's the air up here."

"I'm going to peel my waistcoat off, and my shoes and socks, and let them dry over the side of the car," declared Merry.

The others followed suit.

D'Arcy began to laugh heartily.

"What's the joke, Gussy?" asked Blake, wrestling with a soaked shoe, which would not budge.

"With all these things hangin' wound the side, it looks like washing day," said the swell of St. Jim's. "Do you wemembah washin' day when we had a stwike in the School House at St. Jim's?"

"Yes, rather! I remember I was hungry, too—and I am hungry now. What price a feed?"

"That's a wippin' suggestion," agreed D'Arcy.

"Trot it out," said Blake.

"And a dwink of ginger-ale. Hang the expense," said D'Arcy solemnly. "We've earned a wegulah banquet, haven't we, Mewwy?"

"Yes, rather," agreed Tom Merry, handing round the provender.

"We'd better call this supper, I think," said Blake, as he tackled his second sausage.

"Why, old chap?" asked D'Arcy, handling a piece of cake of scarcely genteel proportions.

"See, it's getting dusk!"

"By Jove, so it is!" assented Merry. "Another night in the air, you chaps!"

The chums realised their position again; there was a silence.

"Buck up!" said Blake. "We've a jolly good chance of sighting a steamer or something as soon as it gets light."

"And pewwaps we might be cawwied wight back acwoss the land again," suggested D'Arcy.

"That's quite likely, Gussy."

Supper finished, the chums put on their clothes again. They weren't quite dry, it is true; but they were, as Blake said, "dryish."

Then they made themselves warm. D'Arcy got into his big motor-coat, which was a little damp, also, with sea-water. Blake and Merry wrapped themselves in rugs.

Dusk settled very quickly into night. In less than half an hour, it seemed to get dark.

"Can we all have a snooze, Merry," asked Blake, "or shall we take it in turns to keep a look-out?"

"We'd better not all turn in," replied Merry. "You can keep an eye open for a couple of hours, Blake. Then wake me. Here's my watch."

"Half-past nine," announced Blake, looking at it. "Good-night, you lazy beggars!"

CHAPTER 18.

The Strange Shape in the Sky.

"NOTHING'S happened! We're so high up, I can't see anything below, or hear a sound of the water."

"Right, old chap! Turn in."

Blake snuggled down under his rug on the floor of the basket. Tom Merry leant over the side of it, silently on watch.

There was not a thing to be seen, not a sound to be heard. Everywhere was the blackness of night.

Tom Merry thought things out in the stillness.

"We're in a corner—a very tight corner. But one must keep one's pecker up," he murmured to himself.

D'Arcy was hard to wake when his turn came; but he turned up the collar of his coat, and prepared to do his turn of sentry-go cheerfully.

"If I see anythin' wemarkable, or hear any stwange sounds, I'll wake you, Tom Mewwy," he declared.

"Right-ho, Gussy!"

D'Arcy felt the importance of his post. He shuffled about in order to keep awake. Tom Merry and Blake were fast asleep.

The swell of St. Jim's looked all round, and then below, time after time; but there was nothing to be seen or heard.

Gradually, however, the sky lightened. There came a chill in the air that made him shiver. It was the dawn.

All round the sky, in a sort of rim, came the light. The balloon seemed to be floating through a number of white, semi-transparent clouds.

"Shall I wake Mewwy, and tell him it's gettin' light, or not?" speculated D'Arcy. Then he murmured: "No, I won't."

Time passed slowly. It got lighter and lighter. Suddenly, looking down, D'Arcy cried: "Bai Jove!" in astonishment.

Far away below, dotted here and there, gleamed tiny, straggling lights.

"Are those ships, or lights from houses?" D'Arcy asked himself. "Must be houses," he added. "If they were ships, I should hear the sound of the watah."

He didn't wake Tom Merry.

"I'll let the poor boundah sleep a bit longah," he said to himself thoughtfully.

"It will be wippin if we find we are dwiftin' over land again instead of that wotten water," he added, in a cheerful whisper.

It was terribly cold. D'Arcy swung his arms to and fro. His feet were icy cold, but he could not stamp them for fear of waking the others.

"How glowious to dwink a nice hot cup of coffee."

The swell of St. Jim's smacked his lips at the idea. Then he listened with a puzzled look on his face.

From somewhere, a faint humming sound seemed to be coming. At first D'Arcy thought it was fancy; then he made sure it wasn't; then it appeared to fade away again. Then it could be heard quite distinctly. It sounded like the faint hum of machinery in motion.

"Surely one can't hear anythin' like that fwom the gwound—it's too far away," thought D'Arcy. The noise still went on. "Pewwaps I had better tell Mewwy," he said to himself.

He had turned round, with the idea of touching Merry on the shoulder, when he happened to look out from the side of the balloon again.

"Good gwacious! What's that?"

D'Arcy's eyes opened wide; his arm, which he had stretched out, hung motionless.

Higher up than the balloon was, away on D'Arcy's right, hung a dim grey shape—long, shadowy, unreal-looking. But D'Arcy's ear told him that the humming sound he had heard was coming from its direction.

"Another balloon! What an extraordinary affair! I must wake Tom Mewwy at once!"

He gripped Tom Merry's shoulder in excitement.

"Another balloon! Another balloon, Mewwy, old chap! Most wemarkable thing! Wake up at once!"

Once his eyes were opened, Tom Merry was alert. He jumped up, giving Blake a dig that brought him abruptly from his slumbers, too.

"Another balloon, Gussy? You've been dreaming! Where?"

"Pway understand, Tom Mewwy, that I've been awake evewy second of the time, and I'm not dweamin'. Look there!"

D'Arcy pointed with his right hand.

The grey shape seemed plainer. It lay in the sky, long and pointed, like a ghostly cigar. Clouds passed before it confusedly, so that every now and then it was almost invisible.

Tom Merry stared hard for a moment or so, without a word. Blake, fully awake, peered over his shoulder.

"That humming noise comes from it, kids. What on earth is it?" cried Blake.

"That noise is machinewy—like the wunnin' of a motor-car," declared D'Arcy. "I heard it before I saw that stwange appawition."

"That's no balloon, you chaps. By Jove, though, I've got it! What an ass I was not to see what it was at once!"

"But what is it, then?"

"Out with it, Mewwy—quick!"

"It's an airship, if it's anything at all. A dirigible's the proper name. A long gas-bag, motors to drive it through the air, with rudders to steer with, and things to tilt it up and down in the air."

"There's a long stowy about 'em this month in a magazine," D'Arcy remarked.

"Never mind about the magazines. The question is, if there are men on the airship, can they see us?" exclaimed Tom Merry excitedly.

"You mean they could rescue us, kid?"

"Not exactly that, perhaps; but they could tell us what to do to bring this thing slowly down if we find the right place for a descent."

"That's right, Tom Mewwy. We're over land, I'm sure. I saw the lights of some town just now."

"They could tell us where we are, too," added Blake. "How about the torch, Merry?"

"That's the idea. Shine a light on and off, like signals."

Blake did so. The powerful light gleamed and went out, then gleamed again.

The chums watched the strange shape eagerly. The humming noise seemed louder. More details could be made out. Below the long, cigar-shaped part of the apparition, there appeared to be hanging a shorter, darker shape.

"Look!" cried Merry. A point of light appeared below the shape. Then it appeared to get shorter to the eye.

"It's turning, pointing towards us; that's what makes it look like that. The light was a signal."

"Hurrah!" shouted Blake.

"Huwway!" shouted D'Arcy.

Tom Merry's eyes were fixed anxiously in the strange vessel. Arthur Augustus gripped him by the arm.

"Why don't you cheer, you duffah?"

"We're not out of the wood yet."

"Still, a cheer won't do any harm, and it's—cheerful," said Jack Blake. "Hurrah! Hip, pip, hurrah! Bravo!"

"Bwavo!"

Tom Merry laughed.

"Oh, all right! Bravo! Hip, pip, hurray!"

"Bai Jove! We shall soon be on land now," said Arthur Augustus, with a great deal of satisfaction. "I would give a month's pocket-money for a change of clothes, deah boys. I wondah where we shall set foot."

"On the ground, I expect."

"Pway don't be funnay, Blake. We might as well have Monty Lowther with us, if we're goin' to have feahful wotten jokes all the time. I wondah if we shall land in Austwaliah."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I fail to see any cause for wibald mewwiment in that wemark, Blake. We do not know how fah we may have dwifted."

"We haven't drifted as far as Australia, anyway," grinned Blake. "I never heard of the voyage being made in the time."

"Well, pewwaps not," admitted D'Arcy. "I should not be sowwy, howevah, to dwop down in Austwaliah. It would be wathah fun to call in unexpectedly on my welations in Bwisbane, or on Hawwy Noble's people in Melbourne, wouldn't it? It would be a gweat joke for Noble to get a telegwam at St. Jim's to say that we were stayin' with his people in Austwaliah."

"Awfully good; but Australia is still some thousands of miles away, so it won't happen. Keep your eyes on that giddy airship."

"Still, it might be Austwaliah aftah all, you know," said D'Arcy. "You nevah can tell!"

"Rats!"

"Did you say wats to me, Blake?"

"Certainly."

"Then I shall have no wesource but to administah a feahful——"

"Hallo! It's a signal!"

Arthur Augustus ceased his speech in the middle, and turned his eyeglass upon the airship again.

CHAPTER 19.

The Airship.

THE dim shape loomed up larger and larger. The humming noise became a sharp, metallic rattle in the stillness.

The chums, leaning over the side of the basket, gazed in wonder.

"It's an airship, right enough," said Tom Merry. "A powerful one, too. They're signalling again."

Three or four times the little point of light gleamed and went out.

"Shine up, too, Blake," said Merry.

Jack Blake obeyed.

"What would a gweat thing like that be doin' about heah, Tom Mewwy?" asked D'Arcy vaguely.

"It's probably one of the Army airships," answered Tom Merry. "They do night journeys, I expect, from some big airship-shed near here; or they may have come miles and miles. They travel at a great rate."

"Gweat Scott! Fancy seeing one quite close up!" D'Arcy looked highly interested. "It's amazin'!"

"You can see how fast they travel by the way they're overtaking us," Tom Merry remarked.

"Will they twy to take us aboawd? We sha'n't have to walk acwoss some plank high up in the air, or anythin' like that, deah boys."

D'Arcy looked apprehensive.

"Not likely; they won't be able to get near enough for that, I expect. They'll tell us which rope to pull to come down, and, perhaps, pick us up when we've landed."

"There's no doubt about there being land below," said Blake, pointing down. Dimly, a very long way below, an outline of fields and woods was now to be seen.

The airship came up with astonishing quickness. In two or three minutes, while the chums watched and speculated, it had almost reached them.

From the long, cigar-shaped gas-bag, they could now see distinctly that a slightly shorter sort of platform hung by means of rods or netting.

"Bai Jove! I can see men wunnin' to and fwo on it!" said D'Arcy, pointing excitedly. "They're wunnin' like anythin'!"

"And I can make out the engines and propellers now," added Blake.

Nearer and nearer it came. As D'Arcy said, it was now possible to see figures moving on the platform, which resembled the deck of the ship. A black mass to the rear of it evidently indicated the position of the engines, and higher up, between the platform and the gas-bag, there was a flicker that denoted the whirling propellers.

The airship curved round, then swept close towards them. There were four men, the chums saw, on the narrow deck. They wore long coats, and had goggles on, like motor-car drivers. Two bent over the engines, evidently attending to their working. A third moved up and down the middle of the platform, casting glances at the propellers overhead, and clearly on the look-out to prevent any mishap.

The fourth, who had on a long white coat, instead of a dark one as worn by the other three, stood right at the front of the platform, upon a raised place resembling the bridge of a ship. He clasped a wheel. Rods and controlling-levers were, apparently, close to his hand also.

The machine, performing a graceful half-circle, came gliding to within fifty yards of the slowly-drifting balloon. The four men were staring hard towards it.

The chums saw that the man at the wheel touched a lever. A bell tinkled near the engines. The men moved levers, and the propellers slowed down in their speed till they were only just revolving.

Above the rattling noise of the engine, the man in the white coat, after waving an arm, shouted:

"What balloon is that? Do you want any help? What's the matter?"

"Yes!" shouted back Merry. "We want to come down, sir!"

"Are you three lads alone in that balloon?" The captain's voice—he evidently was the captain—sounded incredulous.

"Yes," answered Tom Merry. "We were carried away by accident. There are two ropes here to pull to come down. I'm not quite sure which it is."

"Where did you break away from?" asked the captain of the airship. By signalling for some extra revolutions of the propellers, and a rapid manipulation of a rudder, exactly like that of a ship, at the rear of the machine, he edged nearer still to the balloon.

"Eh? What's that?" he shouted, when Tom Merry mentioned the name of St. Jim's.

"It's near Wayland, sir," chimed in Blake, mentioning the name of the market town near St. Jim's.

"Wayland?" The captain beckoned up the man at the middle of the platform. "Wayland? In what county?"

"Sussex, sir."

A big map was stretched out on a frame before the captain's station. The captain pored over it. Then the captain shouted back:

"But you're drifting now towards Wayland—not away from it."

"We've been carried to and fro by all sorts of breezes, I expect, sir," called back Tom Merry. "We've touched land once, and then came down on a ship."

"What?" shouted the captain, in amazement. He motioned the other to take the wheel, and then leant over the platform. "How long have you been drifting about, then?" he cried.

"This is Friday morning, isn't it, sir?" asked Merry.

"That's right," replied the captain; "but what's that to do with it?"

"Well, sir; the balloon broke away near the school, and carried us off on Wednesday afternoon."

"Well, I'm hanged! Did you hear that?"

The captain turned to the man at the wheel. He nodded, and looked over towards the boys in wonder.

"Easy there with the engines!" cried the captain. Then he turned to the boys again. "How did you get up in the air again after you'd come down?" he shouted.

"Dropped bags of sand, sir. I knew that much," answered Merry. "But I didn't like to pull either of these ropes. One, I know, rips a piece out of the balloon."

"That's right," answered the captain. "The cord with the red piece of ribbon tied to it is the 'ripping-cord.' The other, each time you pull it, lets out a puff of gas, and brings the balloon down slowly."

"Shall I pull that one now, sir?" asked Tom Merry.

CHAPTER 20.

Merry Opens the Valve.

"HOLD on, my lad! Let's think a minute!"

The captain walked back and consulted the man at the wheel. Then he shouted across to Tom Merry again:

"You've been carried out on a seaward current, and brought back on another one. You're now not more than a hundred miles from Wayland which you say is near your school."

"Huwwah! Wippin!" cried D'Arcy.

The captain smiled.

"I expect you youngsters will be glad to get back on hard ground again," he said. "But now, will you do exactly what I tell you?"

"Certainly, sir," answered Merry.

"Well, now, catch hold of the valve-rope, to start with."

Merry leant up, and gripped the rope that had not the red ribbon on it.

"That's right!" shouted the captain. "Now, listen carefully."

He leant over as far as he could towards the boys.

"When I say right, pull that rope two or three times. You'll hear the gas coming out. The balloon may begin to go down quickly. If it does, steady it by throwing out some ballast. See?"

"I see, sir," answered Tom Merry. "Blake," he added, "you stand by the sand-bags."

"That's the idea," cried the captain approvingly. "We'll circle down after you. When you've touched ground, we'll see about running you back to your school. I think we've got enough petrol left for the trip."

"Thank you, sir!" answered Merry.

"It's weally too good of you, sir," said D'Arcy.

"Never mind that," answered the captain heartily. "That'll be all right. But, I say——"

"Yes, sir," answered Tom Merry.

"You'll have to look out where you come down. As you've never made a descent before, it'll be a matter of luck with you, I expect. But if you see you're coming down on a house, or across telegraph-wires, or in a pond, throw out your ballast, and go on a bit further. Try and drop in a field."

"Right you are, sir. We'll make the best job of it we can," answered Tom Merry.

"That's the way to talk!" shouted the captain. He walked back to his wheel. "Now, are you ready?"

"All ready, sir," answered back Merry. "Get a sand-bag ready to drop if necessary, Blake," he added.

There was a pause. Merry stood with the rope in his hands. Blake was ready to unhook a sandbag. The captain glanced down below from his steering-station.

"You've got about five thousand feet to drop!" he shouted. "The ground underneath seems good for a descent—mostly fields, with a few farms about. No signs of a railway line. Now, then—right!"

Tom Merry gave a pull on the cord. Bang! With a noise like the report of a gun gas shot through the valve which opened at the top of the balloon.

After releasing the rope, Merry gave it two or three more hard jerks. Following each, came the report-like escape of the gas.

The captain leant over quickly from his platform. He began to call out something, but the words were inaudible.

"He's telling you that's enough gas to let out, I believe," cried Blake to Merry. Then he shouted out "Hallo!" in astonishment.

The platform of the airship, which had been level with the basket of the balloon a moment before, suddenly seemed to move up till it was right over their heads.

They were beginning to drop quickly. In an instant, the curve of the balloon over their heads shut out, from the chums' vision, all signs of the airship overhead.

Merry let go of the rope.

"Are we going down too fast, do you think?" he asked.

Now that there was nothing to compare their speed with, it was scarcely possible to tell how fast they were going down. The ground was too far off to move closer very quickly, no matter what the rate of their descent.

"Judging by the way we slipped away from the airship, I should think we are going down rather too quickly, old chap," said Blake.

"Great Scott, yes!" cried D'Arcy. "It was like goin' down in a lift."

"At any rate, wait a bit before you throw a bag over, Blake," said Merry, after a look downwards. "If we see in a minute that the ground is coming up too quickly, we can check the fall almost at once."

The chums hung over the side of the basket, Blake ready with a bag of sand.

At first the ground seemed to get more distinct very

slowly. There were fields below, green with grass, or brown after the plough. Two or three roads—tiny white stripes across the ground—were to be discerned. Here and there, dark specks, were the roofs of farmhouses.

In less than a minute, however, as they looked, the fields began to look much bigger; the roads began to widen; the farmhouses began to stand out more clearly.

"By Jove," cried Merry, "we must be going down at a tremendous rate, as you say, Blake! Five thousand feet, the captain said there was to fall. We're going down too fast. Shove over the sand!"

Blake emptied the bag. It shot down in a long stream; then opened out, and floated down till it was dissipated in the air.

"If we go on dwoppin' at this wate, there's goin' to be a most womarkably wotten bump in a minute or two!" declared D'Arcy. "Why, things are gettin' plainer every second."

They were, indeed. The balloon was poised directly over a road which went away to right and left. They seemed to be moving forward as they fell, in a direction that would take them across several fields towards a farmhouse, with a red-tiled roof, which could now be seen distinctly.

A draught of air, which seemed to come from below, blew into the boys' faces.

"I say, old chap," cried Blake, in alarm, "we are whizzing down at a rate, you know!"

"I know we are," answered Merry anxiously. "That wretched bag didn't seem to check us a bit."

"Here goes with another," said Blake hastily. He shot it over.

Still they dropped rapidly. A cart could be seen moving along the road they had just passed over. A little figure was standing in it, waving his arms. In the fields were dots that represented men. Some were moving along quickly, evidently running in the wake of the balloon, which they could see was coming down.

CHAPTER 21.

A Rough Descent.

ALTHOUGH three bags of sand had been thrown over, one after another, the rate at which the balloon was going down seemed scarcely checked at all.

"I must have let out a great deal too much gas," said Tom Merry.

"Here's another bag of sand going over," declared Blake. "Perhaps that'll steady us a bit. By Jove," he added, "there are only two more left!"

"I say, you chaps," broke in D'Arcy in alarm, "can't you see we're goin' straight for that farmhouse over there?"

They were quite close over the fields now. One, almost directly ahead, was ploughed; then came one of grass, with cows in it. Then, surrounded by a garden, was a rambling, red-tiled farmhouse.

Every second they were getting nearer the ground, and moving forward at the same time. Evidently there was a strong wind blowing.

"Thank goodness, we're not going down so fast now—at least, it doesn't seem like it!" announced Tom Merry, leaning anxiously over the side.

"Shall I pitch these last two bags over, old chap?" asked Blake

"Try one of them," answered Merry, "and keep the last one as long as you can."

Over went the sand. Their downward rush was clearly checked now. They were so close to the ground that the men running across the fields after them could be plainly seen, and their shouts faintly heard.

The balloon swept over the ploughed field; it did not seem more than a few hundred feet below.

"If we can drop in this next field, it'll be great!" cried Tom Merry. "The balloon would just bump, and then slide along across the grass till it came to a halt."

"But we're going to miss it, I'm afraid, old chap. We've begun to move along so fast, you see, as well as drop down," said Blake.

"Great Scott! Look there! They can see we're going to come down pwetty close!" D'Arcy pointed towards the farmhouse.

On a lawn at the side of the house a little crowd of people had gathered; they were waving their arms, and making signs, which the chums could not understand.

It was a wide field which stretched before the farmhouse. The trail-rope of the balloon touched the ground just about in the middle of it. Several cows dashed away, in fright.

But it was clear now, both to Tom Merry and Blake, that the balloon would not come down in the field. Not only were they too high up, but the wind was sweeping them along too quickly.

"By Jove, I say, old man, it looks remarkably as though we're going either to be carried straight against this house, or jolly near it!"

Blake nodded his head when Tom Merry had spoken. They watched without a word for another second or two.

D'Arcy saw the peril, too. He took a firm hold of the ropes at the side of the basket.

On the balloon swept, slanting down at an angle. The trail-rope dragged through a kitchen-garden which fringed the lawn of the farmhouse.

The group on the lawn, growing nearer and nearer, resolved itself into an old, grey-bearded man, with several young men standing beside him. In the background, running from their work, came the farm-labourers.

Tom Merry and Blake saw these details almost without realising them. Their whole attention was riveted upon the course of the balloon.

It seemed, as they peered down, as though the roof of the farmhouse was rising up directly below them. The balloon itself appeared to be standing still.

Tom Merry realised in a flash that they would either just drift over the roof of the farmhouse, or that the basket would swing against the side of it as they came down. It was impossible to be sure which would happen. They seemed to be swinging forward in a series of jerks, as gusts of wind struck them.

"We sha'n't clear it, Merry, old chap!" cried Blake a moment later. The roof of the farmhouse was scarcely fifty feet away.

"Good gwacious, we're comin' down cwash on it! The whole contwaption's going to turn upside down!"

D'Arcy clung to the ropes, slipping down almost below the edge of the basket in anticipation of the coming shock.

It was a matter of seconds now. Merry saw that the balloon was giving a dip downwards that would almost surely bring them into contact with the roof.

"Out with that last bag of sand, Blake!" he gasped. "Then hold on for all you're worth!"

"What's beyond the farmhouse?" asked Blake, throwing out the bag. It struck the lawn below, and burst in a yellow path upon the grass.

"Outhouses!" cried Merry. "If we miss the roof we shall hit one of them, or else skid into the farmyard. Look out, I say!"

D'Arcy had slid down right into the bottom of the basket. Merry and Blake, gripping the ropes with either hand, bent down as low as they could, and braced their legs against the opposite side of the basket.

In doing so they lost sight of the roof below. They nerved themselves for the shock, holding their breath.

It should have come the next instant, but it did not. Instead, the roof appeared behind them. It was on a level with the basket.

"By Jove," gasped Merry, "we've missed it! We must have shot just over the top of it!"

"But we can't miss this one. Look out, old chap!"

Blake released one hand, and pointed downward, just before them. They were coming down, almost as though they had been on a switchback, right on the top of a long shed, which stood at the far side of the yard, behind the farmhouse.

"What about letting out some more gas? We might just miss it!" cried Tom Merry.

"There's no time, old chap! By Jove! Look out!"

Once in the shelter of the farmhouse, which kept the wind from the gas-bag, the balloon made a sudden swoop earthwards.

Tom Merry and Blake tightened their grip of the ropes. There were shouts and cries from the observers below.

Then there came a tremendous crash, followed by a clatter of falling tiles. The wickerwork basket struck the side of the outhouse roof with a shock that made it bend and creak. Tiles were smashed; rows of them were shaken out of place, and fell in fragments to the ground.

"Help! Wescue! I'm bein' smothered!"

"Hold on, I say—hold on!"

There were wild shouts from the basket, mingling with commotion in the farmyard. Dogs barked, chickens ran away in affright. Men came running up from all sides.

CHAPTER 22.

A Finish in the Farmyard.

LIKE a bouncing ball, the basket swung back from the shock of the blow against the outhouse roof. Then it was jerked forward again.

The chums were thrown from side to side, bumping helplessly against each other.

Thud! The basket struck the roof again, a little higher up. D'Arcy was shot from one side to the other, his cries of "Wescue!" being drowned when the box of provisions was jerked over on to him, hitting him in the chest.

"I'm—I'm going to pull this other rope!" gasped Merry. The basket began to slide up the side of the roof, peeling off tiles, which came tumbling into the basket.

"Good gwacious! Help, help!" D'Arcy shouted again, as the tiles came scattering on him.

"The ripping-cord, you mean?" Blake was swung half round by a sudden jerk.

"Yes; that's it! If we can let all the gas out, we shall settle down in the yard. If we can't, she'll drag right over this roof, and bump along each time the wind catches her."

"Quick! Let me lend a hand, too!" Blake, at the peril of being shaken out with some fresh jerk, let go his hold of the side ropes, and gripped the rope with the red ribbon round it.

Merry took hold just below him. As they did so they were swung almost off their feet. Each gust of wind was jerking the basket higher up the roof.

The trail-rope lay right across the yard, but instead of taking hold of it, the farm people stood gazing at the balloon with open mouths.

"Pull now! Pull hard!" Merry gave the word. It was difficult to pull at all. The basket was hanging half over. The chums were standing more on the side than the bottom of it.

But Tom Merry and Blake managed to give a fierce, long tug upon the rope. From up above there came a loud slitting noise. The rope suddenly came down in their hands, and they nearly lost their balance.

Then the great gas-bag, with the thin strip that the ripping-cord had torn from the top of it, lost its shape. There was a loud hiss as the gas rushed out. The gas-bag caved in limply. The wind blew it over, and it fell partly over the outhouse roof, and partly on the other side.

Released of the upward pull, the basket began sliding and bumping down the sloping roof of the outhouse.

"Look out, Merry! The thing will turn over when it gets to the edge of the roof!" shouted Blake warningly.

The basket jerked down, like a badly-working lift. There was a gutter-pipe at the edge of the roof. The corner of the basket caught in this.

For a moment it seemed as if they were going to hang like this. Then the basket moved over till it stood upright. Then it began to tilt over towards the ground.

Merry had only time to gasp a warning "Look out!" Blake tried to throw his weight to the other side of the basket, and keep it back. D'Arcy, struggling up to his knees, was tumbled over again.

Then the basket, after wavering for a moment, turned completely upside-down. With wild shouts from below ringing in their ears, the chums were shot swiftly out of it.

D'Arcy, with no rope to hold, went first. Then Blake and Merry, after vain clutches at the ropes and sides of the basket, followed him.

By a great, good chance, near the side of the outhouse were piled trusses of straw and hay which had been unloaded from carts, and not yet stowed away.

From the basket it was a fall of ten feet. D'Arcy turned over as he went down, and fell on his back on a truss of straw. Then he turned over again, and rolled across the yard, kicking spasmodically.

Blake fell on his chest on a truss of hay, and lay gasping painfully, the breath knocked out of him.

Tom Merry fared best of all. He came down feet first among a pile of trusses, and, although he fell forward, was quickly upon his feet, although feeling dazed with the shock.

The grey-bearded man they had noticed on the lawn sprang forward. Two younger men were at his heels. Evidently this was the farmer, for the other men stood respectfully back, waiting to be told what to do.

"Are you hurt, young sir?" asked the farmer of Tom Merry. Amazement was written on his face, and also on the faces of the two young men, who were evidently his sons. "Ter'ble thing," he added, "for three lads like you to be trusted up in th' air with a great, outlandish machine like that!"

"We were carried away in it, sir," said Tom Merry. "It wasn't our choice. We don't even know how to work one."

"Then ye may thank the powers that be ye're not killed," answered the farmer. "But be ye hurt?"

"I'm not, thank you, sir, and I don't think the others are," answered Tom Merry. "Blake, old chap!"

Blake sat up. He tried to speak; but he could make no sound. The breath had been knocked right out of his body. He could only hold his chest, and gasp.

"The lad's fair winded, that's all. Run inside, Ned"—this to one of the young men with him—"and get un a little drop o' my best brandy."

D'Arcy was able to stagger to his feet.

Then the brandy arrived. Blake spluttered at his dose, and gasped as though he would choke. But it brought his breath back. And Tom Merry and D'Arcy were both forced, by the solicitous farmer, to swallow a weak decoction. It tasted worse than any medicine.

"Ye may make wry faces, young sirs," said the farmer, "but that's what I take myself and give to any of my men when we've had a fall from a horse, or maybe out of a trap. And now can ye walk inside so's my good woman may get some food for ye?"

The chums, still feeling shaky, found themselves in the fine, old-fashioned hall of the farmhouse.

A bustling, rosy-faced woman, the farmer's wife, quickly took them in hand, with murmurs of astonishment and sympathy.

They obtained a hot bath each, and never had a hot bath felt so agreeable to the juniors of St. Jim's.

It made new men of them, so to speak, and they donned their clothes, freshly brushed and much cleaner than they had been, with great satisfaction.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus, surveying himself in a glass. "I wegard this as a gweat impwovement, deah boys."

"Yes, rather!"

"I'm feeling jolly hungry, too," said Jack Blake, sniffing as an appetising odour of frying bacon and eggs came floating from downstairs. "I could give Fatty Wynn a turn now with the greatest of pleasure."

"Yaas, wathah! I wondah whethah it would be poss. to obtain a clean collah my size in this wespectable farmhouse?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I weally see no cause for mewwiment in that wemark, Blake."

"Well," grinned Blake, "I suppose the farmer-man doesn't take your size in collars, and his sons would hardly wear the same sort. You'll have to make the same collar do till we get back to St. Jim's, Gussy."

"It is simply a limp wag," said D'Arcy, holding up the very much soiled collar, and gazing at it disparagingly.

"Never mind; shove it on. Think of the grub."

"The thought of the gwub does not afford me so much satisfaction, deah boy, as it would if I had a clean collah."

"Go down without one," suggested Tom Merry.

"Imposs., deah boy!"

And Arthur Augustus carefully rubbed the collar to make it as clean as possible, and donned it before the glass. Quite clean he could not make it; but he could tie his necktie in the fashion that was the envy and despair of the best-dressed fellows at St. Jim's, and that he did. Then the chums went down.

CHAPTER 23.

A Voyage in the Airship.

THE chums, sitting round an old oak table in the kitchen of the farmhouse, clean, and feeling quite brisk, had been doing full justice to eggs and bacon and coffee for five minutes or so, when the farmer burst in from the yard.

"Thar's another balloon affair come sailin' just a-top o' my paddock trees," he said. "D'ye young gentlemen know what un is?"

"Bai Jove! It's the airship, deah boys!"

"Yes, rather!"

The three boys jumped up.

"Now, you young gentlemen must have just another rasher of bacon each, and another cup of coffee," declared the housewife kindly. "I can tell you're famished."

"Really, it's very kind of you," said Tom Merry, "but we can't stop another minute. The captain of this airship has promised to take us back to our school, you see. We mustn't delay him for a moment."

"Oh, ay! If that's case, ye'd better come outside at once," agreed the farmer, with a nod of the head.

When they got into the farmyard, floating serenely just above the level of the farmhouse roof, was the airship. Its bow was to the wind, and the propellers were revolving slowly to keep it in position.

The captain, in his white coat, leant down, and, putting a metal trumpet to his mouth, shouted:

"You boys had a rough descent. But you're not hurt?"

"No, sir; not at all. We got shaken up a bit, that's all," answered Tom Merry.

"Well, look here. If you'd rather wait a bit, and go back by train, you can, of course. Or would you rather come over with me?"

"With you, of course, sir!" shouted back Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Then you'll have to come at once; I can't wait. The wind's getting up a little, and I've only just enough petrol. Will you come now?"

"Certainly, sir," answered Tom Merry. "But what about the balloon lying here?"

The captain spoke now to the farmer.

"Will you have this taken carefully in, and stored in one of your barns? This is a War Office airship. We'll be responsible for any charges there may be. It looks like a German balloon."

"Willingly, sir," answered the farmer. "I'll gather un in so's not scratched or torn on the roof. And we'll keep un till we hear from you—eh?"

"Yes, that's right." The airship captain called an order to his men. The airship settled down another ten or twelve yards. Then, from the centre of the platform, one of the men, turning a wheel, sent down, a foot at a time, a thin telescopic metal ladder.

In a moment or so, it scraped across the yard.

"Will you boys get up as quickly as you can," shouted the captain. "We cannot linger here with the wind rising."

The boys turned to the farmer, and shook hands with him, then they bowed to the farmer's wife. They would have taken off their caps, but they had lost them in the descent. They ascended the ladder to the airship.

D'Arcy went up the ladder last. Before he did so, he turned to the farmer very politely:

"We appweciate youah kindness vewy much indeed, sir," he said, "and youah's too, madam"—turning to the farmer's wife.

The farmer's sons, and the farm labourers, stood in the yard gazing up at the airship with open mouths.

"Right y'are, young sir, thank ye kindly," answered the farmer. "Hope to see ye agin some day, but don't ye come in one of them thar dangerous balloon things."

"Wathah not," said D'Arcy, and started up the ladder. Merry and Blake had reached the top.

There was no shaking or vibration when they stepped upon the platform. It was as steady as the deck of a ship. As D'Arcy reached the top, the captain came walking over towards them.

"Come along here to the locker," he said, "and get some caps and coats. Then you can come up in the front with me, if you like."

"Thank you very much, sir," said Tom Merry.

The captain threw open the lid of a long box at the rear of the platform. It was made of aluminium. He handed out to the boys three long mackintosh coats, which came down to their feet, and three peaked caps.

"And not a bad fit, either," he said, when they had donned them. "Now come forward."

"Stand by," he added, as he walked forward. The man who had been at the wheel relinquished his place. The captain directed the boys to stand behind him.

He twisted round the wheel sharply. Several square, box-shaped devices moved under the front of the gas-bag. The boys also saw that a big canvas rudder out at the rear turned sideways.

"Those in front," said the captain, "are the balancers. They send us up or down without letting out gas, or help us to turn. That at the back is the rudder."

The bow of the airship turned slowly round till it was pointing the other way. Then the captain pressed a button on a little table near his hand. The faint hum of the engines grew to a roar.

The boys put their hands up to their caps, and hastily buttoned up their coats. A moment later they had to clutch the rail at the side of the platform. The rush of air sent tears to their eyes. Far below, the ground became a dim blur.

"We're running with the wind!" shouted the captain. "She'll do fifty miles an hour or more like this."

The rush and roar was too great for conversation. The deck throbbed with the force of the engines. The big propellers were invisible, so great was the speed of their revolutions.

The chums clung to the rails, bending forward against the wind. They saw that the airship was slanting upwards, as well as forging ahead with the speed of an express train.

Arthur Augustus clung to the rail, and put his lips close to Tom Merry's ear to speak.

"Bai Jove, Tom Merry! I wathah like this."

Tom Merry grinned back.

"Yes, rather! It's ripping!"

"It's a gweat deal like the mountain wailway at the Fwanco-Bwitish Exhibish., you know; only wathah more so."

"Ha, ha! Yes."

"Hold on!" exclaimed the captain.

"Yaas, wathah, sir!"

They held on gamely.

Below, when they looked down, was nothing but a dim blur, without shape or colour. Over what part of the country they were passing they did not know. But they did not think of that. The rush of the airship down the wind brought the blood to their cheeks, and made their hearts beat faster with a wild excitement.

"Bwavo!" shouted D'Arcy. "This is simply glowious!"

"Ripping!" gasped Blake.

"Spiffing, my sons!"

"Bai Jove, you know, it beats evewythin'! These chaps are handlin' this machine jolly well, you know. I couldn't possibly do it bettah myself!"

"Go hon, Gussy! You're too modest!"

"Weally Tom Mewwy——"

"We're slackening a bit," gasped Blake, catching his breath. "By Jove, that was a rush! We shall soon be at St. Jim's."

"Yaas, wathah!"

CHAPTER 24.

Back at St. Jim's.

TOM MERRY stepped close to the captain, and shouted in his ear, above the roar:

"May we step back and have a look at the engines, sir?"

They had been staring out ahead for a long time without moving. The chums felt cramped and cold.

"Right!" answered the captain. "But be careful," he shouted, "how you walk down the platform."

But there was not much to be seen of the engines. They were mostly cased in. The two men were oiling bearings every few minutes. The sped of the machinery was tremendous. From the engines to the propellers, the power was transferred by long chains, which ran in tubes.

Suddenly looking round, Tom Merry saw that the captain was beckoning them. They hastened back.

"There," he pointed below, "is Wayland. We've had pretty nearly a record run with this wind behind us."

The boys, looking where he had pointed, saw the market town away in front of them. Beyond could be seen the Castle Hill, and the dark woods that lay around the old school of St. Jim's.

"Now where does your school lie?" asked the captain, touching the button again. The speed of the engines decreased at once.

"Just over there, sir," replied Merry, "well to the right of Wayland. Behind those woods."

"Right!" The captain turned the steering-wheel slightly. The airship altered its course. The engines were set going full speed again.

Merry and Blake craned forward. It was Blake who first saw the familiar grey buildings, and the ivied mass of the old tower.

"There you are, sir! Just there!" He pointed below, just a little to the right.

The captain nodded.

He manœuvred his craft with perfect ease. It began to slope down at a speed that took the juniors' breath away.

Arthur Augustus clung to the rail, and gasped.

"Bai Jove!"

"Hold on, Gussy!"

"I am holdin' on, deah boy!"

"Would you like me to take a grip on your ears, or anything of that sort?" asked Blake. "I don't mind the trouble."

"Weally, Blake!"

"Just say the word, and——"

"I wegard the suggestion as uttahly widiculous. Pway don't be an ass, deah boy. Bai Jove, we shall be down in a minute!"

"Hurrah! Here we are!"

The airship swung round in a graceful half-circle, round the chimneys, and then, with the propellers reversed, sank down upon the stretch of lawn before the windows of the Head's study, facing the quadrangle.

There was a shout at once.

A crowd of boys, seniors and juniors, came tearing up, and prominent among them were Tom Merry's chums of the Shell, Manners and Lowther. School House and New House boys gazed with equal wonder at the strange apparition, and Figgins was the first to spot Tom Merry & Co. on the deck.

He gave a yell.

"Tom Merry!"

"Gussy!" shrieked Digby and Herries.

"Blake!" roared Harry Noble.

Arthur Augustus gracefully raised his peaked cap.

"Yaas, wathah, dear boys! We have weturned."

"Well, of all the rags!" said Monty Lowther. "We'd given you up for lost, Merry, you absolute bounder. I was laying out my last week's pocket-money on crape to shove

round my hat, and Manners has bought a stick of celery to plant upon your tomb."

Tom Merry laughed. In spite of his comical greeting, there were tears in Monty Lowther's eyes as he hugged his chum and fairly dragged him off the airship.

The three juniors were, of course, the heroes of the hour. They ran a very serious risk of being torn to pieces by eager youths in search of information.

There was a sudden hush as the Head was seen advancing from the House. He had seen the airship settle down before his windows, and he was coming out with blank amazement written upon his face. There were lines of care there, too. The disappearance of the three juniors, and their dreaded fate, had told upon the kindly Head of St. Jim's.

He gave a gasp of relief at the sight of the boys.

"Merry! Blake! D'Arcy! Is it—is it really you?"

"Yaas, wathah, sir!"

"Thank Heaven! Alive!"

"We're awfully sorry to have caused you anxiety, sir!" said Tom Merry. "But it wasn't our fault."

"I know that, Merry. Lowther has explained to me how you were carried off in the balloon. I have been very anxious; and I had to inform your old governess, Miss Fawcett, of your danger, as you did not return. She is here."

"Here?"

"Yes. And what is this strange machine? What does it all mean?" said the Head dazedly.

"It's a Government airship, sir," said Blake. "The captain has saved us, and brought us back. I don't know what would have happened if we hadn't met him in the air."

"Yaas, wathah!"

The Head held out his hand to the skipper of the airship, with deep emotion in his face.

"I can only say I am grateful for what you have done," he said. "God bless you."

The captain gripped his hand cordially.

"It was little enough for me to do, sir," he said; "though, of course, it meant much to the boys. I am very glad indeed I came upon them. They are brave lads, sir; and have gone through a great deal which might have shaken the nerves of strong men."

He made a sign to the man at the wheel.

"I must take my leave at once," he said. "I have already expended more time than I was strictly justified in allowing. But I understood what feelings would be excited here by the disappearance of the boys, and I was anxious to bring them back as quickly as possible. Good-bye, sir!"

"Good-bye! And thank you again."

And the captain shook hands with the Head once more, and stepped back upon the deck of the airship.

There was a whirr, and the boys of St. Jim's gazed in blank amazement as the graceful vessel plunged upwards.

Upward, and upward, till she was a dark spot over the ancient school, and at last vanished in the clouds.

The Head drew a deep breath.

"Dear me! It seems like a dream!" he exclaimed.

There was a loud, sharp cry from the direction of the House.

"My darling Tommy!"

And the next moment Tom Merry was clasped in the arms of Miss Priscilla Fawcett.

On more than one occasion Miss Priscilla's affection for her ward had excited smiles at St. Jim's; but the boys did not smile now.

They knew the bitter anxiety the kind old lady had been through, and they felt for her.

Tom Merry kissed her on both cheeks and hugged her.

"It's all right, dear!" he whispered. "I'm not hurt! I've really had a ripping time, when you come to think of it."

"My darling child!" sobbed Miss Priscilla. "How anxious I have been! You are sure you are not hurt?"

"Quite sure, dear! I don't look hurt, do I?"

"You did not—not get your feet wet?"

"Ha, ha! I mean, no; my feet are all right!"

"Yaas, wathah, they're all wight, except on the point of size!" Arthur Augustus remarked. "We're all all wight, deah madam!"

The chums were marched into the House amid an hurrahing crowd. There had seldom been such excitement at St. Jim's, even over the biggest football match of the season.

Miss Fawcett was satisfied at last that her dear Tommy was quite safe and sound.

The three juniors were called into the Head's study, and there they had to give a full account of their adventures.

"Extraordinary!" exclaimed the Head.

And Miss Priscilla, who was present to hear the recital, echoed his words.

"Extraordinary, indeed! How fortunate for these dear boys that my darling Tommy was with them, to look after them!"

"Bai Jove!" murmured D'Arcy to Blake. "I was just thinkin' that it was lucky for you chaps that I was with you."

"How curious!"

"What's cuwious, deah boy?"

"Why, I was just thinking how lucky it was for you and Tom Merry that I happened to be with you!"

"Weally, Blake, you must admit that that is widiculous!"

When the juniors were dismissed—unpunished, but with strict commands never to enter a strange balloon again under any circumstances whatever—they were immediately surrounded by a crowd of juniors, and marched off.

Fatty Wynn, in the fulness of his heart, had started a subscription to stand the returned wanderers a gigantic feed, and the money simply rolled in.

Such a feed had seldom been seen before at the old school.

Fatty Wynn was a master of the art of standing a feed; and it was a gigantic success.

Over the feed the juniors had to relate their adventures a dozen times at least.

"You must have enjoyed those sausages!" Fatty Wynn remarked. That was the part of the story that had struck him most.

"Yaas, wathah, deah boy!"

"Well, we're jolly glad to see you back again!" said Harry Noble.

"What-ho!" said Figgins. "Here's to the giddy balloonists, in ginger-pop!"

And the toast was drunk with enthusiasm.

"Thank you vewy much, deah boys!" said Arthur Augustus, taking it upon himself to reply. "We are vewy glad to be back at the old school. We are enjoyin' this feed wippingly. Pewwaps the pleasantest thing of all is to get into a clean shirt and a decent suit of clothes. But evewythin' is vewy pleasant. I must add, howevah, that in my opinion we thwee have now a bettah claim to the title of "The Tewwible Thwee" than Studay No. 1 have. We will adopt the title for the futchah."

"Very well, then, we will be the Terrible Three—for one week only!" said Tom Merry laughingly.

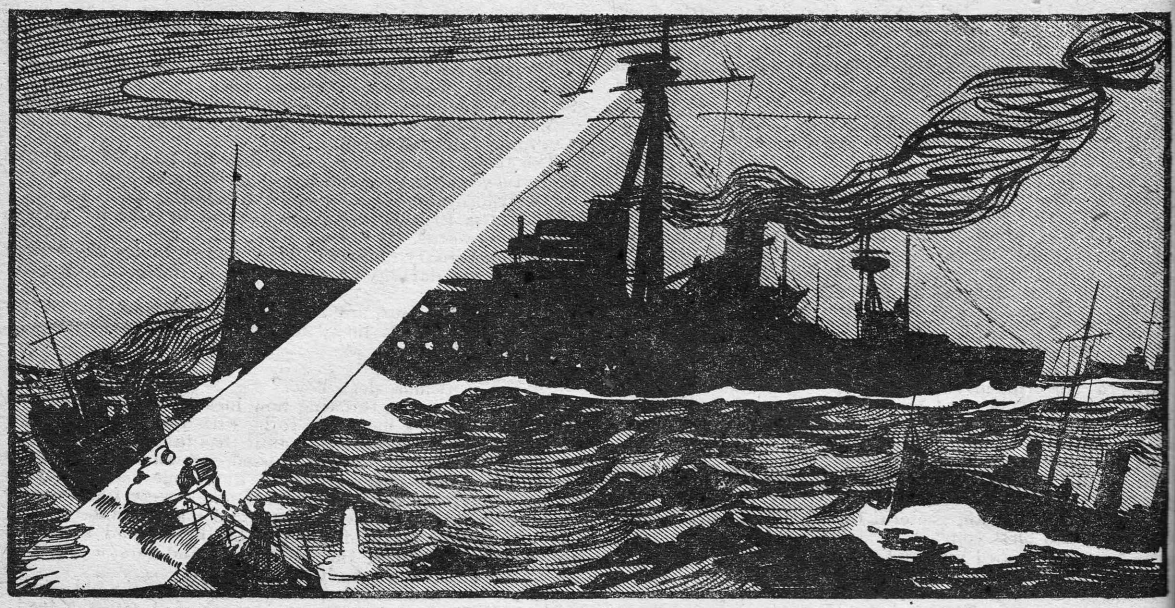
"Hear, hear!" shouted the juniors, amid laughter.

And so, cheerily enough, ended Tom Merry's most perilous adventure.

THE END.

Please tell your Friends about this Story.

BRITAIN AT BAY.



A Powerful and Stirring War Story.

THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

Sam and Stephen Villiers, two cadets of Greyfriars School, by a combination of luck and pluck render valuable service to the British Army during the great German invasion. They are appointed special scouts to the Army, which is forced back on London by Von Krantz, the German commander. At the time when this instalment opens, Sam and Stephen have just come up the Thames with important news for Lord Ripley. Hearing that the whole of North London is in German hands, they go thither and investigate. Before very long, however, they make the City too hot to hold them, and are forced to make for the South side of the Thames again. "We'll give our old landing place a wide berth," says Stephen, as they reach the water-side one evening at dusk. "There will be German pickets there, and they'll fire on anybody who tries to go afloat."

(Now go on with the Story.)

A Prize.

"If only we could find a boat!" said Stephen, nodding heavily. "Phew! but I'm tired—ain't you?"

Somehow, the stress of the bank's siege had told on them more than far longer spells when the work was not so hot. Sam was as weary as his brother, and when, after reaching the little wharf and sheds which Sam had chosen, and finding them deserted, both the boys made their way into the empty boathouse, and throwing themselves on a heap of old barge-sails, fell asleep almost before they were stretched out on their rough bed.

When Stephen woke he sat up, rubbed his eyes, and stared. The first thing he noticed was that the moon had set, and it was very dark, for he could see out across the river. The brothers often enough told their time by the sun in daylight and the moon at night, and Stephen received a shock. He woke his brother at once.

"Sam," he said, in a low voice, "I say, we've overslept ourselves frightfully. The moon's down, and if I remember her course it must be close on daylight."

Sam was amazed and disgusted.

"So it is! You can feel it in the air. Hang it, this is disgraceful! We've never done it before."

"Must have been absolutely dog-tired. We'd better bustle or we sha'n't get across before it's light."

They hurriedly swallowed some hard biscuit, and set out to explore for a boat, which they had been too tired to do the evening before. A short search found that there was no boat to be had. This disconcerted them. There used always to be plenty of dinghys at Spiggott's Wharf, and they counted on finding one. There were one or two lighters moored out in the river, beyond reach. From one of them came sounds that caught the ears of the brothers, and made them halt. They listened for some time.

"Germans!" whispered Sam; "and aboard that barge that's lying at the buoy, with the mast along her deck. They must be in the cabin."

"An' drunk, too," commented Stephen, "by the sound. Hear 'em singing! How the dickens can they have got aboard, though? There's no boat made fast to her."

"Didn't tie it up properly, I suppose. There's a strong ebb-tide running, an' German soldiers aren't much of hands in boats. They must have got away on leave, gone aboard her, an' found liquor. There's generally liquor on those barges—often smuggled. They'll get shot for it, I reckon. Must have been away all night. Bad as desertion in time of war."

"All the more reason for us to get away. There'll be a search-party down after 'em as soon as it's light."

"Yes," said Sam coolly, "we'll go, an' take them with us. We can't swim right across river in this tide, but we can swim to that barge."

"What! But how——"

"We can't raise her mast, but she'll have sweeps (long oars), and we can slip her moorings an' pull her over towards the other side, across the ebb. As for those swabs in the cabin, we'll get aboard quiet an' slam the hatches over 'em. I fancy they're past givin' much trouble."

"Gee-whizz!" said Stephen. "I never thought of barging over, especially with a crew like that."

"There's no other way. Those lighters aren't any use an' probably they've no sweeps. Come on! No need to take off anything; it's a short swim."

Without any more words the boys went down over the muddy foreshore, and walked quietly into the water. The last of the ebb-tide was running out fast, and already it

sky was becoming light. The water struck chill, and the current was strong, but the boys were first-rate swimmers, and soon they were alongside the barge.

The sound of revelry inside her was now so uproarious that they wondered nobody had been brought to the neighbourhood by it. The brothers hauled themselves aboard—there was nobody on deck—and crept quietly to the skylight of the cabin in the stern. They looked down through the glass.

It was not a pleasing sight that met them. Eight or nine burly German linesmen, flushed and dishevelled, were carousing over a case of square gin-bottles, several of which lay about empty. Their weapons were all over the place; they were roaring a hoarse chorus in different keys, and three of them lay senseless on the floor. One picked up an empty bottle, and smashed it fiercely against the table with a loud shout.

Sam nodded to his brother, and taking the sliding hatch on either side, they slammed it home with a loud bang, and Stephen snapped the hasp over into its place. The drinking-party were fairly caught, for there was no way out of the cabin except through the hatch, now closed from outside. Stephen laughed aloud as he heard the party falling over each other and swearing down below.

"Slip those moorings!" cried Sam, catching up a fifteen-foot oar from the deck; and in a twinkling Stephen had cast the buoy-chain off the bitts, and the barge began to drift down with the tide. He seized the other sweep—all sailing barges carry two, to help them in calms—and using the shrouds for a rowlock, tugged away with all his might. It takes a lot of pulling to get much way on a Thames sailing barge; but the craft was light-laden, and they got her well away from the land, driving down and across river on a long slant, allowing for the current. The stars had paled, and the world was beginning to waken to a new day; but those in the cabin did not seem to appreciate it. They howled and kicked, and there were violent but spasmodic batterings on the hatch, and then sounds of strife among themselves.

"Batter away, you beauties," said Stephen, tugging at his oar. "You may thank your lucky stars for bein' prisoners, for a drum-head court-martial an' a firing-party 'ill be the end of you if we didn't take you with us. You won't get much to eat yonder, but you won't be shot."

"Pull away," said Sam, "and don't talk so much!"

An empty gin-bottle came crashing up through the sky-light, and presently a purple face was stuck through the hole and glared at the boys; but its owner was too big to get through the small skylight, and it disappeared again. More battering at the hatch followed, and more bad language.

"They're too full up to do any damage," said Sam. "Heave away at her! We're half-way over now."

The barge was about in the centre of the river, still drifting downwards slightly, though the tide had eased. Sam and Stephen were in the bows, each tugging at his sweep, for she needed no hand at the helm. The British shore—the south—was their goal, and their spirits rose as they neared it, for neither had expected to reach it again a few hours before.

Suddenly there was a tremendous bursting crash, and the cabin hatch was knocked right out of its guides. Up through the opening scrambled seven or eight of the Germans, weapons in hand.

The boys, for the moment, were taken by surprise. They had made a mistake in supposing the Germans too intoxicated to be dangerous, for these were all savagely drunk and bent on mischief. The discovery that they were prisoners in English hands had half-sobered them, and out they came like a swarm of wasps.

"Look out!" cried Sam, running his sweep aboard and drawing out his revolver. "Hold 'em back, Steve!"

It was easier said than done. The Germans paused for a moment, and then came on with a mad rush. The distance was so short that the pistols stood no chance against so many.

But before the first shot was fired—before the attackers had covered a yard of the deck—a stunning shock was felt. There was a dull boom, a heavy, thudding explosion under the barge's stern, and her timbers rent and split as she was lifted bodily up in the air stern first on a great fountain of water, while those aboard her were flung in all directions. Then she came down, a shattered, riven hulk, and sank bodily.

The Great Meeting at Deptford.

Sam and Stephen were sent staggering as the hull lifted under them, and as both fell heavily they felt the stern of the barge go bodily down under them. In an instant they were up to their waists in swirling water, and then were clear of the sinking vessel, while the Germans plunged into the tide all round them from the lifted bows.

"Strike out! Get clear of her!" spluttered Sam as he came to the surface, his brother a few feet away. The river vessel was going down in a small whirlpool of its own, and littered planks and wreckage were all around.

"Ough! Did she blow up? Must have been stuffed with gunpowder!" puffed Stephen.

"Rot! Something hit her from outside," said Sam, treading water; for he realised that they owed their lives to the fact that the explosion had vented itself on the back part of the barge. "Get your wind, and we'll strike out for the shore! Those beggars——"

"Look out behind you!" cried Stephen warningly.

A big, floundering German, who evidently could not swim, was kicking and thrashing about wildly not far from Sam. He gurgled frantically, swallowing pints of muddy salt water; and suddenly, with the stupid instinct of the drowning, clutched hold of Sam, and clung to him like a limpet.

"Let go! Let go, you frightened lump of putty!" exclaimed Sam; for the big German was in a fair way to drown them both.

Sam was so hampered by the man that he could not keep himself afloat and the sight was so ridiculous that Stephen could do nothing but laugh. The boys were as much at home in the water as a pair of young otters; but suddenly becoming alarmed, Stephen swam to the rescue. Sam dealt with the German before his brother arrived, however.

"Won't you let go, you swab?" snorted Sam, and as he said the words he dived bodily, taking the man with him.

They were down so long that Stephen's anxiety increased, when at last Sam reappeared by himself; and the German bobbed up a little later, with a beautiful black eye. The floundering men got hold of a piece of wreckage a few moments later, and clung to that, while the boys struck out for the shore as fast as their sodden clothes would let them.

Three or four of the Germans had been killed or disabled by the explosion, and had sunk like stones. The others were not much the worse, and were now wholly sober. One or two howled epithets at the boys, but most were too much taken up with their own affairs to trouble about anything else. Some could swim, and some could not.

The boys did not worry about their late enemies. It was all they could do to reach the shore themselves, heavily clad as they were; and if the tide had still been running hard, they could not have succeeded. It was just on low water, however, and the current was nearly slack.

"What about the crew?" panted Stephen, as at last they touched bottom at the edge of the mud on the south shore.

"Blow the crew; let 'em take a run!" said Sam. "If they can get away, they're welcome to now; and, after all, we sha'n't be thanked for takin' prisoners ashore. Grub's too scarce."

"What on earth was it?" said Stephen, crawling rather painfully out on to the flat, soft mud, and letting the water pour from his clothes. "I thought it was an earthquake!"

"Torpedo, I think; though where it came from an' how it got there is more than Solomon could tell us. Must have struck a loose one, I s'pose; but it's no time to talk about that. Wrestle along the edge of the mud till we get to the hard-way there."

The Thames ooze runs out a long way at low water thereabouts, and to struggle through it to the wharves would have been a long task, for it is soft as putty.

The brothers waded down the edge for a short distance, till they found a "hard," and along this they made their way to the shore itself. A long, low wharf fronted on the river, and a sentry of the Royal Engineers, who had been watching the dripping pair come up the hard-way, challenged them.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

"Friends," said Stephen, and he added: "You moke, can't you see we're just out of the water?"

"Can't land here!" said the sentry woodenly. "Go farther down—next wharf. This is the sappers'."

"I'm Lieutenant Villiers, and I'm comin' ashore here!" said Sam, mounting the wharf stairs.

The sentry seemed rathed nonplussed; but as the boys came up on the quay a spruce-looking and youthful Engineer subaltern stepped out of a tin shed.

"Hallo," he said, putting up an eyeglass, "are you off that barge?"

"Yes," said Sam—"precious well off it, too!"

"Sh'd rather think so, by Jove!" said the Engineer calmly. "Saw some Germans there; didn't notice you. Prisoners—eh?"

"It's the other way about. They were our prisoners—at least, till they busted the hatch open," said Stephen. "But they were all very drunk."

"Really? That's awf'lly interestin', said the subaltern. "I say, my mine hoisted her up neatly—eh, what?"

"A mine!" exclaimed Sam. "Was that it? We wondered what on earth——"

"Rather! We've mined the river right across in several

places, in case any German store-ships or gunboats run up, don't you know, like they did when London was first taken. Of course, we've command of the Thames again now, so we're makin' sure. I'm in charge of this set of mines. No secret about 'em. Fired by electric current from my shed here. See?"

"Great Scott!" said Sam. "Then did you see us just when——"

"Oh, no; had orders to test the mines! Poor fun touchin' 'em off for nothing, though, so when I saw that barge driftin' down with Germans on her, I thought she'd do. Acted rippin' well—eh?"

"Gosh, I should think it did!" said Stephen feelingly.

"Never knew you were on it," added the subaltern, polishing his eyeglass with a silk handkerchief. "Thought it'd blow 'em up a bit higher. However, it wasn't bad. Any more saved from the wreck?"

"One or two drifting about on planks, I think," said Stephen, grinning.

"Ah, well, we don't want 'em here. Precious short commons, I can tell you; none to spare for feedin' prisoners. I'm pleased at the way the mine went, though. This is my first job in charge."

"Doesn't it warn the Germans where the mines are, though?" suggested Sam.

"Oh, we don't mind showin' 'em! Less trouble, you see; they'll chuck tryin' to sneak vessels up. Our Fleet's still north; an' there ain't much guard at the mouth of the Thames. I say, are you Service chaps?" he added, glancing curiously at the boys' sodden and war-worn clothes. "What corps?"

"Greyfriars Cadets."

"By Jove! The two Essex scouts? Not really? Jolly glad to meet you—heard lots about you! I say, will you lunch with me? An' my orderly'll dry your kit."

"We shall be very glad," said Sam, hesitating, "if we sha'n't be running you short——"

"Oh, no; we're flush of rations just now. My orderly's the finest thief on the river front. Pinched a couple of hams yesterday, meant for some fat publican's feed in Lambeth. Had 'em decently cooked, an' they're just ready in the tin house. Come along!"

Whizz! Pack!

A bullet flattened itself on the iron bollard just beside him. The distant crack of the rifle from the opposite shore was heard, and then a sharp fusillade rang out, and the leaden messengers came thick and fast.

A Cool Luncheon-Party.

The subaltern hurried himself not in the least as the shots came thicker and pattered about the wharf. He did not even shift his eyeglass.

"Not much cover here," suggested Sam, as a bullet sang past his head.

"No; they've spotted us from across the river. Guessed this is the mine-station, I suppose," said the subaltern with a yawn. "They had a go at us yesterday, just the same. But very poor shootin'; no fear of bein' hit. Come in an' have lunch."

The two brothers were not at all sorry to get out of reach of the bullets, of which their host thought so little.

Before they reached the house a small field-gun began to bark from the German side of the river, and a shell knocked one of the wharf piles into splinters.

The subaltern took no notice. He showed his guests into the tin shed—which stood behind an old brick outhouse, backed with bags of earth—as cooly as if he were entertaining a luncheon-party at Aldershot.

"They haven't been long gettin' their guns to work," said Stephen.

"Oh, that little popper is always there. She's mounted on one of their wharves. We don't trouble to reply to her," said the young officer. "This tin shanty is protected well enough. They can't reach it with those shells. You'd like those clothes dried, wouldn't you? I'll lend you some old togs."

The shed was divided into two parts, the outer being the one in which they stood, and it contained a table and chairs.

Beyond the division the boys caught sight of electric machines and wires.

It was a smaller but more up-to-date station than the memorable one on Sheppey. The boys at once got out of their dripping clothes, and put on some old ones which the subaltern produced. He introduced himself as Sub-Lieutenant Vernon, R.E.

"Still hammerin' away outside!" said Stephen as they changed. "Don't seem to be doin' much damage, though," he added, as the shells were heard smacking upon the heavy walls beyond the shed.

"No. Adequate chap, our host," said Sam, putting on a full-skirted dressing-gown as Vernon came in again.

"Lunch is ready, you chaps," said the subaltern. "Expect you're hungry after your swim. Eh—what?"

The orderly had laid a rough but very sufficient meal, consisting of the ham and a tin of lunch-biscuits.

Vernon carved the ham, paying no attention to the row outside, and the boys fell to thankfully.

"It's not the swim so much as feedin' on those beastly emergency rations—compressed food pellets—like we did last night," said Stephen, attacking his portion in a determined way. "We oughtn't to grumble at 'em, for they're very handy at times, though."

"An' precious scientific, I don't doubt," added Sam; "but what a fellow wants on service is bulk in his inside, not pellets. They're wastin' a lot of bullets on the walls," he said thoughtfully, as the drumming of the German lead rose louder. "What on earth for?"

"I've stuck a couple of uniformed dummies on the wharf and called my sentries in," said Vernon, letting his eyeglass drop. "No use wastin' sentries. It's a bit foggy over the river, an' the Germans ain't likely to spot the little deception with their glasses. They're shootin' a little better now, an' they've plugged one dummy through the belt, and the other's got it where his face ought to be. They'll be a bit annoyed when they're able to see what they're doin'."

Stephen chuckled.

"Can't afford to waste men, you know," added Vernon. "Rather short of 'em on this job. I say, d'you mind passin' the——"

Crash!

A small shell with a fuse spouting smoke—a thing the boys had never seen before—smashed through the tin roof, and, hitting the edge of the table, fell to the floor, and lay there sputtering. The boys started up from their seats as if they had sat on springs.

"Great Scott!" gasped Stephen.

And on the instant he made a leap towards the shell, meaning to try and hurl it through the door before it exploded; but Vernon caught him by the ear.

"All right; don't get up," he said, putting a piece of biscuit in his mouth with the other hand. "No harm in that."

"Let go! It'll blow the place to pieces!" cried Stephen, while Sam, who was on the other side of the table, expected every instant that the shell would annihilate them all.

"It won't go off," said the subaltern calmly. "Have a slice more ham, won't you? Saunders, bring that bottle cider."

So perfectly cool was he that the two boys, lost in surprise, actually sat and watched the shell; while the orderly, without even glancing at it, poured them out some cider.

Sure enough, the smoking fuse sputtered and fizzled out, and Saunders, when next he passed, contemptuously set the shell trundling out through the door with a jerk of his foot.

"My aunt!" said Sam, drawing a long breath. "You've a cool hand. I thought we were all as good as corpses. How on earth did you guess the thing wasn't goin' to explode?"

"Oh, they never do," replied Vernon, helping himself to mustard. "We've had lots of 'em droppin' round here, though that's the first that found its way inside. Must have ricked off the wall. They only fizzle."

"Phew! I never knew there were any shells like that nowadays," said Stephen. "It looked like the sort of thing you read about in Crimea times. I thought shells with fuses were as old as——"

"Oh, it's a new patent," said Vernon, "something on the old lines. They haven't brought it out long, an' they think it's no end of a good thing for this sort of work. Must have acted a bit better on trial, I should think, for out of fifty or twenty here I've never seen one go off yet. I dissected one of 'em to see how it works. Sort of new-fashioned grenade, you know."

"Beastly scientific the Germans are!" grinned Stephen.

"Most of their things are all right. They think a lot of this one, but I call it a rotten idea. Told one of the artillery lieutenants so, who was brought in a prisoner a week, an' he got quite huffy about it. By the way, what are you fellows off to?"

The boys glanced at each other.

"I don't think we need trouble headquarters any more," said Sam. "We've seen some service in the last forty hours, but our report don't amount to much. We'd like to see Devine, of the Fusiliers, in the Tower Bridge garrison, though. He can——"

"Devine? Why, he's coming here," said the subaltern, "to arrange about defences. I asked him to lunch, but suppose he couldn't manage that. We——"

"Captain Devine, sir!" announced the orderly at the door, and the acting-adjutant of the Fusiliers walked in.

"Morning, Vernon!" he said. "Couldn't get here before. How—— Hallo! Where on earth did you blow in from?"

The amazed Devine shook hands heartily with Sam and Stephen, who laughed to see his surprise.

"Pals of yours, Devine?" said Vernon.

"Rather! I can tell you, I never expected to see you young 'un's again, after you started across the river. What are the dressin'-gowns for? Have you turned into Cossacks?"

"Only a temporary rig Lieutenant Vernon's been good enough to lend us," said Sam. "I say, I wish you could send up to the bridge for our uniforms, which we left with you. We've been in mufti two days."

"I'll get 'em down for you at once," said Devine, and gave the message. "I'm precious hungry," he added, sitting down and tackling the ham. "Uncommon well you do yourself, Vernon. Wish we had as good a thief as flourishes in the bridge guard. My man never can pinch anything but dog-biscuits, an' stale cheese. Well, young 'uns, what have you been up to on the other side? Did you see anything of the row there yesterday? There were some rare shines in the City, I heard."

"What row?" said Sam.

"Well, for one thing, the German standard on the Mansion House was pulled down, an' kept down for over an hour, for I noticed it myself. Everybody's been wonderin'. I s'pose you were somewhere down east, though. D'you know who did it?"

Stephen looked at his brother, and they both grinned. Neither of them were keen to talk about the previous day's affair, which both now thought rather foolish; but Devine caught the look, and presently drew from them the story of the beleaguered bank.

"That beats cock-fightin'!" said Devine, lighting a pipe. "If I didn't know you I wouldn't believe it. Neither of you have any business to be alive after it, it seems to me. Yes, it was smart, but it does nobody any particular good, an' you've done much better work, if not so showy."

"I know," said Sam, "it was a bit that way, but we hadn't any choice. We got let in for it by the fellows in the house, so we did our best. They'd quite made up their minds about dyin'; but I always think that's poor fun. However, it was Lieutenant Vernon here who nearly blasted us sky-high."

"You two youngsters are hot stuff, 'pon my word!" said Devine.

The firing outside had ceased now, and all was quiet.

"So you found it was true what I told you about the executions over there?" said Devine.

"Yes, the beasts!" cried Stephen explosively. "Women, shot down with the rest! Since I've seen that, I say no quarter ought to be given to any German on British soil. If one grave could hold the lot, they ought to have it."

"It's partly because Von Krantz is gettin' anxious, I believe," said Vernon. "He sees what a hornets' nest he's in among all these millions of Londoners. The Kaiser ordered him to occupy London. He's got a huge army, of course, but he'll have his hands full with these street uprisings all the time. You see, he reckoned on the people being cowed, but they aren't. So he tries to cow them with these savage executions."

"The more hopeless things are for us the more desperate they get," said Devine.

"That's it!" cried Sam. "An' that's why you can't beat 'em. The more you corner a Britisher the more dangerous he gets. I say that if the people could get weapons—any kind of weapons—an' all pull together, they could smash Von Krantz yet, an' all his army! Look at the millions of us there are!"

"That's what Mulholland says," interjected Devine, "an' he's getting hold of the people, too! I believe——"

"Who's he?"

"Haven't you heard? Why, he's waking up the country, man! I tell you!"

"We haven't heard any politics while we've been away, an' didn't much want to," grunted Sam. "The Parliamentary gas——"

"Politics be hanged! This chap Mulholland is—well, nobody knows who he is, but he's a precious strong man in his way. He's rousin' the people up to fight. Some want to give in, you know. Others say we've no chance, an' may as well go on till they finish us off. But Mulholland won't—he says we can win, an' that the men of Britain, though they lose a dozen for every German they kill, will drive the Kaiser's Army back into the sea. An' nobody cares much for his own life now—things have got so cheap, and food is so scarce. Mulholland's startin' a sort of league, I believe. He's an old footballer, they say, an' knows how to rouse the public up, anyhow. This league of——"

"That's what's wanted! It's the very thing!" exclaimed Sam. "Where's this chap hang out? How does he——"

"He's goin' to address a huge meeting to-day in the cattle-sheds at Deptford, I hear. There'll be thousands there, I expect."

"I vote we go!" said Stephen. "I'd like to hear what his cure is. He looks like hittin' the right nail, by what you say. My eye, what a struggle it'll be if it comes off!"

"It sounds pretty tough," said Vernon doubtfully. "I don't quite see what even millions of badly-armed men are goin' to do against a big, perfectly-trained army, with hundreds of first-class guns an' cavalry, and smart leaders. There'll be oceans of blood shed—perhaps uselessly."

"The people have got to face it now," said Devine gravely. "They've brought it on themselves. They wouldn't have universal service—didn't want to waste their time learnin' soldiering, except for a few Volunteers. Preferred to rely on the fleet, an' pay for our little standing Army. Well, we chaps did our best; about half of us are wiped out, an' the Germans have swamped us by sheer numbers."

"So now the people have to foot the bill," said Vernon, with a whistle. "Well, there's no doubt they've pluck enough now they're cornered, but I believe it'll be just slaughter for the lot of 'em. They've started too late."

"Mulholland doesn't think so. Here come your clothes, Villiers."

"On with 'em, Steve!" said Sam, as the package arrived, and their well-worn and cherished campaign kit turned out of it. "Let's get to Deptford and see."

Mulholland and the League.

As the boys made their way eastwards past the southern docks and towards Rotherhithe, the signs of the movement were plain enough. Men were moving that way from all directions, gaunt and haggard, many of them ragged and starving. But their spirits were not broken. There was the same dogged look about nearly all of them.

Here and there, at street corners, little meetings were in progress. Open-air orators were haranguing anybody who would listen to them. Some were cursing the Government, others were urging the mob to loot houses and upset everything, and others again were calling loudly to have the war stopped at any cost, and surrender made to Germany at once.

A good many listened, and seemed to agree; but the boys saw one of these meetings broken up by starving yet determined patriots, and the speech-maker man handled severely and had to run for it.

But all these were little meetings; the main flow of people went steadily on towards Deptford, and when the huge new store-sheds that had recently been built came in sight, the crowd was seen making its way into them.

"It's going to be a pretty big meeting," said Sam to a man who overtook them.

"Yus," said the man, a sharp-looking, strongly-built Cockney, who looked as if he had had his last meal two days ago, "what we're all goin' for is more than I could tell yer."

"He must be a great man, this chap Mulholland," suggested Stephen.

"Barmy, I should say," grunted the man, "by wot I've 'eard."

"All these folks wouldn't go to hear a madman speak, would they?"

"Who knows? There might be somethin' in it," said the man, in a listless voice; "if it's any scheme that could get us food, it's a draw. An' if 'e can show any way o' gettin' back at those devils yonder, I'm on!"

He jerked his thumb towards the north side of the river, and his sunken eyes flashed.

"I wouldn't care 'ow soon a bullet found me, if I could settle one or two o' them first," he said quietly. And, turning his back on the boys, he entered the sheds.

When Sam and Stephen went in, they found the huge iron building rapidly filling. It was like a great railway terminus without any lines or platforms, and every sound echoed in it. At one end a rough platform of piled boxes had been set up, but as yet there was no one on it.

The place was soon packed like a case of herrings, and the boys were only just in time to find a way to a place fairly near the front, and not far from one of the extremities of the platform. In a like while there was no more room at all, and crowds were pressing outside the six open double doors. A buzz of sound filled the place, but presently it was stilled, as a man walked out of the back and mounted the platform.

A scattered cheer rang out from many parts of the building, but from others there was silence, followed by a growing chorus of laughter that became a roar.

"Who is he?" said Stephen to the man next him.

"Mulholland," was the curt reply. The man Stephen had questioned was one of those who had cheered.

Both the boys stared in surprise. They had expected to see some great, commanding presence, who would hold the

people by his look. Instead, they saw a figure so strange that he might have walked out of a show.

A tall, wild-eyed man, powerfully-built, with a shock of tawny hair, and a fierce, starved expression, like the rest of them. That was Mulholland. But at the next glance you saw something about him that made you look longer. His eye, though wild-looking, was keen as an eagle's, and there seemed to come a sort of invisible power from him that held the attention.

"That man's a leader," said Sam, under his breath. "He's born to command. Wonder who he can be?"

The solitary occupant of the platform took no notice of the laughter. It died down suddenly, and there was silence.

"How many of you are there here," he said, running his eye swiftly over the crowd—"two thousand? No, two thousand and fifty."

His voice carried to every corner of the hall, and the crowd listened intently.

"And all beaten! Every one of you starving, while the Kaiser's army holds England. Every man of you ready to knuckle under to the German Eagle!"

"No!" shouted the crowd, in angry protest.

"You'll have to do it, or starve to death. They've got us cornered. The Army's driven back; the Fleet can't help us here ashore. There's only one power that can save us, and that's——"

"Heaven," said a grave, deep voice from the crowd. It came from a tall clergyman.

"Ay!" said Mulholland. "Heaven helps those that help themselves! Is there any man here afraid to die?"

"No!" roared the crowd, in deep tones. The people were growing strangely moved.

"You've little enough need to fear it! Is there a man among you who hasn't lost his home, his living, and all he owned? Haven't half of you seen your houses blazing, and your comrades—your wives and children, too—mown down by the shell-fire that those brutes hurled into a defenceless city? Aren't they shooting down, even now, every man or woman who as much as cries out against them?"

The hoarse murmur of the crowd grew to a roar that stilled again.

"How many Germans are there holding London," cried Mulholland—"two hundred thousand? I say, let London rise! Let every Briton whose hand can hold a weapon rise against the invader! Drive him into the sea!"

The roar broke out again, and became a long, hoarse cheer.

"Where are the weapons?" cried several voices.

"We'll find you weapons!" cried Mulholland, his voice ringing like a trumpet. "I have fifty agents at work even now, and what we want is men! Men who care nothing for their lives—who'll rise when the signal's given. Not breaking out in small street riots, but in one great movement that shall overwhelm the Germans on every side!"

"You'll have no easy victory! You will be facing trained troops, perfectly armed, and ten of you may fall for every German that bites the dust. But we shall win! They cannot annihilate a whole nation; and through England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland our men will rise, all ready to fight to the death! And the cry will be: 'No quarter! No quarter, and no prisoners!'"

Again came the fierce cheers from the crowd, who were carried away by the man's fierce words.

"They have had no mercy on us or ours! Have none on them! Thousands of the innocent and helpless have fallen. Let not a German remain alive in Britain. The League of Britons will be our name, and we are the manhood of the nation. I ask you to join us, and hold yourselves ready for the signal! Wipe out this insult to your nation, and raise the old colours again!"

"We will! While there's a man of us alive, we'll stand to them!" roared the crowd. "Mulholland—Mulholland!"

"The fate of the country rests on you—you are the last hope. The Germans know of this movement. They laugh at it, and despise us. I say that, even though we had knives and clubs for weapons, we should crush them! They have yet to learn what it means to drive Britons to bay!"

He broke off, and gazed keenly at the front ranks.

"Are there any of you who hang back?" he cried. "If so, I can put you to shame! I see two among you who are little more than boys, and yet they have served Britain from the outset at the risk of their lives. They have a record I'd be proud to own, for I recognise them. Two Volunteer cadets, nothing more and yet they were the first to face the enemy while Britain slept! Will you show yourselves less men than they?"

There was a commotion round the foremost ranks.

"It's the young Villiers' cadets! The Essex scouts!" shouted eight or ten voices, to the great discomfort of the boys, who had not bargained for this. "Cheer for 'em, lads! Up on the platform with 'em! Put 'em alongside Mulholland!"

"Yes; let's have them here! I've a word to say to such as them!" said Mulholland.

Sam and Stephen protested vigorously, and Stephen kicked out; but there was no help for it, and they were hoisted bodily up on the platform, willy-nilly. The great crowd cheered till the roof rang again.

The brothers, before that sea of faces, felt more confused than ever they had in front of the enemy, but there was no escape for them.

"Silence for the young 'uns!" shouted a score of voices. "Let's hear what they've got to say. They've played the game from start to finish, an' they're the luckiest mascots in the South. Speak up Villiers!"

"Tell them something," said Mulholland, after he had gripped the boys' hands. "They believe in your luck, and it'll be a help."

"Go on, Sam," said Stephen. "I'm blowed if I can say anything!"

There was a silence as Sam stepped to the front, and all eyes were fixed on him.

"You don't need to listen to me," he said, in a clear, boyish voice. "You've a fifty times better man here; and what he says is right. We've been in North London these two days, and we've seen enough. The people there will rise at the word, as you will, too! They only want organising, and you've got the man who can do it. Even now, the German flag was kept low for an hour, as you've seen——"

"Was it you who did that?" yelled a hundred excited voices.

"Never mind who did it. Seven men kept the flag down for an hour; and you can keep it down for good, and tread it in the dust, if you try. Now, I'll tell you the little I know. The Channel is ours again; food and arms are coming in! There are whole shiploads of rifles on the way for those who'll use them. Canada, South Africa, Australia—all the colonies are sending armed men to help us, and soon they will be here. Join with them in your millions, and tread the enemy under! You'll be shot down in battalions as Mulholland tells you. But before the month is out the German eagle's wings will be trailing in the dust—only flinch at nothing. Here's to the League of Britons—three times three!"

The mighty crash of cheers drowned every other sound. The great crowd shouted with all the force of its lungs, for Mulholland and for Villiers.

"I thank you heartily," said Mulholland, with deep feeling, to the boys aside, as soon as he could be heard. "The people are red-hot for a fight. Will you join me in the League?"

(Another long instalment of this splendid serial next week.)

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