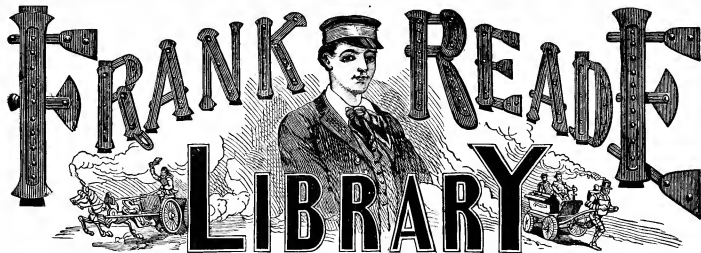


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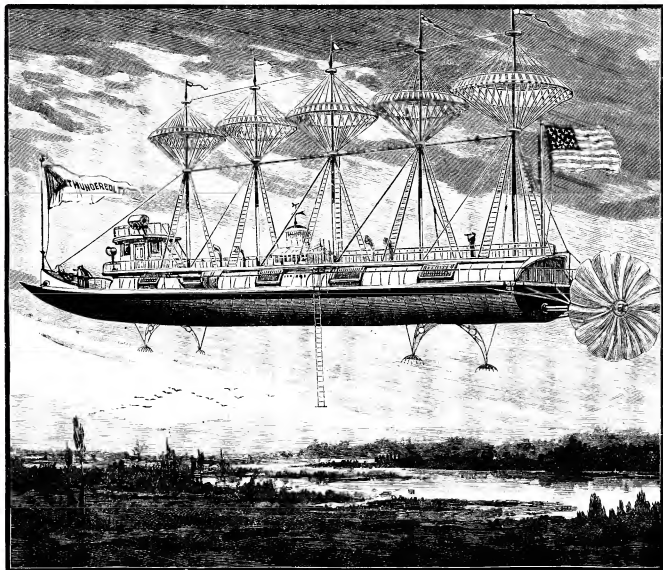
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Six Weeks in the Clouds;

or, Frank Reade, Jr.'s Air-Ship, the
Thunderbolt of the Skies.

By "NONAME."



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Six Weeks in the Clouds;

OR,

Frank Reade, Jr.'s Air-Ship the Thunderbolt of the Skies.

By "NONAME,"

Author of "Frank Reade, Jr., and His Electric Cruiser of the Lakes," "Frank Reade, Jr., and His Electric Prairie Schooner," "From Zone to Zone," "The Black Range," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

A ROMANTIC WEDDING.

ONE morning in August, 18—, a man of distinguished appearance alighted from a carriage before the entrance to the machine works of Frank Reade, Jr., in the thriving little city of Readestown. These works, which covered acres were devoted wholly to the manufacture of Frank Reade, Jr.'s wonderful inventions.

From these shops had emerged such inventive triumphs as the "Steam Man," the "Electric Horse," the "Submarine Boat," and many others.

Frank Reade, Jr., the inventor, stands to-day as one of the widest known and most famous men in the face of the earth.

In every clime his name is known coupled with his works. He came honestly by his talents, his father having been an inventor before him.

The little city of Readestown had been founded by the elder Reade. Frank, though quite young, had excelled by far the exploits of his father.

Of course, this inventive genius had brought the Reades plenty of money as well as fame. They were rich enough for all needs.

A morning train had brought the visitor into the town. He had at once entered the carriage and directed the driver to take him to the works of Frank Reade, Jr.

This request had been complied with. He now left the carriage and entered the vestibule of the office.

A boy met him here.

"I wish to see Frank Reade, Jr.," he said.

"Name, sir!" said the boy, brusquely.

The stranger tendered a card. The boy took it and vanished.

Upon the card had been the name:

"SYLVESTER WARDEN,
"BOSTON, Mass."

The gentleman paced the vestibule in a manner which showed excitement and unrest. There were deep lines upon his face which would seem to indicate that he was in great trouble.

It seemed an age before the hall boy came back.

When he did, he said:
"Mr. Reade will see you, sir. Please come this way."

Warden followed the boy through a broad hall and into a spacious and richly furnished room.

At a desk sat a handsome and athletic built young man.

He arose with a pleasant smile and said:
"Ah, Mr. Warden, I am glad to see you. Please be seated."

The visitor's face lit up.
"Do I read the truth?" he exclaimed. "Indeed, it is almost too good to believe. Do you really mean to grant my request?"

"You ask for too much at present," said Frank Reade, Jr., pleasantly. "Let us talk over matters first."

Warden seated himself, and at once eagerly began:
"Of course, you are familiar with the matter? You read my letter?"

"I read it," replied Frank; "yet, perhaps, I had better hear the matter from your own lips. I confess that I was much interested."

"Is it not all like a story from a novel?" said Warden. "But let me proceed."

"You see, my daughter, Hattie, was engaged to be married to an estimable young man of Boston, named Charles Allen."

"Yes."

"In a very unwise moment they conceived the striking idea of being married in a balloon."

"Mercy! that was an idea!"

"A friend of Charlie's, Prof. Digby Denham, an aeronaut, was responsible for that. He influenced Charlie to attempt the thing."

"You see, Denham had just completed what he believed to be the largest and safest balloon in the world. Of such size was it that the

basket was commodious enough to set up housekeeping in, as the professor put it.

"Like all young people Hattie and Charlie are romantic and believed that it would assure them greater happiness if they could be married in a balloon."

"The theory is good," laughed Frank.

"But the result was terrible to relate," continued Mr. Warden. "The aeronaut agreed to transport them safely up into the clouds and back again. My arguments were of no avail. The day was set and a large crowd assembled to see the feat performed."

"The balloon was truly the largest I ever saw. Indeed, my fears were somewhat assuaged as I saw how gracefully it rocked at its anchorage."

"To cut a long story short the party all got into the basket. There was Prof. Denham, Hattie and Charlie and the minister, Rev. Schuyler Wall, of the Boston Tabernacle. Then the balloon leaped up into the air."

"It was Denham's promise to remain aloft only long enough to tie the marriage knot. Then he had agreed to descend."

"But his plans evidently miscarried. The balloon did not descend. Instead it kept growing smaller and smaller until after a while it went out of sight altogether."

"From that day to this, the balloon nor its passengers have not been heard from."

Mr. Warden paused, and Frank saw that he was deeply affected.

"Indeed, that was very unfortunate," said the young inventor.

"Yes," replied the millionaire. "I set my heart by those young people. Some people have tried to encourage me by asserting that the party are safe, and have descended in some remote spot and will yet turn up all right."

"Which is quite possible," agreed Frank.

"Yes, but I don't believe it. What is your opinion? Are they beyond human aid?"

"That is hard to say," he replied. "Yet I do not see how you can do else but to wait for their return."

"If they have really made a landing somewhere safely."

"Yes."

"But I do not believe that."

"Ah!"

"It is my firm belief that they are yet up there in some upper stratum of the atmosphere, and that they cannot get down."

"Why, how could that be?" exclaimed Frank, in amazement. "It should be easy enough to get down!"

"Why should it?"

"The law of gravitation!"

"Ah, but the elevating power of the balloon overcomes that!"

"Where is the valve?"

"That is just it!" declared Mr. Warden. "It may have failed to work. Indeed, I am quite sure that it did. In that case—"

"Why simply cut the gas bag?"

"At that height? Why, it would be madness. Moreover, there are six balloons inside the outer case of this one."

"Certainly he intended to make his balloon safe."

"There is just the idea. Prof. Denham's balloon would float for months in the upper atmosphere. There would be no possible way for the voyagers to get down!"

"That is so!" agreed Frank.

"You can see what their fate would be!"

"Starvation?"

"Certainly!"

"That is horrible. Did they not take provisions with them?"

"For six weeks. Prof. Denham intended taking a trip after the marriage. But six weeks will not terminate their likely stay in mid-air."

"I should say not!" agreed Frank. "Indeed, Mr. Warden, I am very much interested in this case, and I will surely help you all I can."

A cry of joy escaped Warden's lips.
"Bless you for that!" he cried. "I know that you would do it! Oh, if you will find and rescue them I will give you all I have in the world!"

"I will try," replied Frank.
"You have just completed your new air-ship, I hear?"
"The Thunderbolt of the skies? Yes, and I feel proud of it."
"I wish that I might take a look at it."
"You shall!"

Frank touched a bell.
After a moment the door opened, and a short, diminutive darky as black as coal appeared.

"Pomp," said Frank, "you and Barney may open the store-house doors and roll the Thunderbolt under the glass roof. I wish to show her to this gentleman."

"A'right, sah!" replied the darky, bobbing his head in a comical fashion. "I 'ese jes' gwine to do as yo' say, sah."
And Pomp vanished. Mr. Warden could not restrain a smile.
"What a comical darky!" he said. "One of your servants, I suppose?"

"Pomp and Barney are my two most devoted friends," replied Frank, warmly. "Barney is equally as faithful and valuable a man as Pomp. He is an Irishman of the purest kind. These two men are inevitably my traveling companions wherever I go."
"And you are fortunate, indeed, in having them," said Mr. Warden. "I presume you will take them upon this trip?"
"Certainly."

But they now left the office and crossed the broad yard. The doors of the storehouse had been opened as directed, and there in full view was the new air-ship.

Warden gazed at it in supreme astonishment.
"Well, I never!" he exclaimed. "Truly this is worth coming far to see."

One glance at the air-ship was sufficient to establish its feasibility. And at the same time one wondered why these simple plans had not been attempted by some previous inventor.

"Then the air-ship is at last a settled fact!" exclaimed Warden, "for all time this has been regarded as the supreme of problems."
"And it would have been mastered long before, if inventors had only went at it with confidence and the same application that they have put into other triumphs."

"I believe you are right," agreed Warden. "Yet, but for you the problem might still remain unsolved."
"Possibly," said Frank, "but now let me explain to you, the method by which I gain ascent!"

"Pray do so!"
"You as a school boy probably were familiar with the principle of the paper rocket?"

"I have made many of them and sent them sailing about the room," replied Warden.

"Very good! My principle of overcoming gravitation is exactly the same. Five large rotoscopes are the instruments with which I elevate my ship."

"And they are driven by—?"
"Electrical engines, made as light and portable as possible. I will show you."

And Frank proceeded to describe in detail, the Thunderbolt of the Skies.

CHAPTER II.

THE AIR-SHIP—THE START.

In shape the Thunderbolt resembled a long canoe at the bow and a cylinder in the stern.

The hull was made of thin but highly-tempered sheets of lightest platinum and steel. These were secured by cleverly made joints.

At intervals windows with gratings were placed in the hull. Above the hull rose five light masts, to which were attached swiftly revolving rotoscopes.

These were the means of causing the air-ship to ascend. In the rear was a huge six-bladed propeller made of thinnest steel.

At the rear end of the long cylindrical hull was a platform which extended two-thirds of the way along the hull on either side and was provided with a guard rail.

From this platform a swiveling ladder hung for descent to the ground. The entrance was in the rear by means of a broad door.

Forward was a pilot-house in which were the steering gear and the electrical keyboard for the running of the engines. Plate glass windows were in front.

This is rather a meager description of the outside of the air-ship. With this brief inspection Frank led his visitor into the interior.

Here the most wonderful sights were revealed.

First of all was the long cabin, richly furnished, with neat fittings of stuffed leather, satin and raw silk. Bookcases were set in the wall, containing valuable works of science and books of reference.

Next to the main cabin was the dining room, then the state-rooms, half a dozen in number.

Beyond these was the armory and magazine.

Here were stored a rack of rifles of the latest approved pattern, small arms, and two light dynamite guns, one on each side of the air-ship.

Their muzzles were thrust through ports in the side. Warden looked at them in amazement.

"How is that?" he exclaimed. "How can you carry guns aboard an air-ship?"

Frank laughed.
"Look!" he said.

He put a hand upon the barrel of one of the guns and lifted it easily. Warden was astonished.

"How in the mischief do you do that?" he asked. "Are they dumfries?"

"Not a bit of it," replied Frank; "but the barrel is of thinnest steel. You can see that the bore is quite small."

"True, but I should think that a common rifle cartridge would blow them up. How do they resist the charge?"

"Easily enough. The charge does not explode in the gun. Not until the projectile strikes the target does it explode."

Warden was mystified.

"How do you get the propulsive power, then?" he asked.

"Pneumatic pressure."
"Wonderful!"

"My projectiles are of dynamite. Compressed air throws them easily a mile. This makes the most deadly gun on record."

"I should say so. But where will you ever need such a gun?"

Frank laughed at this.
"There are parts of the world where I can assure you it will be needed to maintain one's rights."

"I dare say, there is a fortune in that patent. The government to doubt would pay you well for it."

"Perhaps so, but I am not after such pay. I prefer to retain the secret of the invention."

"Well, you are wise."
"Now, let me show you the electric engines."

Frank led the way forward, and they entered the engine-room of the air-ship.

Here Warden beheld work which he had never seen the like of before. The intricate and delicate machinery was a revelation.

He inspected it curiously.

Every little detail was explained by Frank. When all was over, he drew a deep breath and said:

"This is indeed a rare treat. I shall not soon forget it."

"Now," said Frank, leading the way to the main cabin, "I will assign this state-room to you. Within twenty-four hours I shall make the start. I hope you will be ready."

"I shall," declared Warden, emphatically, "and I can never fully express my gratitude to you for your great kindness."

"Do not speak of that," said Frank.

With this, Warden took his leave.

Of course the newspapers got hold of the affair.

It was altogether a very romantic affair, the wedding in the balloon, the mysterious fate of the aeronauts, and the proposal of Frank Reade, Jr., to go in quest of them with his famous air-ship.

Thousands of people became so deeply interested in the affair, that all manner of communications began to pour in upon Frank Reade, Jr.

Some were letters of inquiry, others had various requests and not a few begged the privilege of accompanying the young inventor upon his aerial voyage.

Frank treated them with silence.

The waste basket caught most of them.

Indeed to have answered all would have required the aid of an army of clerks for many weeks. So this was out of the question as well as had taste.

Preparations were quickly made for the aerial voyage.

Bruey and Pomp were obliged to bustle for all they were worth. They were, however, overjoyed at the prospect of a voyage in the air.

While the warmest of friends they were both lively as crickets and fond of playing pranks each upon the other.

It was even so with them that to which got the best of this. Sometimes Barney came out ahead and sometimes Pomp.

"I jes' tell yo' one flug, 'I'ish," said Pomp, in a bantering tone. "If yo' ever shows yo' head above de rail de people on de earth will done link dere am a new sun come out ob de sky, or melbe dar am a ball ob red fire hanging ober 'em."

Barney dropped the article he was lugging, and turned upon his defamer.

"Arrah, an' don't yez be afther reflectin' on de color av me hair! Sure it's a black cloud as will darken de earth, when yez get up aloft!"

This was hitting Pomp back with his own weapons.

The darky was silent a moment, then he resumed:

"Hah! clouds kain't do no harm. But if de world got on flab, what den? But I say, boney, wha' an yo' gwine to do for de 'crater' when yo' gits up dar?"

"Never yez mouin't!" retorted Barney, with a twinkle in his keen eyes. "I jes' want yez left yet for a bit av whiskey whenever me stomach felt de need av it."

"Yah, but dere ain't none up in de clouds. Nuffin' but water."

"Whist now, an' do yez think I'll be afther lavin' Redestown an' not carry a bit av consolation wid me?"

"But Marse Frank done say dat we kin hab no whiskey on bo'd!"

"Be-ze-ze, dat's fer de lokes av such as yez. But I'm de gintle-man as knows how to see it. See?"

And Barney snapping his fingers in the darky's face, puffed away a

moment at his duoden and then picking up his load went on his way.

Pomp looked after him a moment and then scratching his head, muttered: "I done fink dat chap hab some place on ho'd dat he hide dat stuff away. Hum! well if dis ehle dean' find it den he am one po' fool' fo' a fac!"

And with this resolution Pomp went about his work.

But Barney on his way into the cabin clucked and blinked and muttered under his breath:

"I reckon that naygur will thry his best ter find where I hide the cratner. Shure I'll have some fuy wid him now an' payhim back fer an onis score. That I will!"

And chuckling and laughing to himself Barney formulated mentally the plan by which he would victimize Pomp. Exciting events were in store.

Promptly Sylvester Warden appeared ready for the ascension. He was overjoyed at the prospect of a quest being made for the lost aeronauts, and had perfect confidence that it would be successful.

"It cannot be otherwise!" he muttered. "I will pray for it!" At the appointed hour, the Thunderbolt was ready for its aerial flight.

Frank caused it to be rolled out into the yard. Every stay was knocked away, the anchors stowed aboard, and Frank sprang into the pilot-house.

Outside the gates a monster crowd waited to view the ascension. There were loud cheers. The bells of the town were ringing in honor of the event.

Frank was in the pilot-house. Barney and Pomp were at the rail, and Sylvester Warden the same, a few feet nearer the door. Frank pressed the electric key.

There was a whirring as of a mighty flock of birds rising, as the rotascopes began to revolve.

Then like a monster eagle, the Thunderbolt rose into the air. Up, up she soared as light as a feather.

The din below was deafening. Frank lashed the wheel and set the propeller key at a certain speed.

Then he sprang into the gun room. He put a projectile with a time fuse into one of the pneumatic guns.

The fuse was calculated so that the projectile would burst in mid-air. Then Frank pressed the button, and the pneumatic gun was discharged.

The projectile rushed a mile up into the clouds and burst. It was like the roar of a thunderbolt, and deeply impressed the spectators.

Up three thousand feet went the air-ship. Then Frank slackened the speed of the rotascopes and set the ship's course.

This was directly to the north. Mr. Warden believed that the balloon had been carried in that direction.

Frank expressed his opinion: "I think we shall find your people," he said, "far up in British Columbia. I have no doubt they are safe there, but have found no rapid means of transit home."

"Heaven pray that you are right," said Mr. Warden. "If the balloon is as strongly built as you describe, certainly it will keep aloft for a good while."

"Yes." "Then the air currents will carry them a great distance." "That is logical."

"Moreover, if they had descended in a region near to civilization, you would have heard from them long ere this."

"You are right."

So Mr. Warden took heart with this reassuring statement of the young inventor. The Thunderbolt bore away to the northward. The great quest for the lost aeronauts had begun.

The party were in the clouds. Exciting and wonderful adventures were near at hand.

All were prepared for them, however, and as the Thunderbolt sped on through the sky, the spirits of all were light and their hearts cheerful.

CHAPTER III.

A FEARFUL STORM.

THE sky had been dark with clouds at the time of the ascent of the Thunderbolt.

It was evident that a storm was near at hand. The air-ship therefore was in sight but a very brief while. The clouds opened and received her almost at once.

And the earth at the same time was lost to the view of those on board the air-ship.

Truly it was a wonderful sight now spread before their gaze. They were in a dense mist at first.

Then all made a rush for the cabin. The passage of the air-ship into the cloud had induced precipitation, and the rain deluged the deck. Frank increased the speed of the rotascopes.

His plan was to rise above the rain as quickly as possible. Up, up shot the air-ship. The rain lasted but a few moments. Then a vivid glare penetrated

the mist, there was a rumbling, jolting shock as the thunder passed on.

They were in close proximity to the works of Jove, and the sensation was a novel one.

Mr. Warden was, for a moment in fear that the lightning would strike the air-ship.

But Frank quitted his fears. "There is not the slightest danger," he said. "We are above it now."

They now floated in a vast body of fleecy clouds. It was a literally grand sight to see them piled about on every hand like huge white giants.

And still upward shot the air-ship. Then suddenly the Thunderbolt shot out into clear atmosphere. They were above the storm.

But yet they missed the friendly glare of the sunlight. Looking up, the reason for this was plainly seen. Fully half a mile above was a dense black wall of clouds.

It was an upper cloud stratum, and the air-ship was right between the two storms.

The one beneath was raging, evidently having hurst upon the earth. But the storm above was in reserve.

Frank appeared on deck with a barometer. "Four thousand feet higher," he said, "and we would likely be in sunlight. But I fear to make it."

"And why?" asked Mr. Warden. "The best of reasons. Do you not notice a change in the atmosphere?"

"It is cold!" All were looking blue around the nose and lips and were biting their finger tips. It was frigid.

"Exact!" The air grows rarer every foot we go upward now. Above that black cloud it may be so extremely rare that human life cannot be supported."

Nobody disputed this. But Mr. Warden said: "Well, in that case what ought we to do?"

"We can only try to beat the storm," declared Frank. "Outra it!"

"Well, run through it. It comes evidently from the northeast. Now we will take a northern course, and I have no doubt we can soon leave it behind."

With this decision Frank went into the pilot house and started the Thunderbolt rapidly to the north.

Thus far the storm had been accompanied by little agitation in the atmosphere. Now, however, an exciting and fearful phenomenon was witnessed. As the Thunderbolt sped on Frank saw that the upper stratum of clouds was beginning to shut down.

At the same time he heard what seemed like the roar of a flame in his rear.

Turning his head he beheld an alarming spectacle. There were mighty mountains of clouds coming piling after the air-ship with frightful rapidity.

It seemed as if the ship must be crushed if they should strike it. Frank saw the danger.

The tempest had come and the air-ship was to be in the very midst of it. It was too late to ascend higher. All that could be done was to put on speed and run before the tornado.

Frank feared that every rotascope would be dismantled if the tornado caught the air-ship, so he relaxed no effort to outstrip it.

He shouted to those on deck: "Come in, every one of you. If you don't, it will be the end of you!"

The warning was at once heeded. All came rushing in from the platform, and Barney hastily closed and secured the rear doors.

He was not a moment too soon. In an instant darkness of the densest sort shut down, and what followed seemed ever after like a horrible nightmare.

It seemed as if the air-ship was picked up and hurled like a football through space.

Giant hands apparently had it in their grasp, and it at times seemed revolving over and over like a top.

There came a falling sensation, and all believed themselves about to be precipitated to the earth.

Those in the cabin were not able to control their motion. They were hurled about like puppets in a corn popper, and many were the bruises and hard knocks they sustained.

As for Frank in the pilot house, he hung to the wheel like grim death.

He knew that the only hope of salvation lay in keeping the rotascopes buzzing, so he kept his hand on the switch whenever he could.

And on through space the air-ship was whirled. How it ever survived the fearful shock was a mystery. At length the storm began to wax less strong, and soon the air-ship righted itself and went steady once more.

The darkness was dispelled as if by magic, and sunlight streamed into the cabin.

The voyagers picked themselves up and took a view of the situation. The Thunderbolt was riding clear and steady in the upper atmosphere.

Below, the storm was still thundering and howling. Frank lashed the wheel and sprung down into the cabin. "Hollo!" he shouted. "Are you all alive down there?" "Begorra, much as ever!" cried Barney. "Surely me back is broke in two!" "Golly, I done fink mah shins am busted!" declared Pomp, with a wail. Mr. Wardea was badly used up himself, but he said, cheerily: "I am thankful that it was no worse. I thought it was the end of us, Frank!"

"Well, I was in great fear myself for a while," said Frank. "Then the air-ship is all right?" "I believe so. She may be somewhat wrenched, but not seriously injured I hope. An examination will show." And this Frank hastily proceeded to make. To his great joy he found the vessel intact.

There was really reason for mutual congratulation, for the escape had been a narrow one. "One thing is sure," declared Frank. "We shall take great care to keep out of the way of storms hereafter."

All were surprised at the long duration of the storm. The ascent had been made at three o'clock in the afternoon and now it was fast growing dark.

Night was at hand. Soon darkness settled down everywhere. The blue firmament overhead with its myriad stars seemed fully as far off as if viewed from the earth.

All was blackness below. But Frank trained the search-light to bear upon the earth and the result was wonderful.

The ray of light sent down through all that space was reflected back as if from a mirror.

Frank Reade, Jr., understood this. "It is water!" he exclaimed. "We are above one of the big lakes; probably Lake Michigan."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Mr. Warden. "At this rate we shall soon reach British North America."

"Oh, yes," replied Frank. Then he touched the rotoscope lever and the air-ship began to settle down.

"I am going to make sure if it is a large lake or not," he said. "Mercy only knows where that storm might have blown us." Down the air-ship rapidly settled.

And as it did the surface of the water became enlarged and plainer under the search-light's glare. From a height of two miles the air-ship descended to within a thousand feet of the lake's surface.

Then twinkling lights were seen near by. The search-light being turned in that direction showed a large steamer plowing its way along.

The people even could be seen upon her decks. They were evidently astonished at sight of the air-ship.

The steamer's siren whistle sounded a repeated salute. Frank answered by firing an electric projectile ahead some distance into the water.

The effect was grand to witness. The full glare of the search-light was turned upon the miniature catamaran which arose from the lake.

The steamer had slackened her engines and laid to. Frank saw her officers on the bridge and that the captain had a speaking trumpet.

"Ahoj, up there!" came the stentorian hail from the steamer. "Ahoj the steamer!" replied Frank.

"What kind of a balloon do you call that?" "This is not a balloon!"

"What the devil is it then?" "Frank Reade, Jr.'s air-ship, the Thunderbolt of the Skies!"

"The deuce you say! We have heard of that invention, but supposed it only a newspaper story. So you are Frank Reade, Jr.?"

"Yes."

"Well, come down on deck and see us!" "I can't do that," replied Frank, "but now please to answer my questions."

"All right!" "What steamer is that?"

"The Lake City, excursion steamer bound for Chicago. Captain Ernest Brand."

"Well, Captain Brand, I wish you good-night and a fair voyage!" shouted Frank.

Then he touched the rotoscope lever, and up shot the air-ship. Up a mile into the sky it rose.

Then Frank set the lever and the wheel. Its came down into the cabin and said:

"I know you must all be very tired. I am myself and propose that we have some sleep."

"Good!" cried Wardea. "I am more than willing!" "Now, Barney!" said the young inventor. "You are to watch until two o'clock. Pomp will relieve you then. Call me at five!"

Then Frank retired to rest. Routine had begun on board the air-ship.

CHAPTER IV.

BARNEY VICTIMIZES POMP.

All that night the air-ship sailed on through space. The pace was a moderate one, and yet in the morning it was seen by the register that she had sailed ninety miles.

Lake Michigan had been crossed and left to the eastward. Frank now set the course toward Manitoba.

Little could he see of the country below from their dizzy height.

But Mr. Wardea did not seem specially interested in what was below. He watched the sky incessantly with a powerful pair of glasses, for his belief was firm that his friends would yet be drifting around in space in their unmanageable balloon.

All that day the air-ship kept on at full speed. But not a speck appeared in the sky.

So far no trace of the lost balloon had been seen. It was like looking for a needle in a haystack.

But Mr. Wardea would not relinquish his sanguine hopes. "We shall find her yet," he said.

"Yet think of the slender chances!" said Frank. "Some storm may have taken the balloon across the Pacific."

"I do not think that is possible!"

"Why?" "Storms do not travel as far without spending their force. Moreover, there are certain air currents about the northwest which I believe would keep the balloon for an indefinite period sailing about within a certain radius."

"Your theory is logical!" declared Frank. "I wish I knew some way to study out those air currents!"

"Our meteorological maps might enable us to do it in a measure!"

"That is true. We will consult them. But—here is another problem!"

"What?"

"The danger of the balloon ascending into the rarified atmosphere. Perhaps this has happened."

"Which would be fatal to all in the car?"

"Yes!"

"I do not believe it!" said Warden, knitting his brows.

"Why not?"

"The balloon would not carry sufficient gas to carry it to such an elevation. I believe it would maintain a stationary position so far as elevation goes."

"Well, you may be right," agreed Frank. "At any rate, we will do all we can to find the party."

For days the air-ship kept on. The days passed into a week.

The plans of the aeronauts had resolved themselves into merely following the various air currents and keeping watch of the sky.

This was all that Warden's direction, who would not listen to a theory that the party had made a descent.

"If we can only sight them before their supplies give out, we will save them!" he said, with a deep sigh.

One week had passed. Tired of unsatisfactory cruising about in a certain radius, Frank had taken a new course to the northward.

This brought them almost to the land of snow and ice. And here, the first thrilling incident to support Warden's theories occurred.

Dark clouds hung in the zenith.

It was near the close of day, and darkness was at hand. Warden had been out on deck.

He was watching intently a distant ragged cloud.

Suddenly from it a huge object seemed to glide. For a moment he stood like one in a daze.

Then a great wild cry escaped his lips. "It is! It is!" he yelled. "Hoorn! come all! It is the balloon!"

But when the others excited beyond measure reached the spot there was no balloon in sight.

It had been visible but a moment drifting from one cloud into another.

It might have been an illusion for all the proof there was, but Wardea would not relinquish his claim.

"It is the balloon!" he said. "I tell you I saw it. Make for that cloud!"

Of course the air-ship was sent forward at a rapid rate of speed. The cloud was reached and penetrated. Electric signals were made, guns were fired, the search-light employed to pierce the cloud, but all in vain.

The aeronauts if in the vicinity did not make reply. Wardea was beside himself.

"It is too bad," he cried, with grief and dismay, "they were right in our reach. I tell you I saw them. And now to think that we should lose them."

"But for the clouds we could very soon tell whether your eyesight was good or not," said Frank. "We will wait until morning. They may disperse then."

"I don't know about that," said Warden with a shake of his head.

"We are in a cloudy part of the world. The sun sometimes does not show itself here for weeks."

"Keep up your heart!" cried Frank. "If the balloon is really here we shall be sure to find it."

"Ah, but the clouds?"

"Never mind, they shall not prevent it."

"We shall see."

Darkness now shut down rapidly. It was not darkness of the ordinary kind, either. The searchlight would not penetrate it, as it was partly composed of the material of the clouds.

Frank's plan would have been to descend to the earth and trust to getting a better view from there in the morning.

But Warden expressed agony at the proposition, so speed was shut off and the Thunderbolt held suspended in space.

Barney was first on watch that night. Pomp was to relieve him at two o'clock.

The Celt sat out on deck for a full hour after the others had retired. The air was chilly, and he experienced many a shiver.

He had been directed to listen for some sound from the sky, which might indicate that the lost aeronautes were in the vicinity.

But time passed, and he heard nothing above the chuck of the rotascopes as they kept up their steady movement.

"Bejehers, it's loike waitin' fer the end av the wormin'," he muttered. "Divil a bit do I loike it."

He thrashed his arms about his body for a while to warm his fingers. Then an idea struck him.

"Bejehers, if I had a drap av the cratier now I'd be warm enough."

Barney knew where to get this.

The impulse was upon him to go after it when he became aware of a most startling fact.

A dark form was lurking behind the pilot-house door.

"It's the naygur!" whispered the Celt as he recognized the shape of the skulker. "Pihwat the divil is he up to?"

Then like a flash, a complete understanding dawned upon Barney.

He chuckled with infinite relief.

"Be jahers I have it!" he muttered. "Shure the spaikeen is watchin' av me, thinkin' I'll soon go after the cratier an' thein he'll fould out where he is!"

As this became a moral certainty to Barney, he was too elated to express his feelings.

Indeed, he had been anticipating just such a move as this upon Pomp's part.

He had prepared a neat little reception for the darkey, which he believed would effectually square old accounts.

"Shure I'll larn him a lesson in meidilin' this toime!" he muttered.

Barney whistled a merry tune, then exclaimed, as if to himself, but yet loud enough for Pomp to hear it:

"Shure it's murderin' cold. It's a drap av the cratier wud do me good, av leggora I'll have that same!"

He nated with a twinkle in his eye that Pomp had straightened up.

Barney now proceeded to walk aft along the deck.

Ho, however, managed to slyly glance behind him and saw that Pomp was following him.

"He the swat av 'Faddy the piper!" he chuckled, "I'll fix the omahounn this toime."

Barney led the way down the ladder to the outer platform and then through a small door into the after hold, which was under the cabin.

Here all was darkness.

Nobody thought of penetrating to this part of the air-ship save perhaps to examine some part of the machinery.

Barney slid along the steel rods which braced the body of the air-ship, and then placed his hand under an overhanging joint of the steel plates.

He waited until he was sure that Pomp was behind him, then he lit a wax taper.

The darkey was hiding just behind the door of steel and could see every movement of the Celt.

Satisfied of this, Barney hummed an Irish air, then placing his hand under the shelf he drew out a black bottle.

"Here's to good Ireland!" he muttered, tilting the bottle to his lips.

He took a good strong draught. It was the real stuff and he smacked his lips with great relish.

"Shure that naygur wud give all his owld socks to foind this," he ejaculated in a tone loud enough for Pomp to hear.

The darkey grinned.

"But he never will," rejoined Barney.

Then he performed a slight-of-hand which apparently restored the bottle to its hiding place.

But really it went into an inner pocket and another was substituted.

The substitute bottle contained a vastly different preparation.

Then Barney lit the taper go out and proceeded to crawl toward the door.

He passed so near Pomp that he could have touched the darkey.

But he did not offer to do so. He passed on on the platform and went whistling apparently back to his post.

But in a few seconds he was back to the steel door listening.

There was a rustling movement in the hold. Barney grinned.

"Shure, the naygur is onto it," he muttered. "It's fun: there'll he mighty quick."

Barney was right.

Pomp in his concealment had watched the Celt with elated feelings.

He was sure of a dead snap.

"Golly, I see jes' gwine to wet mah whistle wif dat I'shman's whisky," he muttered. "I done fink he be surpris'd fo' to see how fast it will go."

The darkey crept forward until arrived at the spot where Barney had been.

Then he reached under the steel plate and took out the bottle.

It was but a moment's work to uncork it. Victory seemed his.

He held it aloft triumphantly.

"Yo' am a pooly smaht I'shman, Barney O'Shea, but dar am smarter men dan yo' right aboid dis ship. Hyar goes to yo' health, sah!"

Barney listening at the door heard every word of this soliloquy. He nearly exploded with suppressed laughter.

And Pomp put the bottle to his lips.

He tipped his head back and took a long, deep draught. And then—ah, what then!

CHAPTER V.

PULTE QUEST—THE PUB HUNTERS.

The bottle which Barney had prepared contained a mixture sufficient to paralyze a wooden image.

There was whisky with it, to be sure a moderate amount, but there was also red peppers, castor oil, mustard—raw, jalap and several other ingredients of an aesthetic and emetic character.

Down into his capacious gullet the unsuspecting Pomp poured that conglomeration of physical agony.

The result was indescribable.

For a moment the darkey's amazement was only exceeded by a fearful, agonizing doubt as to whether he was yet on earth or in hades.

"Uhhle—gubhle—garghle—whieest—ss—mm—oh—h—h!"

Then a yell like that of an expiring Sandwich Islander escaped the dazed darkey's lips.

Catching his throat with both hands, he started for the deck.

"Massa ordy—mm—gurgle—sabe die chille—nargle—oo—oo—bahl!"

And upon the platform he burst. Here he fell flat upon his stomach, wriggling like a snake.

"Fo'—de—lan's sake!" he gasped. "Wha' am strack me? Ah—h—h—h—nigh!"

Barney was rolling upon another part of the deck in a paroxysm of laughter.

"I see done burnin' up!" yelled Pomp. "Sabe dis chille!"

Barney instantly sprang up. A pail of cold water sat near the gangway. The Celt seized it.

"Pihwat's the matter wid yez?" he cried. "Is it burnin' up yez are?"

"Yah, yah!" yelled Pomp.

Swift—swash!

Down went the contents of the pail over the darkey's head and shoulders. It nearly drowned him.

But it had a good effect.

He swallowed nearly a quart of the cooling fluid. Then up came his stomach, and once he grew better.

He managed to get upon his feet.

He asked no questions, volunteered no explanations, but started at once for his bunk pell mell.

A deep, dark suspicion, had dawned upon his mind.

"Fo' de lan's sake!" he muttered. "I done believe dat I'shman knowed I was down dere an' jes' played dat trick on me. Well, I never."

Luckily none of the sleepers were aroused. Barney went back to his watch.

There he spent his time chuckling and grinning over the neat game he had played upon the darkey.

And at two o'clock Pomp pulled himself out on deck a complete wreck. The dose he had received had made him very sick.

Without a word he came along the platform.

The Celt knocked the ashes out of his dudden and arose. He gave the darkey a sidelong glance and said:

"Shure, yez luk all broke up. Pihwat's the matter wid yez? Did yez get the wrong end av the hottle?"

Pomp answered the head like an enraged bull. Barney had no desire to come to close quarters and lit out hastily.

He went below and turned in.

As for Pomp the poor chap was so sick for the rest of the night that he was hardly fit to remain on duty.

Morning came, though, and Pomp overcame the effects of his bitter dose.

But he muttered:

"I see jes' gwine fo' to get square wif dat I'shman afore dis vy'age am ober, an' yo' kin jes' bet I will, too!"

Still heavy clouds hung in the sky with the coming of daylight.

There was no prospect whatever of a clear sky. Nothing had been seen or heard during the night of the lost balloon.

All that day and the next, the air-ship cruised aimlessly around.

Indeed, day after day passed, and another week sped by. Thus far they had been two weeks in the clouds.

At this stage, Frank began to get impatient.

"Really, Mr. Warden," he said, "I cannot see to be here gaining anything by this sort of business. Are you quite sure that you saw the balloon that time?"

Warden looked offended.

"I ask for no more," he said. "Of course if you do not wish to pursue the quest further—"

"Ah, but that is not the point," said Frank. "I have no desire to give up the quest. But it is our method of pursuing it."

"Have you any better one to suggest?" asked Warden.

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"I propose that we descend and make a few inquiries."

"Will that not be waste of time?"

"You forget we can watch the sky from the earth as well from the balloon."

"I suppose so!"

"Perhaps we will be more apt to see the balloon. She may hang below the clouds, while we are right in them."

This thought seemed to impress Mr. Warden at once.

He inclined his head, saying:

"I believe you are right, Mr. Reade. Let us try it."

Accordingly Frank cried to Barney, who was in the pilot-house:

"Lower the air-ship. We are going down to the earth."

"All right, sir!"

And with this Barney reversed the rotoscope lever. The ship began very rapidly to sink.

Down, down she went through the clinging mass of clouds.

Then suddenly the earth burst into view a mighty distance below.

It seemed to be drawing nearer to the air-ship with great strides. When within a thousand feet Barney checked the descent. A strange scene was spread to view below.

Mighty forests extended over mountains far to the northward. For a time Frank looked in vain for a sign of human habitation.

Then he spied a number of log shanties upon the shore of a lake. It was a border settlement in the far northwest.

Frank determined to descend and make the acquaintance of the inhabitants.

He had no doubt but that he could learn from them news of the lost balloon if it had come that way.

Down settled the air-ship.

Frank decided to make a landing right in the clearing by the lake. Suddenly Warden cried:

"Look! A canoe!"

A light canoe containing three men was seen making its way rapidly across the lake.

The occupants were dressed in the style of the horder trapper, and they seemed much excited at sight of the air-ship.

"They see us," cried Warden. "No doubt they are surprised!"

"Very likely!" agreed Frank. "And that is not a matter of much wonderment."

"Certainly not."

Now it could be seen that men to the number of a score had come out of the log cabins.

They were regarding the air-ship in apparent amazement.

"Is it prudent to hand without a parley?" asked Warden, "they might not be friendly."

"We will trust to luck!" declared Frank, "they are white men like ourselves."

So the air-ship rested upon the ground not a hundred yards from the cabins. Frank walked boldly out on deck.

"Hello!" he shouted.

"Hello, thar!" came back.

"W'nt settlement is that?"

"This is Fort Moose; a branch of the Hudson's Bay Fur Company.

But who in tarnation ar' yew?"

"I am Frank Reade, Jr., and this is my air-ship!" replied Frank.

"Thunder an' gans! did yew make that masheen yerself?"

"I designed it."

"Wall, that beats all. Whar ar ye from?"

"From Roadstown, U. S. A."

"In course we mought hev knowed that it was all a Yankee trick. Wall, yer welcome tew Fort Moose. C'm in an' hev a pint of two of rum an' molasses!"

Warden looked at Frank and they laughed heartily.

"I'd advise you not to go, Frank!" said Warden, jestingly. "So much of a good thing would never do."

"I never drink!" said Frank. "So I am safe!"

"Yez might send me!" said Barney, innocently.

But Pomp gave a loud cough.

"Yo' doa' want fo' to do nuffin' ob de kin', Marse Frank!"

"F'wast that ye say?" exclaimed Barney, turning angrily upon his compeer.

"I'm a big ribboin temperance man meself."

"Well, I don't think I'll trust either one of you!" said Frank, with a laugh. "I'll go myself!"

"And may I not go with you?" asked Warden.

"Certainly, Barney and Pomp, keep good watch of the ship!"

But there was no need of this admonition. The two jokers, were always on hand in case of responsibility.

So Frank and Warden left the air-ship and walked over to the cabin.

The Hudson's Bay men were all great strapping fellows inured to the hardship of the wilderness.

They lived here in this wild place all alone, there being not a woman in the camp.

The tallest and stoniest of them, apparently the leader, advanced and offered Frank his hand.

"I'm Bill Wimans," he said. "I reckon I'm boss of thar fort, yer durned welcome, strangers!"

"Well, I am glad to make your acquaintance," said Frank. Then conversation upon light topics followed for some while.

"Oh, yes, we enjoy this kind of livin'!" declared big Bill Wimans. "It wud go hard with yew city chaps."

"I suppose you secure a good many fine furs?"

"In the winter time, yea!"

With which Wimans led them into the main building. Here there were hundreds of beautiful pelts.

"We've had uncommon good luck this year!" declared big Bill. "Gnme has run well. I reckon we've a fortune here in furs."

"I should say you had."

"Now, thar's a big grizzly skin. Thet feller killed one of our meeu while we wuz gittin' him."

"Whew!" declared Warden. "I should want to let those chaps alone!"

"Ah, but yew see some big lord in London will pay one hundred pounds for that pelt, for a door mat. I reckou thar man's neck warn't w'rt' hulf thet."

At which witty remark, big Bill haw-hawed, and Frank and Warden for the sake of courtesy were forced to join in.

But Frank now approached the subject of his visit.

CHAPTER VI.

EXPERIENCES WITH THE PUR HUNTERS.

"I CAN'T say that I would want to join your gang," he said. "By the way, friend Wimans?"

"Wall?"

"Is this air-ship of ours the first one you've ever seen?"

Wimans stared at Frank. Then a light broke across his rough face.

"I've seen a balloon," he replied.

Warden gave a gasping cry.

"For God's sake, when and where did you see it?" he asked.

Wimans looked at Warden in astonishment. Then he coolly ejected a quid of tobacco and replied:

"Not more'n tew days ago."

Warden almost screamed:

"Where? Tell me!"

"Where?" exclaimed Wimans. "I say, stranger, air yew lookin' fer thar balloon?"

"Yes," replied Frank.

Wimans took Frank by the arm.

"Come hyar."

He led him to the door of the cabin.

Then he pointed to the north-west.

"Up over thar peak!" he said, "I seen a balloon, an' it hung thar for six hours. Some of our boys set out tew climb the peak, but thar fust thing we knew thar cussed thing sailed away."

"I told you so!" cried Warden, triumphantly to Frank.

"And in what direction did it go?"

Wimans pointed to the west.

Frank grasped his hand.

"My friend!" he cried. "You have done us a great favor. We shall not forget it."

Then he turned to Warden.

"That settles it. The balloon shall be found."

Both set out for the air-ship. But big Wimans shouted:

"Hello, thar, friends! I don't call this air a fair shake!"

Frank saw the point.

He turned and marched back.

"We have no intention of forgetting our indebtedness to you!" he said. "Come with us!"

And he led the big trapper straight to the air-ship. On board they went, and Frank gave Pomp a key.

"Go to the locker and bring out the choicest old Burgundy," he said. "Be seated, Mr. Wimans. By the way, won't your friends partake too?"

"Wall, I like this," said the big trapper, looking approvingly about the air-ship.

Then he arose and shouted:

"Come, pard! This is thier Tenderfoot's treat."

As the rough crew piled aboard the air-ship Frank saw his mistake, and instantly repented his hospitality.

Of course he had accepted them as honest men, and yet, for aught he knew, they might be cut-throats.

It was evident that the same thought was in Warden's mind, for he exchanged glances with Frank.

Barney and Pomp also looked askance at the rough hunters.

At an opportune moment Warden said to Frank:

"I don't know but that we are taking a great risk. What do you think?"

"I am afraid so," agreed Frank. "It is well to be on our guard!"

"Can we handle such a crew?"

"I think so."

The Burgundy was brought and tendered to the hunters. It was choice wine, but in their rough throats, accustomed to old rum, it was little better than cold water.

"That's good stuff for women," grumbled Wimans, "but I kain't say as it fits a man's gullet."

"Let's hve some rum," rejoined one of the gang.

Wimans arose and sauntered toward the pilot-house. His keen gaze took in everything about the air-ship.

Suddenly he paused and whipped a brace of revolvers from his belt. With a roar of thunder he roared:

"Hands up, every condemned Yankee of ye! Surrender!"

Frank Reade, Jr., turned in amazement.

"What's that?" he exclaimed.

"Surrender!"

"What for?"

"Fer instance. Ain't thet enough?"

"Ye're j'king."

"I'm in dead earnest."

"But what right have you to treat us in this manner?" exclaimed Frank, angrily.

"The right of English law!" shouted the ruffian. "Which says

that any Yankee encroachin' on her majesty's huntin' grounds, which is patented to their Hudson Bay Fur Company, is guilty, an' sho'ld be arrested."

"Nonsense!" replied Frank, "that applies to hunters. We are not such!"

"How in tarnation do we know that? Howsundever, ye're our prisoners, an' this air-ship will make us a nice little go cart. Eh, pard? An' when I'm done with it, I'm goin' to send it to Queen Victoria (see this in from Windsor down to London!)"

And the ruffian laughed fensively, in which he was joined by his companions.

They had all risen, and were holding cocked revolvers in their hands.

Frank saw that for the moment the air-ship was at the mercy of the wretches.

But he did not lose courage.

This would have been fatal.

It was his province to now find a way out of the scrape. He was quite equal to the emergency.

But he realized that it was best for a time to humor the whims of his foe. So he said quietly:

"Then we are your prisoners?"

"Yas!" replied the villain, emphatically.

"But I had no idea of receiving such treatment as this when I landed here!"

"Then ye're disappointed, ain't ye?"

"Yes, but I can't see what you are going to gain."

"Why not?"

"You cannot make the air-ship fly!"

The villain looked noupised.

"I can make you show me!" he said, finally.

"If I will?"

"You will," said the villain, fensively. "Or I'll blow yer brains out. Yew won't dare to refuse!"

"If you insist upon it!" said Frank, warily, "but the ship cannot fly with so many on board!"

Wimans' was thoughtful a moment. Then a gleam of comprehension flashed from his eyes.

"How many will she carry up?" he asked.

"Perhaps a dozen!"

Wimans turned to his companions.

"All get off but a dozen of yew!" he ordered, "I'm goin' to take a little ride on this masher. 'It'll be a dandy thing tew hunt eagles with."

The majority of the trappers left the air-ship. Then Wimans held his revolver upon Frank and said:

"Show me how ter make her fly, or I'll make a copper sieve of ye!"

Frank led the way to the pilot-house. He managed to wink at his companions as he passed.

In the pilot-house he proceeded to show Wimans the mechanism.

But he took pains to show him the wrong thing.

"Now pat both hands on this bar," he said, "Press bard on it and see the air-ship rise."

Wimans immediately obeyed.

As he stepped forward, he placed his feet upon an iron plate in the floor of the pilot-houses.

Connected with this was a wire, which Frank had skillfully arranged, and the latter was held in connection with the dynamo by a push button.

As the villain put his feet upon the steel plate, Frank instantly pushed the button in.

The result was thrilling.

Like a flash, Wimans threw up his arms and fell without a groan. He had been instantly shocked into insensibility.

This had not been seen by his companions on deck. Had it, the result would have been different.

Frank now knew that he had the dozen villains on deck to settle accounts with. But how was he to do it?

Suddenly he ran out to the guard rail and twisted a small wire around it. It was of steel.

Just forward where the villains were, a long seat extended, the rail forming its back.

In sitting upon it one was obliged to come in contact with the rail. Frank returned to the pilot house.

It was an instant's work to connect the wire to a lever, which on being turned would throw the current into the railing. This done, Frank now considered how he was to get his birds into the trap.

In order to make a success of it he must induce his foes to sit down upon the long seat.

Fortunately a happy idea came to him.

It was a clever mimic in the matter of voice. Simulating Wimans' voice to perfection, he shouted:

"Hey there, pard! All sit down by ther rail. Ther ship is goin' tew start an' yew must balance her."

Unsuspectingly the twelve villains obeyed. It was success for Frank Reade, Jr.

Without a moment's delay he switched on the current. The effect was wonderful. Twelve men were hurled from the settee as from a catapult.

Not one but was shocked into insensibility. They lay in a heap on the deck.

At the same moment Frank pressed the retoscope lever.

Up shot the air-ship six hundred feet.

Then Barney and Pomp and Warden, wild with joy, came rushing into the pilot-house.

They surrounded Frank.

"Whurro, but didn't yez give it to 'em, Mister Frank!" yelled Barney, exuberantly.

"I done forgot we was gone chickens dat time sure!"

"You circumvented them in a wonderful manner, Frank!" cried Warden, joyfully. "But what will you do with them? Throw them overboard?"

"Not yet," replied Frank. "I don't exactly want to kill them."

The young inventor sent the air-ship across the lake. Then it a clearing he allowed it to descend.

The villains had begun to show signs of returning consciousness.

Frank with the help of the others rolled the bodies of the rascals out upon the ground. Wimans was the last, and he staggered to his feet just as the air-ship rose.

But he was too dazed to do any harm. The air-ship rose a hundred feet and then Frank went to the rail.

"Farewell, friend Wimans!" he cried; "the next time you want to arrest me and confiscate my air-ship come down into the United States and do it!"

A volley of curses escaped the wretch's lips. This terminated the episode.

Up into the air rose the Thunderbolt!

It had been a narrow escape for the voyagers. But they had gained the purpose for which they descended.

It was now known for a fact that the lost halloon was still floating around in the air-currents above British Columbia. It was now in order to find it.

This Frank was resolved to do.

And when the famous young inventor set out to accomplish an end he generally succeeded.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BALLOON AT NIGHT.

The sky was still overhung with dark clouds. There seemed no indication of the sun's breaking through.

Soon the Thunderbolt was dead among these clouds, and pursuing a westerly course.

Frank had hoped that they might hit upon the same air current as that which carried the balloon along with it.

In that case they would be sure to very soon overtake the more slowly moving body.

Yet it was necessary to proceed with great caution.

But little distance could be seen ahead, and if the balloon happened to be in the path of the air-ship a fatal collision would be the result.

For two days the air-ship kept on its course.

Then Frank said:

"We have come six hundred miles. The halloon could not have drifted or been driven so far in two days."

"Perhaps we have passed it," suggested Warden.

"It is possible. Yet I have a belief that it is still in the locality of Fort Moose, the place we have just left."

"Let us go back then."

"I think it best."

"So do I."

The air-ship accordingly was turned about. One thing was to be regretted.

This was that the clouds hung so low in the sky. Had the sky been clear without doubt the balloon would have been sighted long before this.

Two days had elapsed of the third week. The return to the vicinity of Fort Moose was made more slowly.

Five days elapsed. Two more were spent in the vicinity of the starting point, cruising aimlessly about.

Three weeks had been spent in the seemingly futile attempt to rescue the lost aeronauts.

Certainly the situation was growing very tedious.

Unless there should come a change soon the patience of all would be sorely tried.

This was the general sentiment. But Warden was the only one who had even caught a glimpse of the balloon.

A new course was now made to the north. Still the sky hung cloudy.

For two days the Thunderbolt cruised about in the same aimless way, but without any tangible result.

"There is one thing about it!" declared Frank, confidently. "Unless they have got down to terra firma their provisions must be nearly exhausted!"

"They will probably economize on those," said Mr. Warden.

"I certainly hope they will. It will be serious for them if they do not!"

"What a horrible fate!" said Warden, with a shiver. "Starvation in the car of a halloon! Ah, that will not be their fate, for I fear that in hunger's madness some of them may be tempted to jump overboard."

But reflections of this kind were by no means pleasant, and Frank Reade, Jr., dispelled them.

"Let us look upon the bright side," he said. "At any moment we are apt to run across them."

"Pray Heaven we may!"

But developments were close at hand.

The third night of the fourth week was a memorable one. None in the party even forgot it.

When it came time to turn in, Frank Reade, Jr., made the remark: "I think there is a storm about to burst over us. The barometer indicates it, and the wind has freshened."

This was true. Quite a gale was blowing from the northwest. It was Barney's first watch as usual. The nights were bitter cold in this part of the world, and the Celt was warmly wrapped up in furs. He walked the platform until midnight. At intervals he had been directed to listen, and if anything was heard to at once investigate. "Begorra, it's meen a blunder we are on a fool's errand!" he muttered. "Shure we'll never find that halloon."

The words had barely left his lips when a startling thing occurred. Suddenly from the gloom far distant there appeared a star of light. The clouds had partly rolled away to show it.

And hurr! upon the wind Barney heard voices. There was no mistake. Human voices came from the clouds. "Mither ave mercy!" he gasped, "phwat iver will I do? Shure, I know!"

The Celt sprang to the electric search-light and turned the lever. Instantly a pathway of light shot up into the clouds.

And there, dancing along the verge of a mighty white cloud, the Irishman saw a monster halloon.

He rubbed his eyes a moment to make sure that he could see aright. Then with thrilling impulse, he cried:

"Och, hone, an' who the divil are ye?"

For a moment Barney saw the figure of a man at the netting, and a voice came faintly to him:

"For the love of God save us! We are adrift in a balloon!"

"Shure, how'd on as tight as iver ye can!" cried Barney. "It's to save yez we're after bein' here!"

And Barney rushed into the pilot-house.

He pressed the alarm gong and then set the propeller at work. The air-ship shot forward.

The alarm gong roused everybody on board the air-ship.

Up onto the deck came Frank Reade, Jr., and Warden, half dressed and half awake.

"What's the matter, Barney! What has happened?"

"Shure, sor, see fer yesilf!" replied Barney as he shot the rays of the search-light up into the cloud.

And there, plainly, Frank and Warden saw the halloon. A voice came down:

"Who are you?"

"It is me!" yelled Warden, hysterically. "Yonr father come to save you. Have couraget do no give up. We will save you!"

Then the shrill note of a woman's voice was heard, and the words:

"It is my dear father. Heaven be praised!"

The air-ship was rapidly nearing the balloon. It seemed a certainty that the rescue would be made.

But just at that moment a fearful dismaying thing happened.

As if by magic, a mighty blast of wind swept through the sky. A fearful inky cloud shut down almost instantly between the air-ship and the balloon.

The halloon instantly went out of sight. The air-ship plowed through the cloud; but the halloon had vanished.

No reply came back to repeated calls.

This was most disheartening. Doubtless the halloon had been whirled away like a puff ball by the blast of wind. To find it now was a gigantic task.

The disappointment of Warden can hardly be imagined.

Until daybreak the quest was kept up. But in vain! The balloon was not seen again.

Words cannot express the dismay of all in the party.

But Frank Reade, Jr. was resolute.

"My blood is up now!" he declared. "We will find that balloon or die!"

The young inventor meant what he said. He did not intend to be balked in his purpose.

Quite a sharp breeze had sprung up from the southwest and it was believed that the clouds would be driven away.

"Give us a clear sky!" declared Frank, "and I believe it will be an easy matter to find the balloon."

But it seemed as if disappointment and deferred hopes were yet to be the fate of the party.

The wind, instead of dispersing the clouds, seemed only to multiply them and make them more dense.

As the day waned, rain began to fall. For some time the decks of the air-ship were heavily deluged.

Frank finally concluded to get out of this, if such a thing was possible. So he opened the electric key and let the ship shoot upwards.

Up went the Thunderbolt, until the clouds seemed to envelope her in one mighty sheet of water.

Up, and then, of a sudden, sunlight was all around. It was the first time in many days that they had seen aright but black clouds.

It was really a relief to get into the glare of the sunlight, though the air was very raw and cold.

Below the storm could be heard raging. The voyagers all congregated in the cabin about the electric heaters.

These enabled them to keep warm.

And gathered here a general discussion became in order.

"Begorra, we're sure of wau thing!" cried Barney. "It's no wild goose chase we're on."

"That is settled," agreed Warden. "We have seen the halloon and know that it is still afloat."

"Pity the poor souls in the basket," rejoiced Frank. "Why, will they not freeze to death?"

"Ah, the fires of the gas generators will prevent that," said Warden. "If they allow them to burn, of course the halloon will float indefinitely," said Frank. "Yet I suppose they could divert the gas and utilize the heat."

"Exactly," agreed Warden. "They would be exceedingly foolish if they did not."

"You are right."

"I hope we shall overtake them before another day. It is possible that we may run across them at any moment."

"I done link we can't do much so long as dis storm lasts," declared Pomp.

"It is not safe to travel fast in the clouds during the storm," affirmed Frank, "for if we struck the halloon it would be all up with those on board."

But Warden looked wistful.

"I begrudge the loss of time," he said. "I cannot help but realize that it is all exceedingly precious."

"So it is!" agreed Frank, "yet I can see nothing to be gained by floundering around in these rain clouds."

"If we could only get in speaking distance we would direct them to generate more gas and send the balloon above the clouds."

"That would settle the whole difficulty," declared Frank. "However, the balloon ought not to keep afloat much longer of itself; ought not the gas to be exhausted soon?"

Warden shook his head.

"Humph!" he said, "the gas bags are so economically arranged that the balloon might float for months yet. Of course it will come down in time."

"And just when those in the basket might not want it to. Into the ocean for instance."

Warden drew a deep sigh and knitted his brows. The delay was to him a most galling feature of the quest.

But a change of programme was at hand.

Barney had gone into the pilot-house. He had been engaged in studying the tumbling clouds beneath.

CHAPTER VIII.

FROM THE BALLOON TO THE AIR-SHIP.

AND as Barney watched the warring of the elements so far below, he was suddenly given a powerful start.

"Whurroo!" he yelled. "Shure an' there it is!"

He had seen a dark object emerge for a moment from one cloud only to pass into another.

It was the top of the halloon.

At that moment it was less than a quarter of a mile distant from the air-ship. Barney acted quickly.

He knew that at that moment his companions and acquaintances with the fact would be a loss of time.

He did not wait for that.

But he sprang to the rotoscope lever and set it back. At the same moment he started the propeller.

Down shot the air-ship.

The next moment it was deep in the rain clouds. A perfect deluge descended upon the decks.

ASTOUNDING beyond measure, Frank and Warden sprang into the pilot house.

"What on earth are you doing, Barney?" cried the young inventor.

"Sure sor, it's the balloon!" cried the excited Celt.

"The halloon?"

"Yis sor!"

"Where?"

But both Frank and Warden at that moment beheld a thrilling sight!

Below them a thousand feet and half submerged in the clouds was the halloon. There was no doubting their eyesight.

"Upon my word, there it is!" cried Frank.

"You are right," agreed Warden.

The voyagers in the halloon had seen the air-ship and were making signals. It was an exciting moment.

The halloon was drifting and gyrating forcibly but the air-ship easily kept pace with it.

"Lower the ship, Barney!" cried Frank. "Let us talk with them!"

"All right, sor!"

The Thunderbolt settled down until its deck was nearly on a level with the basket.

Not a hundred yards separated the aerial crafts but now an obstacle of serious sort arose.

Warden had seen no reason why the air-ship should not hitch to the car and the aeronauts be transferred.

But Frank Reade, Jr., cried:

"No, no—that can never be done!"

"And why not?" cried Warden.

"Don't you see? The lag and ropes of the halloon will foul the rotoscopes. We cannot risk that."

This was true.

Indeed, such a contingency would be likely to precipitate the air-ship to the earth and kill all on board.

Here was a problem.

How were the aeronauts to be got aboard the air-ship? Even they themselves saw this point.

The aeronaut, Prof. Denham, shouted:

"It won't do for you to come too near us!"
 "I see that," replied Frank. "We will find some other way."
 Being so near, for a few moments running conversation was kept up.
 "How are you all?" shouted Warden.
 "We are all well as could be expected under the circumstances," replied Charles Allen, "but we are anxious to get down upon terra firma."

"You don't like living in space then?"
 "Well, not exactly."
 "Don't you wish you had taken my advice and married in the old fashioned way?"
 "I'll tell you better after we get out of this scrape," replied young Allen, laughingly.

"This is certainly the most romantic wedding I ever officiated at!" cried the Rev. Schuyler Wall.
 "You will not try another?"
 "I think not."

"I don't think they ought to complain," protested Prof. Digby.
 "They have not been killed yet."
 "No thanks to your faultily constructed balloon!" cried Hattie.
 This caused a laugh.

"Well, have you suffered from cold?" asked Frank Reade, Jr.
 "Not much," replied Rev. Mr. Wall, "but I would like a little more room for my cramped limbs."
 "How are you fixed for provisions?"
 "Enough for another week!"
 "There!" declared Frank to Warden, "your fears of starvation have proved groundless!"
 "Ah, but in time they might have come to pass."
 "Fortunately we are in time to relieve them of the risk," rejoined Frank. "Now, friends," he shouted, "I am going to send a man aboard of you."

"All right," replied Prof. Digby. "How will you do it?"
 "I shall mount to a position above the balloon. I will send a man down on a rope and swing him into the basket."
 "All right!"

This was certainly the only feasible way of making connections with the balloon.
 All this while the rain had been dripping on the air-ship's deck and over all.

"Now, Barney," said Frank, "do you want to attempt that feat if you do not I will."

The Celt gave a leap in the air and threw up his cap.
 "Shure, sor," he cried, "it's mighty honored I am at the chance. Shure, I'll go down nisy."
 "All right!" agreed Frank. "Fetch out a rope."
 Pomp proceeded to do this. A long rope was coiled upon the air-ship's deck. A slip noose was placed under Barney's arms.
 Then he went over the rail.

Down he went, slowly lowered by those on the deck of the air-ship. The balloonists watched the operation anxiously.
 Down until on a level with the car of the balloon Barney was swung. Then he hung in space, swinging to and fro.
 Fully a mile above the earth and depending upon the single rope. What if it should break?

It was too horrible a thing to contemplate. To be dashed such a distance to the earth would be frightful.
 But Barney never once thought of danger. His nerves were as cool and steady as steel. He was even in a laughing mood.

"Shure, I'm loike the pendulum av Father Mickey's clock!" he cried.
 "Give me a long swing now!"
 And this was done.

Gradually swinging backward and forward the Celt finally was able to grab the ropes of the balloon.
 A moment more and he had slid down into the basket. The connection so much desired was made.

A cheer went up from the lips of all.
 Warden was beside himself with joy. Another rope was speedily lowered. This was to bring up the aeronauts one by one to the air-ship's deck.

Hattie was the first one to essay this trip.
 The rope was fastened under her arms, and she was swung out into space. She was extremely plucky, and did not even scream out.
 Pomp and Warden pulled on the rope, while Frank kept the air-ship steady.

Up and aboard the Thunderbolt the young bride was safely hoisted. Then she was clasped in her father's arms.
 Sylvester Warden was the happiest man in the world at that moment.

Indeed, so overcome was he that he forgot apparently the existence of the others, and it was only when Pomp called him that he returned to a proper realization of the situation.
 "I done fink we bettah pull up de others!" cried the dorky. "If yo' jes' gib me a hand, sah!"
 In a moment Warden was by his side.
 "Pardon me!" he cried. "I am beside myself. But I must not forget the peril of others."

Down went the rope. Barney caught it, and this time the Rev. Schuyler Wall was the upward passenger.

He made the trip safely, and then it came Charles's turn. But he turned to the aeronaut—Prof. Digby—and said:

"You shall go first, sir!"

The balloon, lightened of some of its load, had begun to rise. But Frank sent the air-ship up higher.

Prof. Digby was quickly swung on board. All this while air-ship and balloon had been drifting rapidly into dense clouds.

Also a sudden riotous wind had arisen. Now before either Charles or Barney could make the upward trip there came a tremendous strain upon the ropes.

The balloon, relieved of some of its load, had grown lively, and the sudden burst of wind caused the ropes to stretch.

Frank increased the speed of the propeller, but it was too late.

A terrific gale rose in what seemed a second of time, the ropes snapped, and the last seen of the balloon it was being whirled away through space like a fensher.

Into the black clouds it went, and was lost to view.
 Cries of dismay arose from the lips of all aboard the air-ship.

"Mercy!" cried Prof. Digby, "they are lost. We will never find them!"

"Yes, we will!" shouted Frank, resolutely, putting on all speed. The air-ship shot forward rapidly.

Into the clouds in pursuit of the balloon it went. But it was no other case of looking for a needle in a haystack.

The balloon was doubtless miles away, and in what direction it had been carried it was impossible to say.

But still Frank kept on in pursuit. Until darkness shut down the quest was kept up.

It was a most dismaying turn of affairs.
 Part of the aeronaut's party were rescued, to be sure. But Barney, Frank Reade, Jr., valuable man, and Charlie Allen, the bridegroom, were yet lost in the clouds.

"There is no likelihood of starting for home this week!" declared Frank, gloomily. "Certainly, I am not going, and leave those two men behind."

Hattie, or Mrs. Allen was distraught at the fate of her husband. She wrung her hands and wept bitterly.

The Rev. Schuyler Wall was perhaps the calmest of any. He spoke cheering words, and said:

"The Lord will bring all out right yet. Let us have hope and patience."

But the days passed, and still the air-ship sailed vaguely through the clouds. Not a sign of the balloon had been discovered in all this while.

"Four weeks to-day!" said Frank Reade, Jr., one morning. "We have been much longer in this quest than I had believed that we would."

Warden was thoughtful for a moment. When he lifted his head finally, he said:

"I have an idea, Frank!"

"Ah!" exclaimed the young inventor, "what is it?"

Warden led Frank to the rail and looking over pointed to the cloud banks below.

Then he proceeded to expound his new theory, while Frank listened.

CHAPTER IX.

WARDEN'S THEORY.

"My theory embraces the dispensing of those clouds," said Warden. "It may seem to you as absurd and impossible."

"Perhaps not," replied Frank. "Pray what may it be?"

"Well, you have no doubt heard of the rain making experiments made in New Mexico awhile ago?"

"What, the use of explosives in upper stratum of the atmosphere?"

"Just so."

"Well, what of it?"

An inkling of Warden's scheme now began to dawn upon Frank. The other rubbed his hands briskly and went on.

"I believe that it is possible for us to dispel these clouds in the same manner."

"With explosives?"

"Yes!"

"What is your theory of the effect?"

"The concussion will induce precipitation. The clouds will fall to the earth in the shape of rain, and in due course of time the atmosphere should be cleared."

Frank whistled softly.

Then he laughed.

"You would drown out the region beneath us," he declared; "the inhabitants would believe it a second deluge."

"Hang the inhabitants! They are not of the class we are bound to respect!"

"I can see but one obstacle to your plan," said Frank.

"Ah!"

"It is a very large one."

"What is it?"

"Suppose we use explosives. It has been demonstrated that, exploded in a clear sky, the concussion will draw clouds from an invisible source and precipitate rain."

"Well?"

"Now if we try to dispel these clouds in that manner, why shall we not be drawing more, perhaps an unlimited amount? We might get more than we bargained for."

Warden's face fell.

He saw the point of Frank's argument. Yet he was not disposed to abandon his scheme.

"At least," he said, "is there any harm in attempting it?"

"Why we can try a few explosions," agreed Frank. "I am a little cautious myself to see how it would act."

With this, the young inventor went into the gun-room. An explosive shell, carefully timed, was fired into a cloud near.

The explosion was exactly like a clap of thunder.

Electric flashes leaped from the cloud, and instantly there were indications of a storm.

Several of the bombs were exploded in this manner in various parts of the cloud but had no effect.

Rain fell heavily. The clouds were precipitated in a perfect deluge. For a time this continued.

Then, Warden cried triumphantly:

"See! The clouds are scattering. You can see the earth."

This was true.

Directly beneath them the aerial voyagers saw the earth. The clouds had fallen to that immediate vicinity.

But Frank cried:

"Look! The supply is inexhaustible!"

Almost immediately the heavy clouds closed in like a solid wall, and the earth was again concealed.

If anything the clouds looked thicker and blacker than before.

"Well, I never!" muttered Warden. "Where do they all come from?"

"My friend!" said Frank, impressively, "that is one of the mysteries of nature. The supply will never cease. All the explosives we could find would not change the present situation in the least!"

Sylvester Warden nodded his head.

"You are right," he said, "then the old way of a random search in the clouds is our only method for finding the lost halloon?"

"It seems to be now," replied Frank. "Yet nature may work some great change at all in a few hours."

So the matter was dropped.

The other voyagers especially Prof. Digby Denham had been deeply interested in the attempt.

The latter now came to Frank, saying:

"Upon my word, Mr. Reade, you have solved the secret of aerial navigation."

"Ah!" cried Frank, casually, "is that your opinion?"

"It is emphatically. I shall build no more balloons."

"No?"

"When I get home I shall at once proceed to build me an air-ship," Frank smiled at this.

"Ah, do you reckon that easy?" he asked.

"You seem to have found it so. Why should not I?"

"Very true," replied Frank ironically. "It is easy enough to build air-ships."

"Yes."

"But not so easy to make them fly."

The Rev. Schuyler Wall stood near and now ventured to remark:

"You will find Mr. Reade is right, Digby. The secret of flight is very important. That must be learned."

"Is it a secret?" asked Denham contemptuously, gazing at the rascal.

"Why, you simply have to make those revolving wheels and furnish the lightest of motive power."

"Well, my good friend," put in Warden, who had been listening with interest, "just you go ahead. When you build an air-ship that will fly I'll make you a handsome gift."

Denham looked rather offended.

"If I live to reach home I shall try," he declared.

The subject dropped; but a little while later, at another part of the ship, Warden and Frank had a good laugh.

"I don't wish to deny the possibility of the man's constructing a successful flying machine," said Frank, "but he must first learn the secret to build one after the type of this one."

"I believe you," agreed Warden. "You see, the trouble with the professor is a very large case of swelled head."

Still the discouraging quest for the lost halloon was kept up.

Days passed into another week. Five weeks had passed since leaving Keweenaw; but the next and sixth week was to bring forth some thrilling incidents.

One morning all in the party tumbled out of their bunks to discover a new and pleasant state of affairs.

The clouds in part had lifted, and the sun was shining brightly upon the earth.

The air-ship rode high in the clear, bracing atmosphere. The sight as well as that was exhilarating.

Instantly the one thought was of the lost halloon.

Glasses were brought out and the sky was minutely scanned. Not the slightest speck was visible as yet.

But to the westward and the north banks of clouds hung high above the horizon. It was possible that the halloon was somewhere beyond them.

So the course was set in that direction. The clouds rapidly drew nearer.

And now it became a question as to whether it was best to enter the clouds again or not.

The halloon certainly was not in the open sky. Where else could it be then but in the clouds?

It was possible that the clouds might lift entirely in a few hours or that the halloon might drift out of the sun and again into view.

If the air-ship was in the clouds at the time, of course this opportunity was lost. It was a hard question to decide.

Frank considered it from all sides.

He was a great believer in action. He disliked the thought of waiting around for such an uncertainty.

"Mercy!" he exclaimed. "The clouds may settle in again even while we are waiting. I believe it best to go ahead."

So he gave the order to Pomp to drive into the clouds.

In a short while the air-ship was once more drifting through the mighty walls of mist. Every one now was on the keen lookout for the halloon.

It seemed as if it ought to be found the easier, now that the zenith was at last free from the clouds. But there was yet left a mighty cloud covered space.

However, the quest in the clouds was near its end. Suddenly a mighty wall of mist just in front lifted, and a great cry went up from all.

"Hurrah, the halloon!"

Yes; there it was beyond a doubt.

The huge sphere was drifting rapidly through the fleecy mass. The air-ship was instantly in pursuit.

Then it was within hailing distance. To the amazement of all, it was seen that there was but one man in the basket.

This was Charlie Allen.

Barney was gone.

What did it mean?

A swift, silent chill struck Frank Reade, Jr. It was a deadly fear that his trusted servant's fate was sealed forever.

At once he hailed the halloon.

"Hello!" he shouted.

"Hello!" came back.

"Are you well?"

"Yes."

"Where is Barney?"

"Is not with me. I will tell you when I get up there where you are."

A line was now thrown over the air-ship's rail. It was gently swung back and forth until it was within the reach of young Allen.

He grasped it, and then swung clear of the halloon.

The huge sphere shot upward and vanished again. This time the skies might claim it forever. No further pursuit would be made.

Charlie Allen was drawn swiftly up and aboard the Thunderbolt.

As he struck the deck Hattie was the first to be clasped in his arms. Then Warden and the others gathered joyfully about him.

But Charlie saw the anxious look upon Frank Reade, Jr.'s, face and said:

"Mr. Reade, now I will tell you about your man, Barney."

"Is he dead?"

"I do not know."

Frank drew a breath of relief.

"Ah! then there is a chance that he is alive," he said, eagerly.

"Oh, yes," declared young Allan. "In fact, I am quite sure that he is. I'll tell you how it was:

"You see, after losing the air-ship we drifted about for days in the clouds. We did everything we could to signal you, but in vain.

"Then one day, owing to some peculiar depression of the atmosphere, a halloon began to sink. We thought sure we were going to the earth."

"But it was so good luck. The halloon went down, though, until within a few hundred feet of the surface of a lake.

"I was right in the heart of the woods. We thought the halloon might fall into the water, and counted the chances of getting ashore.

"Barney did not think that it would be much of a swim, and said that he had in mind to leap overboard. Then an idea occurred to us."

"And it was our attempt to carry out that idea which separated us."

CHAPTER X.

TO BARNEY'S RESCUE.

YOUNG ALLEN paused a moment for breath and presently continued:

"Our scheme was to simply lower a line to the water and slide down the line ashore. It looked dead easy."

"We were bound to try it. Barney was the first to go. The line was not strong enough to hold two, so he was to go down first, then steady the line for me."

"So Barney went over the edge of the basket and slid down the rope, which was fully four hundred feet long. But just as he got near the end of the rope a queer thing happened."

"From the stern canoe with six savage Klamath Indians in it shot out into the lake."

"I shouted to Barney, but it was too late. The Indians reached him before he could even try to climb up again."

"They yanked him off that rope in a hurry. The loosening of ballast caused the halloon to shoot upward like a rocket. In a few seconds I was again in the clouds. That was the last I saw of Barney."

"As I finished his narrative a troubled expression settled down upon Frank Reade, Jr.'s brow."

"In the hands of the Klamaths," he exclaimed, "that is hard enough, for they are very cruel to their prisoners."

"But is there not a good chance to rescue him?" asked Allen.

"I shall try," declared Frank. "Of course you would know this locality if you were to see it again!"

"Oh, yes!"

"Then, will you look for it?"

Frank let the Thunderbolt descend rapidly. Soon it was far below the clouds. The earth was just below.

"Now we will hunt for the spot," said Frank, "please to point it out, Mr. Allen!"

"I will do so," replied Charlie.

And he proceeded to keep a strict watch.

With Barney in the power of the savage Klamath Indians, there was little chance for his life.

Frank knew that this particular branch of the tribe were savage assassins. Small show would the Celt stand against them.

However, he was determined to do all he could to save Barney. Pomp in particular was much excited.

"I don't want to lose old 'Fahman, Marse Frank!" he declared.

"He am jes' too valuable a man for you!"

"How is this?" exclaimed Frank mischievously. "I thought you and Barney were not on very good terms?"

"Who done say dat ting?"

"Why, I heard you say the other day that if you lived long enough, you'd pay him off for an old score."

Pomp laughed merrily.

"Dat am jes' foolin', Marse Frank," he cried. "Ob co'se I tries to fool him all I kin, an' he does jes' de same."

"Ob! that is it!"

"Yes, sah!"

The explanation was perfectly satisfactory to Frank. He did not make further inquiry.

The air-ship for several days cruised about the wild region. Then one morning Charlie was alerted.

"There is the spot, Mr. Roade. There is the lake we hoped to drop into!"

Frank saw at once that the spot corresponded with Allen's description. The air-ship hovered over the vicinity for some while.

Not a sign of the Indians was to be seen until Frank happened to send the air-ship close to the wall of a mountain near by.

Then Prof. Denham cried:

"There they are!"

All rushed to the rail.

The object of the professor's remarks were instantly seen. Half a dozen savages were in full retreat along the base of the mountain.

They had evidently seen the air-ship and wanted to escape from it. Several of the voyagers spring for their rifles, but Frank cried:

"Don't fire at them!"

The young inventor had a good purpose in view. He sent the air-ship in hot pursuit.

He was in the hopes of overtaking them and capturing at least one of them. From this time he hoped to learn Barney's fate.

But of a sudden the entire crew disappeared. For a moment it was a matter of much wonderment where they had gone.

Then Warden cried:

"Helicopt' a cavern!"

This was true. Right in the side of the mountain was a mighty high arched cavern.

Into this the Klamaths had disappeared. Doubtless this was the home of the entire tribe of them.

This was the conclusion reached by the aerial voyagers. The air-ship was allowed to descend until one could look right into the cave.

There was nothing to be seen at a greater depth than twenty feet. Here the cavern took a sharp angle to the left.

What was to be done?

It was reasonable to suppose that if Barney was a captive he was in the depths of the cavern. If so, how was he to be rescued from it.

This was a troublesome problem.

It was certainly out of the question for the air-ship to attempt to invade the place. Again, should any of the voyagers attempt it on foot, might not they be overpowered by superior numbers.

All these things were carefully considered. Matters seemed in statu quo for a brief time.

But Frank was not to be defeated so easily. He was determined to rescue Barney at all hazards.

"I have in my possession that which will make it safe for three of us to enter the cavern!" he said. "Pomp will watch the air-ship. Will you go with me?" addressing Allen and Warden.

They signified assent. Then Frank said:

"Pomp, bring up the cases of armor!"

The darky vanished. In a few moments he had brought up three long boxes with lids of metal.

Frank quickly opened these. In each lay a suit of beautifully constructed chain armor.

The others gazed upon the sight with amazement.

"Upon you, boys!" exclaimed Prof. Denham. "Real chain armor."

"Yes," replied Frank.

"But is it impervious to rifle balls?"

"Certainly! It is steel manufactured by a secret process and which will resist any rifle ball. The armor is light and pliable and encased in it one may feel safe against an enemy's bullets."

"Is it an invention of yours, Mr. Roade?" asked the Rev. Schlyer Wall.

"It is," replied Frank.

"The catalogue of your achievements in the invention line must be very great."

Frank took from the case one of the suits of armor and proceeded to put it on. In a few moments he was encased from head to foot.

Then the wonderful advantage of the armor was easily seen. Frank stood, the admiral of his beholders.

Charlie and Warden donned their suits. The three armor-clad men now proceeded to arm themselves.

To cap all, Frank now produced some rifles, of which he said:

"These throw an explosive shell. With them a handful of men can make havoc in the ranks of a small army."

"Then you really intend to invade the den of the red foot?" asked Prof. Dighly.

"Certainly," replied Frank.

"What shall we do to assist you?"

"Simply remain here until I return. If you are attacked, Pomp will show you how to defend the air-ship."

"All right."

Then a few in readiness for the attack upon the Klamaths.

Of course Frank had no knowledge of the numerical strength of the Indians, or of the extent of their hiding place in the cavern.

But with the protection of the armor he felt safe in the case of a reasonable attack. Therefore he did not shrink from the pass.

The air-ship descended until, upon a level with the mouth of the cavern.

Then the three adventurous rescuers left its deck by means of a rope ladder.

Armed with the explosive shell rifles, they boldly entered the mouth of the cave.

Frank carried with him a coil of wire connected with the dynamo on board the Thunderbolt.

This was for the purpose of using an electric light in case there was need of it, or to signal the party on the air-ship and keep informed of what was going on there.

Thus equipped, they boldly entered the Klamaths' cavern.

To their surprise all was as light as day in the inner passage.

There were crevices in the hill overhead by which light was admitted. A beaten trail extended through the passage, which it was easy to follow.

For a long ways the passage led them on in winding course. Then suddenly a bright light was seen far ahead.

"What is that?" asked Charlie Allen, coming to a halt. "It looks like a fire."

"It is," replied Frank. "Can you not smell the odor of pitch pine?"

This was true. Thin films of smoke from the burning wood floated through the corridor.

Then to Frank was evidence of the existence of a larger cavern, perhaps a night subterranean chamber beyond. This might be the den of the Klamaths.

The three men halted at this spot.

They had no desire to rush recklessly into a trap.

Thus far nothing had been seen of the Indians. They had kept out of sight either purposely or accidentally. It was hard to say which.

"What shall we do?" asked Charlie, somewhat in doubt. "Ought we to go back to the air-ship?"

"I see no other way," replied the young inventor. "It will be well to keep a sharp lookout, however."

And this was done. The three rescuers pushed slowly and cautiously forward.

Every moment now they drew nearer to the open chamber beyond. Suddenly a startling sound was heard in the rear.

Then the telegraph clicker in Frank's hands began to tap in a muffled way. It was a message from the air-ship.

"Look out! Some savages have entered the cave in your rear."

Frank quickly wired back:

"All right."

Then he hastily grounded the wire. The footsteps of the advancing Klamaths could be plainly heard in the rear.

"Quick, boys!" whispered Frank. "Crawl in here."

There was a crevice in the wall of the passage. Into this they crept.

They were not a moment too soon.

Down the passage came five savages. They passed near enough to the hidden white men to be almost able to touch them.

But they passed on and were soon out of sight.

Then Frank crept out.

"Quick, boys!" he said. "Let us follow them at once!"

Down the passage they went at full speed. It was hoped to get in sight of the Klamaths again.

But this they were unable to do.

However, they came to the very entrance to the mighty cavern chamber. It seemed to cover fully an acre, and apparently was the interior cave of an extinct volcano.

A wonderful spectacle it was which now rewarded their gaze. All regarded it with amazement.

High arched, the cavern shadows were relieved by four fires in different corners, which sent ghostly shadows flickering about the mighty roof.

Sitting upon the cavern floor were fully a hundred of the Klamaths, all in a state of great excitement.

When the cause of their excitement was seen, Frank and his companions could hardly contain themselves.

There in the center of the attentive circle of smoking Klamaths was Barney engaged in a genuine Irish song and dance. And the savages were bestowing upon the performance all the attentiveness of first nighters at a city theater.

CHAPTER XL

THE FIGHT IN THE CAVERN.

THE situation was not one devoid of humorous features, although serious in the main.

With the greatest of zest Barney was rendering a genuine breakdown, and the Klamaths, who had never seen anything of the kind before, were more than interested.

In their stoical way, they smoked their pipes and applauded in guttural tones.

The greatest difficulty for Barney seemed to be, however, that the Indians could not seem to get enough of the thing.

It was kept at it hammer and tongs, and when he seemed disposed to pause, one of the party would prod him with the point of a spear.

"Bejabers, piwat do yez take me fer—an Eyetalian hand organ?" cried Barney, finally breaking down from sheer exhaustion. "Shure I'm not a perpetual motion machine. Ow—ouch!"

One of the Klamaths had pricked him with a spear. The Celt was doubled up.

The others roared with laughter.

The Irishman saw the point, and his combative spirit was aroused.

Quick as a flash he hit out from the shoulder, and the fellow with the spear went down like a log.

To the surprise of the three spectators in the outer passage the other Klamaths seemed to treat this as a joke and only laughed and applauded the more.

Even the three white friends of the Celt were constrained to smile, though they trembled for his safety.

"Good for Barney!" muttered Warden. "I hope he has killed the scamp!"

"But I fear for Barney now!" said Charlie, apprehensively. "Stand ready!" said Frank, cocking his rifle, "we may have to shoot quick!"

The savage knocked down by Barney now gained his feet, and made a savage rush at the Celt.

Barney promptly knocked him down again. At this several of the Klamaths rushed upon the Irishman with upflitted tomahawks.

The crisis had come.

"Pick your men!" cried Frank. "Take those nearest Barney!"

Crack—ack! Crash!

The rifles spoke, and the explosive shells striking in the midst of the Klamath crew created havoc.

Four of the savages were instantly killed. The effect upon the others was exciting.

Instantly they were upon their feet, the personification of surprise and fury. They huddled together, seemingly for a moment undecided as to which way to turn.

This was just the opportunity Frank wanted.

"Now, boys," he cried, "give it to them again!"

Crack, crack, boom!

Again the explosive shells plowed their way through the Klamath ranks. This was quite enough for the savages.

They broke for cover at once.

Into the depths of the cavern chamber they fled. This put them for the moment out of range.

But the point was gained and Frank Reade, Jr., did not care to carry the war further. Barney had astutely divined the situation and in the confusion had made his escape and was now with his friends.

It is needless to say that he was warmly welcomed.

"Bogorra, Mistler Frank," he cried, excitedly, "shure yez cum jist in loime! They wud have burned me at the stake a bit later."

"Did you think we'd go home and leave you in this fix?" asked Frank.

"Divil a hit av it, sor. Shure, I was on the lookout for yez."

"Well, how are our chances, Barney? Are there many of the red men in the cave?"

"Bejabers, there's a raft av thim!" cried Barney, excitedly. "Shure, sor, I'm afther thinkin' the best we can do is to get out of here at wanst, sor."

"I agree with you," declared Frank. "Then let us return to the air-ship."

All now set out rapidly down the passage. But suddenly Frank was called to a halt.

This was caused by the sudden sound of the telegraph in his pocket. He drew the instrument out and read this communication:

"Look out! half a hundred of the savages are in the passage. We tried to stop them and killed a score of them, but they got by us."

"Mercy!" cried Frank, excitedly; "there's danger for us! What shall we do?"

To face the crew of fifty armed Klamaths seemed madness, in spite of the explosive rifles and the bullet-proof armor.

The Klamaths carried heavy axes, which in a close struggle would, no doubt, batter the armor wearers into insensibility. What was to be done?

"To go back into the cavern chamber seemed fully as bad.

They were hemmed in upon all sides. The situation certainly looked very dubious.

But there was little time for reflection. Something must be done and at once. Frank turned in despair to Barney.

"How is it, Barney?" he cried. "You ought to know something about affairs here. Are there any other modes of exit?"

"Oh, yes, sor," replied the Celt. "Shure, the hill is full of holes and corners and corridors like. Shure, sor, I was not brought here this way at all."

"Indeed!" cried Frank. "In what way then?"

"I think I can find it if yez will follow me."

"Go ahead!"

Barney needed no second bidding. Back he went to the cavern chamber. He pointed across this.

"Shure, it's over there," he cried. "Will we thry it?"

Some of these struck Frank and Warden. But for their armor they would have been seriously wounded.

As it was, however, the arrows rattled off harmlessly.

It was now a question as to whether it would be safe to try the other passage of exit.

Those wearing armor had nothing to fear. But Barney would be almost sure to be hit by the bullets or arrows of the foe.

Frank, however, hit upon a plan.

"Here, Barney, he cried, "You get behind us. We will interpose our bodies between you and the savages."

The idea looked feasible enough. Keeping well in the shadow of the further side of the amphitheater the four white men started for the other passage of exit.

But the Klamaths had evidently foreseen this purpose and had provided for it.

They massed themselves there in great numbers and Frank saw before half the distance had been covered that it was going to be troublesome to force a way through.

Indeed he was obliged to halt and open fire upon the foe.

What made matters all the more complicated now was the appearance of the Klamaths in the passage they had just left. The situation was thrilling.

They were hemmed in on all sides. There seemed no avenue of escape.

Charlie Allen was deadly pale and gasped:

"My God are we destined to die thus like rats in a trap!"

"No!" cried Frank, forcibly. "We must fight our way out!"

With which he sent a shell into the midst of the red foe. Had the battle been carried on thus at a distance it was easy to see that the white men would have had the best of it so long as their ammunition lasted.

But the Klamaths seemed to realize that their great hope was to bring the battle to close quarters.

So they made a charge upon their white foe! It was a critical moment for our friends.

Had Barney possessed weapons it would have made things more even. But he had not a cudgel.

Indeed he was obliged to keep behind the three mail clad men to avoid being instantly killed.

Frank, Warden and Charlie kept up a hot fire. Before it the Klamaths fell like sheep. But the places of those that fell seemed instantly to be filled by others.

Thus the light wazed for some while with no appreciable advantage upon either side. But now a chill came over Frank.

He knew that their ammunition was getting low, and that in such an event the result would come quickly.

Something desperate must be done, and at once.

The young inventor was not long in adopting a plan. He communicated his idea to the others and it was carried out.

"Keep close to the wall!" he directed, "we must work our way along step by step and force the enemy back until we reach the passage."

The scheme proved a good one. But even then the fate of the party would have been undoubtedly sealed had it not been for aid from another quarter.

Back on the air-ship the knowledge of the dangerous position of those in the cavern had excited them greatly.

Pomp was almost beside himself.

"I done kin I mus' go to help dem, fo' suah!" he cried, excitedly.

"Dez mus' hab help from some one!"

"By all means," pleaded Hattie, who was convulsed with terror.

"Oh, do not let them die in such a manner!"

"But I jes' don' know what to do about de air-ship."

"Leave it with me!" cried Hattie. "Go, all of you!"

Pomp was reflective a moment. He knew that he was the only one safe to remain with the air-ship.

Yet if it was anchored it would be all safe in Hattie's charge until they returned, provided that it was not attacked.

It was a hard problem for the faithful darky to solve.

He was more than anxious to go to the aid of his friends, but yet he disliked to disobey orders and leave the air-ship.

However, it was a question of the air-ship or his young master's life.

Pomp at once decided.

"Jes' yo' get yo' guns!" he cried, turning to Denham and the Rev. Schuyler Wall. "We's jes' gwine to go to the rescue ob Mars Frank an' don' yo' fo'git it!"

CHAPTER XII.

HATTIE BECOMES A HEROINE.

ALTHOUGH not a man of warlike propensities, the Rev. Schuyler Wall was willing to gird on his armor and for once forego his profession to indulge in battle which he felt assured was for the right.

Rifles were brought, and the three men were ready to go to the rescue.

Hattie was pale but very resolute.

"You will find that I shall hold the ship," she declared. "I can handle a rifle, and it will not be easy for them to get up here." Pomp showed her how to work the electric levers for the ascension or descent of the air-ship.

Then the three men went down the ladder and were lost to view in the cavern.

It was a novel situation for Hattie, who had endured peril enough, however, in the last month to harden her fears reasonably well. She thought more of the peril of her father and husband in the cavern than of herself.

Yet in spite of this she did not lose sight of the fact that it was necessary to be constantly on her guard.

And as chance had it, her friends had not been absent upon their mission many minutes when thrilling danger presented itself.

It seemed as if Kiamath was constantly arriving at the cavern. Suddenly from a point on the mountain wall Hattie saw a dozen of the red foe come into view.

They paused, apparently astonished at sight of the air-ship. Their predecessors had been glad enough to seek the cover of the cavern at once, but these fellows paused and studied the air-ship.

Hattie knelt by the rail and watched them furtively with wildly-beating heart.

"Will they dare to attack the air-ship?" she thought. "If they do what will become of me?"

Her question seemed to be almost immediately answered when one of the party suddenly discharged an arrow at the ship.

It struck the metal hull and bounced clanking upon the deck.

Another and another came.

As there seemed no show of resistance from the air-ship, the savages were emboldened to approach nearer.

They came down slowly.

The air-ship seemed to possess a peculiar fascination for them.

They studied it for a while.

Then one of them began to pull on the anchor rope.

He was not strong enough, however, to overcome the resistance of the rotascopes.

The savages held an excited consultation under the air-ship.

The result was that one of them suddenly began to climb the anchor rope.

Deadly alarm seized Hattie.

For a moment she was like one spellbound.

Two more of the savages were climbing the other anchor ropes.

What was she to do? Her heart beat so fast that she well nigh fainted.

Still she was powerless.

At that distance she could easily have shot the savage.

Yet some strange fascination, which she could not overcome, held her in restraint.

Up came the red foe until his hand was actually at the air-ship's rail.

Then Hattie acted.

She sprang up and cried forcibly:

"Go back! back! I tell you, or I shall fire at you!"

The savage's head was above the rail. He paused with a guttural cry. But he did not fall back.

His keen, black eyes took in the deck of the air-ship and its appointments. He saw only a very handsome and slender young woman as to oppose him.

He laughed in a fiendish manner and essayed to cross the rail.

Fatal move! Up went the rifle to Hattie's shoulder. She was a sure shot.

Crack!

With a mortal cry the savage lost his hold and fell. The thud of his body upon the rocks below high caused Hattie to faint.

A loud, angry yell went up from the other Kiamaths. Two of them were upon the other anchor rope.

The next moment they were at the rail. But they did not cross it.

One shared the fate of the first. The other slid down down the rope in a hurry.

Hattie was holding the fort in royal fashion. She had killed two of the savages with ease.

This had a salutary effect upon the others. They did not venture again to ascend the rope.

But with loud, defiant yells, they retired to a higher point on the mountain side. From there they essayed shots at the air-ship.

Hattie narrowly missed being struck by one of the arrows.

She crouched down behind the steel netting of the bulwarks and watched the red foe anxiously.

As matters now stood she had decidedly the best of the situation.

But the shock of the affair had taxed her nerves greatly. She did not dare to look down upon the bodies below, for fear she might faint.

She had learned the use of the rifle well, being a good huntsman. But human game was a kind which had taxed the nervous system of even the strongest man.

It seemed hours to Hattie crouching there upon the air-ship's deck, before there was any change in the situation.

She could easily have shot others of the savages in the interim. But this she did not care to do.

She had no desire to unnecessarily take human life. It was well for the Kiamaths that this was so.

Time passed slowly. Again and again she fancied she heard the return of her friends, only to be disappointed.

Would they never come? Had they fallen into a death trap?

A slow sense of horror came over her as she realized what a position here would be if this were really so.

But she clung to hope. Certainly fate would not be so cruel.

She once more did the Kiamaths venture to attack the air-ship. Several of them went down and tried their strength upon the anchor rope.

But they could not pull the air-ship down. Hattie fired a shot at random to frighten them away.

It had the desired effect.

They retreated in hot haste to the cover of the cavern. From this on the young defender of the air-ship was not molested.

But still she kept a vigilant watch.

Of course at any moment a larger crew of savages might come upon the scene. In that event the outlook would be a serious one.

Also it would indicate the fate of her friends. Realizing this, the young girl prayed earnestly that such a thing might not come to pass.

And thus situated, let us leave her for a brief time to follow the thrilling adventures of the other characters of this story.

In entering the Kiamaths' cave with Denham and Wall, Pomp realized well enough the risk he was incurring.

He was really the only fighting man in the party, though doubtless Denham and Wall would do their duty.

The darky had but one motive uppermost in his mind, and that was to rescue Frank Reade, Jr.

He was deeply devoted to his young master, and was ready at all times to sell his life for him.

Into the cave the three men boldly passed. Soon they were deep in its tortuous windings.

They went on rapidly for some distance before they saw or heard anything of the foe.

Then suddenly from behind an angle in the passage they came face to face with a couple of the Kiamaths.

There was no time for sentiment. Nor for parley. It was a case of the quickest for the best.

The Kiamaths had instantly unsung their bows.

Arrows were already half headed to the bowstring, when—

Crack—

Pomp's rifle spoke, and blended with Denham's. The two savages fell dead. Then the white men waited the appearance of others.

But singularly enough they did not appear. The two Indians had, apparently, been unaccompanied by others.

"I done fink we bettah go right on," cried Pomp. "Nebor gain anything by waitin' on."

So they pressed on. Through the passage they went rapidly.

Soon, upon turning an angle, a distant startling sound came to their hearing.

It was the crack of rifles, blended with loud yells. No further explanation was necessary.

A battle was in progress just ahead.

"Forward, gamemans!" cried Pomp. "I done reckon we wants 'o' to take a hand in dat scrap!"

"The firing would seem to indicate that our friends are not dead yet," said Rev. Schuyler Wall.

"You are right," agreed the professor. "I think we shall get there in time."

"Yo' kin jes' bet we will!" cried Pomp, confidently. "Look out dar!"

All ducked their heads just in time. A flight of arrows went whizzing over.

"Gib it to 'em!" cried Pomp.

All three opened fire.

Their volleys, sweeping down the long passage, were very destructive. The two savages were completely taken by surprise.

The besieged white men in the cavern were not a little surprised at the sound of firing in that direction.

Barney gave a joyful shout of comprehension.

"Bejabers, it's the nuygur an' the others!" he cried. "Shure, they're comin' 'jst in the nick of time."

This gave all renewed hope, and the battle went on more resolutely. The Kiamaths had been pressing them hard.

But now they seemed bewildered and dismayed by the inexplicable attack in their rear.

A sort of panic seemed to seize them, and they broke and retreated wildly to the further end of the cavern chamber.

This left the path open to the outer passage.

It is needless to say that Frank and his companions quickly gained it.

They were met there by Pomp and the others. The meeting was a joyful one. Pomp and his two associates had cleared the passage before them.

The battle was over.

The Kiamaths still kept up their fire from the lower end of the chamber, but it was not returned.

Frank had no desire of conducting the conflict further.

His end, that of Barney's rescue, had been accomplished. More he could not ask for.

The exchange of greetings was joyous enough, but Frank cried: "Come! Let us go back to the air-ship. There is nothing to keep us here. In another hour we must be on our way to Redestown."

Then the other query came to all. Would they find the air-ship safe in the charge of its first defender?

CHAPTER XIII.

THE END.

ALL were prone to admit that the Klamaths had shown themselves to be plucky fighters.

Had it not been for the suits of armor provided by Frank Reade, Jr., they would certainly have overcome the three white men, for perfect showers of arrows were turned aside by the steel meshes.

It was a glorious victory. But now all felt anxious about the air-ship.

"It was a risky thing to leave it so," said Frank. "But if you had not chanced it, Pomp, I am sure that we should all have been killed."

"I'll wager we'll find it all safe," said Warden, confidently. "I tell you Hattie is plucky and knows how to handle a rifle."

"Let us hope for the best," said the Rev. Schuyler.

It seemed an interminable way to the mouth of the cavern. What was more the trouble with the Klamaths did not seem to be over.

Before the entrance was reached a number of shots were exchanged with them.

This kept them at a respectful distance, for the elephant rifles created havoc in their ranks.

"Where is the end of this eternal passage?" cried Warden, fretfully, pressing on. "Will we never reach it?"

Just at this moment a number of Klamaths were seen just ahead. They fled before the white men.

But this was a dismaying sight to all.

"My soul!" groaned Frank Reade, Jr., "I fear they have gained the air-ship!"

Forward all pressed now eagerly.

The last angle was just ahead. Frank was the first to turn it. Then he glanced up and saw the air-ship.

"Hurrah!" he cried. "All is safe!"

His words were heard by Hattie who was quickly at the rail. She waved her arms joyfully.

[THE END.]

The delight of all was of the frenzied kind. It seemed certain that after all their many perils and hardships that they were at last to be rewarded with success and deliverance. Then the dead bodies of the Klamaths were seen, and a comprehension of the truth burst upon all.

"Hurrah for the brave defender of the air-ship!" cried Frank.

The cheers were given heartily. Then Barney went up the anchor rope like a monkey.

It was but a moment's work for him to lower the air-ship. All piled over the rail.

At this moment the Klamaths burst out of the cavern. But they had come just too late.

Frank Reade, Jr., was in the pilot-house, and the air-ship shot upwards into the zenith.

A course was instantly set for home.

Now that all was over and all were safe on board the Thunderbolt, a keen enjoyment of the voyage home became in order.

It was a time of general justification, and perhaps the happiest of all were the wedded couple, Mr. and Mrs. Charlie Allen.

"I don't see why our escapade did not turn out splendidly after all," said Charlie, joyfully, "but for it we should have missed all this delightful sail in mid-air."

"That is all right," said Warden, with a deep breath, "but if you were married to-morrow and proposed to go up in a balloon to do it, I'd have you both clapped into an insane asylum the quickest way. You squeezed out of a very bad scrape and caused your old father more worrying than your precious scalps are worth."

Everybody laughed at this rather caustic admonition. No event of importance occurred during the journey home.

In due time Readestown was safely reached. The different members of the party went their respective ways.

But the romantic incidents and thrilling episodes of that search of "Six Weeks in the Clouds" was not nor never will be forgotten by those who participated in it.

And with this rejoinder we beg leave to bring this story to

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