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The Chase of a Comet;

OR,

Frank Reade, Jr.'s Most Wonderful Aerial Trip With His New Air-Ship the "Flash."

A MARVELOUS MID-AIR FLIGHT.

By "NONAME,"

Author of "Around the Arctic Circle; or, Frank Reade, Jr.'s Most Famous Trip With His Air-Ship, the "Orbit," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I. THE NEW COMET.

PROFESSOR ALEXIS MENDON of the American School of Science had just descended from the observatory where for two whole hours he had been engaged in watching the heavens, starlit and beautiful.

Below him lay the flashing lights of Washington, but he had never even deigned them a glance. His whole attention had been given to that which he saw in the reflector of the great telescope.

The assistant, John Vance, had stood behind him all the while awaiting orders.

The professor was in a state of no little excitement, for he expected and hoped that hour to make a discovery which would electrify the scientific and astronomic world.

He had begun to study the great reflector, at exactly ten o'clock. In it were mirrored the constellation of stars which were the object of his interest.

Slowly time dragged by and he watched. Several times it became necessary to change the range of the great telescope.

At half past ten the attendant ventured to say:

"We are a little early, sir!"

"Better than late!" was the scientist's terse reply.

"Aye, sir!" agreed Vance, tacitly.

Time went on.

Eleven o'clock came. One hour had passed. Still the professor stared into the reflector.

Another half hour drifted by and Vance stirred a little.

"Keep still!" said Mendon, harshly.

The attendant winced, but obeyed. There was already a light of incredulity in his eyes. It was now fifteen minutes of eleven.

One hour and three quarters had passed. The professor's face looked troubled.

"If it does not come within fifteen minutes," he mused. "All my reckoning is at fault."

John Vance looked as if he doubted the professor's expectations, but he said nothing.

But suddenly Mendon drew closer and watched the reflector intently. His note-book lay in his lap, and he made entries without taking his gaze from the reflector.

Through the milky whiteness of the nebula he saw a bright and fiery star suddenly emerge. It was moving and increasing in size.

As it developed more distinctly a long nebulous tail was seen. For full ten minutes the new comet, for such it was, remained in sight.

Then it vanished.

But Mendon knew that this would not be its last appearance. Every night after this, at the same hour, and for a longer period each time, it would be visible.

He drew a deep breath and arose.

"John Vance," he said, "wipe the lens and have all ready for to-morrow night at quarter of eleven. The comet has come."

The attendant bowed respectfully.

It was then that Professor Mendon descended into his study. At a table upon which were spread many charts sat a young man.

He was handsome and intellectual, and looked up as Mendon entered.

He saw the light of exultation in the professor's eyes.

"My boy," cried the latter, "my reckonings are verified! The Hopkins comet, after an absence of fifty years, has returned."

"Father," exclaimed the young man, springing up, "you don't mean it!"

"Yes, I do, Jack."

Jack Mendon, the professor's son, and who was following rapidly in his father's profession, was much excited.

"What a wonderful revelation this will be!" he cried. "The Hopkins comet has an enormous orbit, and, if it follows its previous course, will come very near the earth."

"As near as the moon, my lad."

"Mercy! What a chance that will be to study its composition and other characteristics!"

The professor made a rueful face.

"So it ought to be," he said, "but I fear that its proximity to the earth at that moment can only be viewed from a part of the globe which has hitherto never been reached by man."

"And that—"

"Somewhere in the vicinity of the South Pole."

Jack Mendon was silent for some moments after this declaration.

He saw at that moment the apparently sheer impossibility of carrying out a cherished project.

But with the characteristic hopefulness of youth, he would not abandon the chance for such mighty gains. He would not believe but that there was some way to gain the desired end.

Professor Mendon was gazing hopelessly into the cheerful grate fire. He could see no way out of the difficulty.

But he was an old man and had seen many a project placed beyond any chance of accomplishment. He was more inclined to disappointment.

He knew that many brave men had tried to reach the South Pole only to fail.

Therefore it was not at all likely that he or Jack would ever be able to view the comet at its close approach to the earth.

Only at this out of the way part of the globe would the monster be visible in his approach. At this point he would be hardly distant from the earth not more than two hundred and fifty thousand miles.

With a powerful telescope at that moment, such a view could be had of his comets as would doubtless satisfy beyond all doubt, all speculations as to its character or size.

It will be easy for the reader to understand of what mighty value to science this would be.

For instance, the tail of the comet has always been the subject of

much speculation. Many have claimed that it is a solid appendage, others that it is but a nebulous trail in the sky.

In view of all these things, the bitter disappointment of the scientist and his son can be imagined.

But finally Jack, after much thought, ran his fingers energetically through his long hair, and exclaimed:

"Is there no possible way of gaining those latitudes?"

"I certainly know of none," declared the professor.

"Ships had penetrated quite near it. Perhaps—"

"Nonsense! No vessel can ever take us far enough south. Be sure of that!"

"Oh, for wings," cried the young scientist. "Or perhaps a balloon would take us thither."

"A balloon?"

The professor gave a start, and then paced the floor several times excitedly back and forth.

"A balloon!" he exclaimed, and his features worked convulsively.

"My boy, you have hit it."

He paused before his son with pale and agitated features. There was a sonorous ring in his voice as he said:

"Do you see the point? I believe that a strong balloon, launched from the southern cape of Enderby Land, would take us as far as the Pole, or far enough to see the comet."

Jack looked intensely at his father.

"So it would," he agreed, "but—"

"What!"

"How would we ever return?"

Professor Mendon's frame quivered. He looked at his son again, and there was a strange light in his eyes.

"We could never return!"

Startled beyond measure, Jack Mendon for a moment could not speak. Then he said:

"You are right. We must give up the idea."

"No!"

Professor Mendon went on earnestly:

"My life is near its close. I have devoted it to science. I am willing to sacrifice it to science. I intend to see the Comet at its nearest approach to the earth, even if I do not come back alive. I am willing to give my life to see it."

Jack Mendon gave a gasping cry:

"No, no, father!" he cried. "I will never consent to that—"

"Stop! My mind is decided."

Jack knew that when his father spoke in that manner that he was not to be gainsaid. So he interposed his last argument.

"But in what manner will you benefit science by thus throwing your life away? How will you be able to send to the world an account of what you have seen? That will die with you."

"No," replied the Professor; "there is a way. I shall take carrier pigeons with me. They will carry back all that I may wish."

"And your plan then—"

"Is first to secure a ship to take me to Enderby Land. Four months from to-day I must land there."

"Yes!"

"I shall go ashore, wait for a favorable wind and then launch my balloon. The ship may wait two months for me to return. If I do not come back by that time it may return home for it will be known that I am dead."

Jack Mendon arose and clutched his father's arm. He was very much affected.

"Father," he said, "you are not going alone!"

"Yes, my boy!"

"Never! I am going with you!"

"No—I forbid that. You are young and shall take advantage of my great discoveries. You shall reap the fruits of that mighty enterprise for which I am willing to bring my high spent life to a close!"

But Jack Mendon said:

"I am decided as well as you. I shall go with you. And if you do not return from the South Pole alive, we will die together."

CHAPTER II.

THE NEW AIR SHIP.

JACK MENDON meant just what he said. He clung to his point ardently.

Nothing the professor could say would dissuade him. So finally the aged scientist had to give in.

The two projectors of the mighty undertaking went to work rapidly and secretly.

It was not until after the Storm King was a month out of port on her southern voyage that the newspapers got hold of the matter.

Then a thrill of excitement ran through the country.

The two daring scientists who proposed throwing their lives away in the interest of science became actual heroes.

Everybody was interested in the famous project. Great articles were written on the subject, and many theories advanced as to its probable outcome.

Among those who became interested in the fate of the brave scientists was one man who stood foremost in the ranks of talent and fame.

This was Frank Reade, Jr., the young inventor who had perfected the submarine boat and the electric horses.

Readstown was the home of this youthful genius. Here were located the shops for the construction of his inventions.

In his employ were two men who were geniuses in their way.

One was a type of Irishman right from the Emerald Isle. His name was Barney O'Shea.

The other was a negro, black as a coal and full of fun. He answered to the name of Pomp.

Barney and Pomp chanced to enter the room as Frank was reading about the scientists and their trip to the South Pole.

At once the young inventor said:

"How is work progressing on the new rotascope for the Flash?"

"It's all finished, sir!" replied the Celt, with a duck of the head.

"It's all right, sir!" interjected the darky, rolling his eyes.

"Good!" cried Frank, with evident pleasure, "then the new air-ship is almost ready for a mid-air flight."

"Yis, sir!" replied Barney, with a grin, "but if phwat some av thim say cums thrue, she'll niver fly!"

"How is that?" asked Frank, sharply.

"Shure, sir, wan spalpeen met me on the athreet to-day an' wanted to bate me tin to wan that the air-ship cud niver fly. He said that navigation of the air was niver yit solved, an' niver wud be!"

"Indeed!" exclaimed Frank, with asperity. "You should have taken that bet, Barney. However, it is well you did not, for I can never approve of betting. But he is mistaken!"

"Golly! I done flunk he am, sah!" declared Pomp; "dere ain' no sight ob sence in nobody sayin' dat air-ship ain' gwine ter fly."

"We'll show them!" said Frank, resolutely, "but I am anxious that she shall be got ready as quickly as possible! I intend to start upon a long aerial voyage with her at once."

Barney and Pomp exchanged delighted glances.

The prospect was too much for them.

Barney turned a flip-flap, and Pomp stood on his head. When they had recovered from this ebullition Frank smiled and said:

"I have found a very important and philanthropic mission to make it an object for our next journey. I am going to the South Pole."

Pomp grinned and Barney chuckled.

"Yo' am gwine to de Souf Pole, Marse Frank?" cried Pomp.

"Wha' am yo' gwine to do when yo' git dar?"

"Begorra, phwat a senseless question to ax!" put in Barney. "Do yez think there'll be nothin' to do there? Shure we'll make yez cloimb the Pole if nothin' else."

"Shut up, yo' no 'coant 'fiah," blustered Pomp; "don' yo' sassify me."

"Easy, boys!" said Frank, with a smile. "Don't carry the joke too far. I have a wonderful object in view in visiting the South Pole."

The two jokers looked expectant.

"You can understand better by reading this paragraph in the paper," he continued, as he extended it to them.

Both Barney and Pomp read the account of the thrilling enterprise of the Mendons. They were deeply interested.

"Begorra, I see the point!" cried Barney. "Shure, Misther Frank is going down there with his air-ship to bring thim brave min back agin!"

"Just so," replied Frank, "and that is not all."

Barney and Pomp looked eager.

"Wha' am de nex' ting?" asked Pomp.

"I am going to see how near we can get to that comet by a direct ascension. I shall have the Flash provided with chemical reservoirs for the generation of air, just the same as my submarine boat, for you know that if we should get miles up in the air we would find it too rare for our lungs."

"Bejabers, thim we'll be in chase of the comet!" cried Barney.

"Just so!"

Again the two jokers indulged in lively flip-flaps.

"We're all ready, Marse Frank," cried Pomp. "When am we gwine fo' to start?"

"At once," replied Frank; "see that the Flash is provided with all the necessaries for such a long voyage. I want the air-ship ready within two days if possible."

This ended the confab.

Barney and Pomp rushed away to do Frank's bidding. The young inventor retraced his steps to his desk and went to work again.

But in some manner an enterprising reporter got hold of the affair.

The next day the papers were full of it. Imaginary cuts of the comet, of the air-ship and of the icefields of the Antarctic were given.

Of course none of these were correct, and originated in the fertile imagination of the artist.

But it was sufficient to set the country agog. Frank was deluged with telegrams and letters.

One of these was from a large scientific institute in the West, offering a large reward for the safe return of the daring scientists.

Frank assured all that he would do his best. Of course he could guarantee nothing.

Night and day work was pushed on the air ship.

All hopes were centered upon her. If she succeeded, then the Mendons would surely be rescued.

If not, then they must perish in the frozen wilds, martyrs to the noble cause of science.

The Flash was ready right on time. As she was rolled out of the shop into the yard, she formed a wonderful spectacle.

Her model was not unlike that of a racing yacht, with a long, sharp bow and deep stern. Her hull was of lightest and toughest aluminum.

She carried two powerful rotascopes which gave a prodigious sustaining power. Forward was a mast, to which was attached a huge flying jib to aid the screw in propulsion and give her additional speed.

For the Flash was built for speed.

Frank had designed her for the fastest of anything afloat, whether on water or in air.

The screw had four powerful blades and it and the rotascopes were driven by electric engines of Frank's own invention upon the storage principle.

The deck of the Flash was capacious and enclosed on all sides by guard rails.

Forward was a long cabin and pilot-house. Aft was another cabin in which were the state-rooms and living quarters of the crew.

All of these cabins and compartments were richly furnished, yet with an idea of lightness of material. The Flash was the most wonderful result of inventive genius of modern times.

And Frank felt proud of his air-ship, now that it was done. It was safe to say that no modern inventor could hope to equal it.

All the necessities for such a long voyage were stored aboard the Flash.

There were all manner of scientific instruments, weapons and a good stock of provisions. Thus as far as possible we have given the reader a description of the Flash.

In some way the hour set for the departure was learned by the eager public, and as a result an enormous crowd was on hand to see the Flash take its first flight.

This was indeed a spectacle worth witnessing.

The air-ship rested upon a platform in the yard, and all was in readiness. Frank Reade, Jr., with Barney and Pomp, were on the deck.

Frank had refused all petitions of friends and others to accompany him. He knew that when he should reach the South Pole, if Mendon and his son were rescued, there would be people enough on board.

All this he explained as well as he could. Though for all, some were quite offended.

The workmen in the yard had put the last stay from the side of the air-ship. All was clear, and Frank stepped into the pilot house and touched the rotascope lever.

In a moment the machinery began to whirl, and the air-ship, like a huge eagle from its eyrie, began to rise in the air.

Up it went majestically. The immense crowd in the streets of Readestown cheered wildly.

Faster and faster the Flash mounted upward. When fully three thousand feet above the city, Frank went out on deck and said:

"Boys, take your last look for a good while at Readestown." All looked over the rail.

The little city nestled among the hills so far below presented an interesting sight. Barney and Pomp pulled off their caps reverently.

"The best spot on earth savin'ould Oireland is Readestown!" declared Barney.

"Golly! I done fink it am a heap sight bettah," averred Pomp.

Then Frank went back to the pilot house.

He threw the motor lever wide open. The screw hummed, and the big jib filled before the current of air.

The Flash was off in a manner becoming her name and her design.

CHAPTER III.

POMP DISAPPEARS.

READESTOWN was left behind in a twinkling. It soon faded entirely from view.

Frank was anxious to test the speed of the air-ship.

So he taxed the engines to their utmost. The speed was so terrific that Barney and Pomp lay down flat and clung to the deck.

"Begorra yez will sweep us overboard, Misher Frank," cried the Celt, in alarm.

Frank laughed at this and then checked the speed of the air-ship.

"We were traveling right along," he declared. "I think it would be hard work for that comet to beat us much."

"Begorra, I believe yez!" cried Barney. "Shure I'd about as soon roide on its tail."

"Huh!" grunted Pomp. "I jes' like fo' to see yo' ride on a comet's tail, Pish. I reckon yo' change yo' mind pooty quick."

The darky's eyes twinkled mischievously as he said this. As Frank had gone back to the pilot-house, he saw what he believed was a rare chance to hector the Celt.

Barney was ripe for any sort of ruction. It did not take him long to flash back:

"Be me sowl, yez seem to be very much intererested in me roidin' on the comet, yez black clown yez!"

"Huh! I jes' remember how yo' tried to ride a mule once. Any man dat kain't stick on de back ob a mule bettah not talk about ridin' on the tail of a comet!"

"Who told yez I cudin't roide a mule?" flashed Barney, indignantly.

"Be jabbers, av I can't ride one yez can't, I'll ate me ears!"

"Yo' would fin' dat a berry big job," suggested Pomp.

This was enough for Barney.

He made a dive for his tormentor. The darky made a feint to run. Then he suddenly turned about and lowered his head.

This was disastrous to Barney to say the least. The Celt tried to dodge.

But in vain. The two jokers collided with terrific force.

The darky's head took the Celt fair in the stomach. The effect was decisive as well as comical.

Barney sat down with a suddenness which for a moment confused him. He hardly knew what had happened to him.

He could not yell for he had no breath to do it with. He simply lay there gasping and sputtering.

When he did get his first gasp he ejaculated:

"Tare an' ounds! I'll—I'll 'ave the loife av yez fer this. Phwore the civil are yez? Phwy don't yez cum an loike a man!"

The Celt glared wildly about as he staggered to his feet.

He was burning with discomfiture and baffled vengeance. Woe to the darky if he could only catch him at that moment.

But Pomp was nowhere in sight.

When Barney went down the darky had turned a somersault over him. Then he had vanished.

But Barney was not to be deceived.

He was certain that Pomp had fled for safety into the cabin. He would chase him and bring him out.

So into the cabin he dashed; but high and low he searched, and found no trace of the darky.

The Celt was stamped.

"Bejabbers, it's quare phwore that coon cud hide himself," he declared. "Divil a bit do I undherstand it!"

At length he got tired of the search, and in baffled rage cried:

"Shure, yez kin sthay hid; but yez will soon git tired av that, I'm thinkin', an' want to cum back; then I'll have yez shure!"

If Pomp heard he made no reply. Barney went down to the engine room and busied himself.

Frank was looking over some charts in the cabin.

Thus an hour drifted by. It was the dinner hour, and time for Pomp to be found in the cooking galley.

The Celt chuckled.

"Begorra, he don't dare to cum back," he muttered. "Shure, he knows phwat he'll get."

Finally Frank pressed a call bell.

Barney answered it.

"Look here!" said the young inventor sharply, "is it not past the dinner hour?"

"Yis, sor," replied Barney.

"Where is Pomp?"

"Divil a bit do I know, sor."

"You don't know?"

"No, sor."

Frank was astonished.

"What fol-de-rol is this?" he cried impatiently. "Look him up at once and see why he has not made dinner ready before this!"

Barney ducked his head.

"Shure, sor, I've hunted iverywhere for him, and divil a trace av him kin I foind."

"You can't find him?" exclaimed Frank in alarm. "Perhaps he has fallen overboard. When did you see him last?"

"No, sor," stammered Barney. "Shure, I don't belave that, sor. I think it's only a joke, sor—"

"A joke?"

"Yes, sor. He's hldin' away from me. Shure we were foolin' an' he butted me in ther stumick wid his head, an' I reckon he's afeerd to cum out an' show himself fer fear I'll baste him, sor."

Frank looked angry.

"Well, I don't like such skylarking," he said; "find him at once, and tell him to come out of his hiding."

"Yis, sor."

And away went Barney shouting Pomp's name in every part of the ship. But when he went back to the galley and the darky was not there, then he began to grow alarmed.

A sudden thought and a recollection came to him.

Their scuffle had taken place near the rail.

What if Pomp had lost his balance and plunged over it? This was not improbable.

The Celt turned grayish pale.

Frank came on deck at this moment and Barney went to him with his fears.

Frank was horrified.

"My soul!" he cried; "of course that is where he is gone, and he is doubtless dead ere this. Horrible! Could you not have seen him?"

"Shure, sor, I was that dizzy an' sick, I could see nothing."

Frank rushed to the rail. It required but a brief examination to see the truth.

That part of the rail near where they had been wrestling was bent and twisted as though a fallen body had struck it.

It was near the anchor ropes, and one of these was disentangled and hung, anchor and all, a thousand feet below.

It was hardly a hundred feet from the earth, and why it had not caught some obstruction was indeed a great mystery.

But there it hung swaying. No sign of Pomp was to be seen, however.

That the darky had gone down to his death seemed certain.

Frank instantly turned the air-ship about.

Of course it was not an easy matter to find Pomp's mangled body, but Frank was determined to do this, even if he gave up his trip to the South Pole.

He was much distressed over the sad fate of the faithful darky, while Barney was almost frantic.

"Shure, if he had a black face it was a white heart he had," he declared, with many groans and wails. "I'd rayther have lost me own brother, fer we were that same ourselves!"

Back on its course went the air ship.

Barney and Frank kept a sharp watch of the ground below. The air ship was not allowed to rise very high above the earth.

In this manner the Flash sailed slowly on for two hours.

Then it began to ascend the slopes of a mountain. How it had ever passed over this without the kedges of the anchor catching was a mystery.

That it had done so was certain.

But even as the air ship was fifty feet above the summit, Barney gave a wild cry of delight.

There upon the mountain summit safe and well stood Pomp waving his arms excitedly.

"Howly mither!" gasped Barney, "howiver did he live troo it!"

And, indeed, he might well ask this question. But it remained a mystery until Pomp came aboard.

Then he explained all.

"Golly! I done fought dis chile was done fo' when I went ober dat rail," he declared. "But I jes made one big grab fo' de anchor rope. It fell and I hung on and slid down it afo' I cud stop mah'sef. Then de anchor struck a big rock an' done frowned me to de ground. I fell not moh dan ten feet so was jes not one lily bit hurt."

"Begorra, an' it's glad I am av that, naygur!" cried Barney wildly, as he embraced his colleague.

It was a happy outcome. But Pomp hustled away to the galley to get dinner.

While the air-ship once more sailed away at full speed on her Southern course.

For the next two days she traveled very fast and over a section of the Southern States to the Gulf of Mexico.

One morning they hung over the blue waters of the gulf, and Frank said:

"The journey is really begun. We shall very soon now be well on our way to the Equator."

"Bejabbers, thin mebbe we'll catch up wid the ship Storm King!" declared Barney.

"I wish we might," said Frank. "We could prevent that fool-hardy balloon trip, which we ought to do."

So all speed was put on, and the air-ship kept on her southward course.

Day after day the flight went on. The blue sea rolled beneath sometimes in a dead calm, at other times in the fury of a storm.

The aerial voyagers enjoyed the experience, but no special incident worthy of note occurred until the cold seas of the South Atlantic merged with the waters of the Antarctic and they knew that the Antarctic Continent was not far distant.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ICE-BOUND SHIP.

ACROSS the Equator and in the middle Atlantic, plenty of ships were sighted every day.

But once well into the South Atlantic these became no longer frequent. To be sure a few whalers were seen, but these were all.

No attempt was made to hail or communicate with any of these passing ships.

Occasionally a signal was exchanged, but that was all.

The voyagers now found that the climate had undergone a radical change.

The warm skies and balmy air of Equatorial seas was no longer in evidence.

But instead, there were drifting ice-fields, giant bergs, lowering skies and fearful cold weather.

Fortunately Frank had provided for this very contingency.

He had caused for suits to be provided for all on board. These enabled the voyagers to withstand the frightful cold of the Antarctic regions.

This was, if anything, more extreme than at the North Pole.

Forty and fifty below zero was a common temperature. There was also a frightful chill in the atmosphere which seemed almost fatal to the lungs.

Over the great ice fields the air-ship drifted.

Frank was looking for the Storm King. But the ship seemed nowhere in that part of the world.

But one day after futile quest, Barney called the attention of Frank to a high white line on the horizon.

"Phwat iver is that?" he asked.

Frank was excited.

"Why, it is land!" he declared.

"Land, sor!"

"Yes, the Antarctic Continent. On those shores the Mendons were to land. We must search well for them."

"Begorra, that we will!" cried the Celt.

The air-ship's course was shifted in toward the coast line. Every moment now it grew plainer.

There was little evidence of vegetation—a few scrubby pines and firs; that was all.

The air-ship followed along the coast of the Antarctic Continent for several hundred miles.

Of course no exact spot had been fixed upon for the landing of the balloon party.

It was something like the proverbial search for a needle in a haystack, but the aerial voyagers kept a keen lookout just the same.

Frank felt quite sure of finding the Storm King somewhere along the Antarctic coast. If he should fail in this, he was then determined to strike directly for the South Pole.

The Antarctic winter was evidently just setting in.

The ice field was growing more and more solid every hour; also the sun was visible but a few hours each day.

The Antarctic night was coming on rapidly. This was not utter darkness, but a deep gloom, which at times was so dense as to require the use of the search-light to dispel it.

High overhead at night the heavenly constellation shone with wonderful brilliancy and magnitude.

Barney and Pomp several times fancied they saw the comet. But Frank was of different opinion.

And thus the search for the ship Storm King went on. Several days were spent in futile quest.

Then one morning, while the sun was visible for a few brief moments, Barney sighted an unusual object across the ice pack.

He called Frank's attention to it.

"Shure!" he cried, "phwat the divil do ye call it but shmoke?"

And smoke it was to be sure, a curling column ascending high into the rarefied air.

The cold was something intense, which made the air very clear, so that the distant smoke seemed quite near at hand.

Of course, this was evidence of the nearness of human beings, for they alone could be responsible for the smoke.

Frank was interested.

The air-ship was headed thither at once.

The smoke came from behind a high hummock of ice, so that the fire could not be seen.

But the Flash had not proceeded far when Frank gave a wild cry.

"On my word, it is the ship!" he cried.

"The ship! Begorra, that's thrue!" screamed Barney.

There was the Storm King tightly wedged in the ice pack. She was laid up in winter quarters.

The ice pack must have closed in upon her immediately upon her arrival, for she could not have penetrated so far shorewards otherwise.

It is needless to say that the air-ship was not long in reaching a point within hailing distance.

The smoke came from the ship's funnel, and upon her deck was a number of fur-clad sailors.

At sight of the air-ship one of the sailors fired a rifle as a signal.

Frank answered it.

Then the air-ship hovered right over the ice-bound vessel.

"Hello!" came up the hail.

"Hello!" replied Frank.

"Who the deuce are you?"

"I am Frank Reade, Jr., and this is the air-ship Flash."

"Well, I'll be keel-hauled! It's the first time I ever saw a ship that could sail in the air. I'm Captain Levi Briggs, and this is the ship Storm King."

"You're just the man we are looking for!" replied Frank.

"The deuce you say!"

"It's the truth. Do you know anything about Professor Mendon and his son?"

A cry of surprise came back.

"Yes, they chartered this ship to bring them here."

"That is what I thought. Where are they now?"

"They have gone toward the South Pole in a balloon. The more fools they, for I don't believe they'll ever come back!"

"And you are to wait for them?"

"Until this ice-pack breaks up. Then we are to sail for home."

Frank let the air-ship descend and rest upon the ice-pack not far from the ship.

Then he went on board and had a long consultation with Captain Briggs.

The latter gave him full particulars of the apparently foolhardy trick of the two scientists.

"Why," exclaimed the captain, vigorously, "how can the two fools ever hope to get back? They surely can't walk; and the balloon never will bring them back, be sure!"

"They probably are willing to sacrifice their lives for the benefit of science."

"Yes, the more fools they! They have taken carrier pigeons with them, but I don't look for them to ever get here! The cold is too much for such a bird!"

"Well," said Frank finally, "I agree with you that it was a fool-hardy undertaking. But it was just this thing that brought me to these latitudes."

"To see the comet?"

"No, but to rescue these two zealous but foolish men."

The captain gripped Frank's hand.

"You're after my own heart," he said. "I hope you'll succeed, and I feel sure you will."

"I hope your ship will stand the ice all right."

"I pray for that, though I own she's a bit likely to be nipped. If she is, then our cake is all dough."

"No. I will return this way and if you are in trouble I will give you assistance."

"God bless you, my friend."

The crew of the Storm King cheered the air-ship as she finally ascended and started for the Pole.

In a very few moments she was but a speck in the distance to those on board the ice-bound ship.

Then the sun went below the horizon and the gloom of the Antarctic came on.

It was no easy matter to search for the missing scientists and their balloon, as Frank well knew.

Doubtless before this they had reached an objective point and were already preparing to view the Comet.

And at that very moment Frank chanced to glance upward and saw an astounding spectacle.

A huge ball of fire hung in the zenith. It was nearly as large as the moon, and had a long nebulous tail, which extended far into the distance.

"Begorra, it's the comet!" cried Barney.

"Golly, dat am jes' wha' it an," ejaculated Pomp.

Frank regarded the wonderful spectacle with deepest interest. It was certainly an impressive sight.

Doubtless, at that moment, the scientists with their most powerful glass, were studying it. Frank could understand well now their enthusiasm which had led them to risk their lives.

"Upon my word," he muttered, "it is really worth a lifetime to see it."

Then he sent the rays of the search light sweeping over the icy waters in quest of the scientists.

But not a sign of them was to be seen.

They must be very much farther to the south.

So the air ship sped on. All the while the comet steadily grew in size.

It was evidently rapidly approaching the earth. Would there be a collision?

If so, what would be the result? Would it not be the end of the world?

These queries came to the aerial voyagers and were in turn discussed by them. But they were not disposed to give them credence.

Frank knew that the earth was moving in its orbit as well as the comet.

No doubt the comet would approach comparatively near to the earth. But that would be the end of its orbit, and it would sweep off again upon its return course.

It would then recede from the earth and rapidly pass from view for another fifty years, or until it once more got around from its limitless range through space.

Frank brought out his most powerful glass and studied the heavenly visitor.

But it was only powerful enough to show the comet as a ball of fire. It was then that a daring idea occurred to him.

CHAPTER V.

THE SCIENTISTS ARE FOUND.

FRANK did not impart the startling theory which had come upon him to either Barney or Pomp.

He knew that they were witty and sagacious, but hardly deep enough to understand its wonderful depth.

But he went into the cabin and upon some blank paper drew a chart.

Here was the earth and the relative position of the comet, sun, moon and stars.

He knew that one reason why he could not see the details of the comet was simply because the atmosphere between him and the comet, or, at least, that contiguous to the earth was too heavy and dense.

Ergo, to reach the limit of terrestrial atmosphere would bring one to the impalpable region of space, of empty void, where objects at a great distance are more largely magnified and made a thousand times clearer to the human sight.

Therefore, it was only necessary to ascend fifty miles or more into the zenith to see the comet magnified many hundred times.

Frank knew that the air-ship was capable of taking him up there.

But there was a vital point to consider.

Once up there the limit of terrestrial atmosphere must fail, and human life could be no longer supported for very lack of breath.

Moreover, the cold at that altitude would most certainly be something very frightful to contemplate.

It would probably be impossible to venture out on deck.

But the present means of heating the cabins by electric generators Frank believed would enable them to take observations from the windows. This would be sufficient.

"It is settled," he muttered, "I am going to give chase to the comet. It will be a wonderful achievement!"

Then another thought came to him.

There were the scientists.

They had practically given away their lives just to gain this very end of seeing the comet.

Such a view at such a powerful range would be of much greater value to them than to him.

Frank had thought of effecting their rescue after his return to the earth. But sober second thought decided him otherwise.

He would first find them.

They should be given the privilege also of inspecting the comet at a range fifty miles in mid-air over the South Pole.

He went out on deck and viewed the comet again.

Then he caused Barney to put on all speed, and the air-ship swept like a meteor over the ice fields.

For forty hours she sailed on at the same rapid speed through the deep Antarctic night.

Then an astonishing thing occurred.

The air began to lose its chilliness, open bodies of water were seen, and there was every evidence that they were approaching a temperate region.

Barney was amazed.

"Begorra, Mither Frank," he cried, "phwat do yez make av it?"

Like a flash the truth burst upon the young inventor.

"I have it," he cried; "there is an old tradition long current among miners that the region of the South Pole is a temperate one surrounded by ice."

"They claim that this is owing to a volcanic region which has the effect of changing the climate quite radically. We are finding the verification of this theory."

As if to corroborate Frank, at that moment a distant pillar of fire was seen upon the horizon.

The search-light was flashed thither, and after some moments of inspection, Frank declared:

"That is an active crater within the volcanic region! In a few hours we shall know the truth."

The hypothesis was speedily proved to be correct.

A number of fiery pillars soon appeared. There were scores of the volcanoes. The air became almost summer-like.

Within one hundred miles, ice and snow vanished.

The trend of the earth was downward, and valleys green and fresh began to open up.

It was an astounding spectacle. The aerial voyagers were more surprised than words can tell.

"Begorra, I niver seen the equal av this!" averred Barney.

"Golly! dere am jes' a fine lake down dere," said Pomp; "if I was suah dere was no 'gators in it I done like a bit ob a swim."

The temperate region of the South Pole seemed to cover hundreds of miles. But the air-ship had no occasion to travel all over it.

They came upon a spectacle suddenly, which caused a great deal of excitement.

Upon a small eminence, not far from one of the volcanoes, they saw two men standing.

They were men, human beings beyond a doubt, and were regarding the air-ship with amazement.

"Whurroo!" cried Barney wildly, "there they be, Mither Frank! there ar' ther ballooners!"

Professor Mendon and Jack it was indeed.

Upon the ground at their feet was the collapsed balloon. From the cage they had removed their effects, including the telescope, and were already preparing to take a sight at the comet.

Their astonishment at sight of the air-ship can hardly be expressed in words.

"Mercy on us!" gasped Jack. "What is that, father?"

"It looks like an air-ship."

"In these regions?"

"It must be. It cannot be that it is the manufacture of any new race of people in these parts."

"Of course not. And yet—"

But at this moment a hail of unmistakable English came from the air-ship's deck.

"Hello! down there!"

"Hello!" replied Jack, making a trumpet of his hands.

"Are you Professor Mendon?"

Now both Jack and his father were amazed.

"Why, they know us!" gasped Jack. "They have come here in quest of us."

"Wonderful!" cried the professor, wildly embracing the idea.

"Hurrah, Jack, we are saved."

But Jack had already answered the hail, adding:

"Who are you?"

"I am Frank Reade, Jr., of Reddestown, U. S. A., and this is my air-ship the Flash. I heard of your idiotic exploit in coming here to view the great comet, and thought I would come down and see that you did not sacrifice your lives so foolishly."

"Hurrah!" cried both father and son. "Mr. Reade, you are our greatest benefactor. Pray descend."

"All right!"

And down the air-ship went.

In a few moments Frank was shaking hands with the plucky professor and his son.

Explanations and an interchange of ideas were quickly in order.

Then the scientists went aboard the air-ship and indulged in a bountiful repast provided by Pomp in his best manner.

After this was over Frank had a long conference with the Professor about the comet and its probable orbit.

It was then that Frank elaborated his plan of a trip fifty miles into the zenith to get a nearer view of the comet.

The effect of this upon the professor can hardly be expressed in words.

He was "struck all in a heap," to use an ancient term.

It was an opportunity so far beyond what he had dared hope for that even now it seemed beyond possibility.

"Why," he gasped, "that would be a most wonderful thing. The like I never heard of. But—"

"Well?"

"Do you think human life could be supported up there?"

Frank laughed.

"There is a way to overcome that," he said. "Barney, bring me the chemical generator diving helmets from the forward cabin."

"All right, sor."

After Barney had gone Frank continued:

"You will remember that I am also the inventor of the submarine boat."

"I have heard of that famous invention," declared the professor.

"Of course you will understand that to travel under the sea, the boat must necessarily be provided with good pure air to sustain the life of the passengers."

"Yes."

"I therefore invented a chemical generator by which I was enabled to keep the boat always supplied with pure oxygen. This naturally suggested to me the application of the same principle to a diving suit."

"The result is a helmet which the diver can wear an indefinite length of time, all the while supplied with the purest of oxygen from the generator, which is in a small reservoir carried on the back. I put a number of these diving suits aboard fortunately. It is easy to see that if we wear these while in the upper atmosphere, there can be little danger of death from suffocation."

"Wonderful," cried Prof. Mendon. "Mr. Reade, you are a genius!"

At this moment Barney appeared with one of the diving suits.

It was exhibited to the professor and Jack to their delight and admiration. It meant the solution of a great problem.

All were now wildly enthusiastic over the chase of the comet, for such it seemed to be.

"Of course, I shall venture as far from the earth as possible," declared Frank, "yet I cannot agree to take any undue risk!"

"Correct!" cried Prof. Mendon, "we shall at least get an opportunity to view the comet at a nearer range than we had dared hope for!"

"This will, of course, be a special advantage to you?"

"I should say so. It will doubtless enable us to determine the composition of the comet and all its peculiar characteristics. We shall also learn something of the phenomenon of the tail which has always been a great bone of contention."

It is needless to say that all the voyagers on board the Flash were in a state of deep excitement and thrilling anticipation.

CHAPTER VI.

FORTY-FIVE MILES IN AIR.

PROF. MENDON now proceeded to bring his traps and the big telescope aboard the Flash.

This latter he mounted upon its frame, and the big reflector was employed to take a look at the comet.

The huge body of fire as depicted in the reflector was a wonderful spectacle.

It seemed a huge revolving ball, with jets of flame and mist bursting from it in all directions.

What seemed like a cloud of mist enveloped it and merged into the tail.

This seemed but a huge constellation of fire and sparks extended at varied lengths into the upper space.

That the comet was moving with frightful speed was certain.

That it would be visible in its present enlarged form but a few hours Prof. Mendon knew well.

Whatever was done toward taking observations in the upper atmosphere must be done at once.

The professor intimated this to Frank, who replied:

"We are all ready."

"Good!" cried Mendon eagerly. "Fortune seems to be with us. We will try and get a correct diagnosis of the comet this time."

All were safely aboard the air-ship. There was nothing more to wait for.

So Frank gave the order, and Barney pressed the motor lever.

The rotascopes whirled, and up went the Flash with its human freight.

Up and up it shot, higher and higher.

In the pilot-house window there was a gauge which recorded the exact altitude of the air-ship as it changed.

Up, and still up! Now it was a mile above the earth. The rarity of the air was most intense.

It was necessary for all the voyagers to go into the cabin. The electric heaters were turned on full force.

This warmed the atmosphere in the cabins. But it was frightfully cold on deck.

"Jericho!" exclaimed Jack Mendon. "My lungs pain me. How do you all feel?"

"I am really pressed for breath," declared the professor.

"What's the altitude, Barney?" cried Frank.

"Three miles, sor," retorted the Celt.

"Enough!" cried Frank. "Get out the generators! We must not risk injury to our lungs."

Three miles in the air!

This no doubt seems an awful distance to the reader. Frank Reade, Jr., was going to the furthestmost limits of the terrestrial atmosphere.

This would be fully fifty miles from the earth.

What a stupendous height! What an awful distance to fall!

But there was no danger of the air-ship falling, as all knew. It was too buoyant and was well able to keep afloat.

But in the rarefied atmosphere, fifty miles above the earth, it would seem as if the comet would be brought to very close quarters.

Professor Mendon even fancied that its heat might be felt at that near proximity. But even Jack laughed at this.

"It must be a pretty hot fire which can be felt two hundred and fifty thousand miles," said Jack.

But his father laconically replied:

"You forget the sun."

This was a settler. Certainly all knew that the heat of the sun was felt for a distance of ninety-five millions of miles.

So Professor Mendon's seemingly ridiculous presumption was laughed at no more.

Up, and still up went the air-ship.

All now wore the chemical generators and with no discomfort whatever. But it was found difficult getting any sort of an observation of the comet.

This was for the reason that the windows of the air-ship were incrustated full three inches in frost.

Apertures were cut in this, but they readily closed up. It was frightfully cold without.

The electric heaters were taxed to their utmost and yet it was frigid in the cabin.

But for their thick fur suits the voyagers would have perished.

Frank went to the pilot-house window and noted the high gauge thermometer.

He gave a great start as he noted the astounding temperature of eighty degrees below zero.

And yet the machinery of the air-ship seemed not affected in the least. It kept steadily mounting upward.

But they were no longer in gloom. All was as light as day in the upper atmosphere.

This was caused by the powerful light of the comet.

It seemed to draw nearer to them rapidly and was much larger than when viewed from the earth.

"How high are we now, Barney?" asked Frank.

The Celt glanced at the gauge.

"Thirty-five miles, sor!" he replied.

"Fifteen more to go!" exclaimed Jack Mendon. "Whew! I for one am a bit timid about going further."

"Are you?" exclaimed Frank, in surprise.

"I admit that I am!"

"What do you fear?"

"I cannot tell you. It is a frightful reflection that we are away up here in the atmosphere so awful far from the earth."

"You are not afraid of falling?"

"I had not thought of that."

"What a terrific drop it would be!" said Prof. Mendon.

"We should know little of it," declared Frank. "We would not be conscious of falling until the great concussion came!"

"Thirty miles drop through the air!" exclaimed Jack, in awe.

"Whew! I can't say that I should like the idea of it very well."

Already the young scientist, despite his nerve, was beginning to feel willing to return to terra firma.

But Frank was the most unconcerned of all. He smiled grimly and motioned Barney to keep on.

One fact was now proven.

There was a certain amount of heat to be felt from the comet. This was proven in the fact that the cold did not grow more intense, but, indeed, began materially to decline.

Frank knew that the atmosphere was getting thinner and more like a vacuum from the action of the rotascopes.

Suddenly Barney cried:

"Forty-five miles, sor, an' shure she won't go a peg higher!"

Frank went to the gauge. He saw that this was correct. The limit of terrestrial atmosphere had been reached.

The rotascopes did not find resistance enough in the void to enable it to go higher.

And there it hung at the frightful altitude. The voyagers seemed overcome with the enormity of the thing.

But Frank Reade, Jr., who was self-possessed, cried:

"Now is the time to take your observations. I warn you to lose no time."

This aroused the two scientists.

They really lost no time in rigging the big telescope and getting all in readiness.

It became necessary to cut a niche in the frost upon the windows to enable a good sight for the telescope to be obtained.

But the sight revealed to the aerial travelers was one far beyond adequate description.

There was the mighty comet reduced almost to a distance of fifty miles by the powerful lenses of the telescope.

It was seen to be a mighty body of luminous material, which seemed all afire. Great sheets of smoke and steam constantly shot from it.

There were high mountains and deep valleys. All of these seemed to be seething volcanoes.

These shut off such a powerful volume of smoke and fire that it extended in a long vivid trail extending for hundreds of miles back into space.

And this terrific fiery monster of the stellar system was traveling through space upon its orbit at an incredible rate of speed.

All this Professor Mendon noted.

But Jack said:

"What gives the comet its terrific speed power?"

The professor was quick to answer.

"Forces akin to those which govern the motion of the earth," he declared, "or any other revolving planet. It has its orbit just as the earth and the moon. Only it follows it with terrific speed, which I think is gained from the fiery nature of the comet."

"That is logic," declared Frank; "but why should the blazing

comet travel its orbit so much faster than the earth or any other heavenly body?"

"That is something which the laws of nature seem to deny us!" declared the professor. "We know that the earth follows its orbit, with slow and measured regularity."

"And the comet does not?"

"Exactly!"

"But why should the comet be so fiery a body?"

"For a simple fact. It takes a longer and swifter shoot through space. Friction with the atmosphere is what gives the comet its fiery appearance!"

"You believe that?"

"I see no reason why not."

"As I take it, this comet is nearly as large as the earth?"

"Not bodily!" replied the professor, confidently; "its main part is not half as large. But it is surrounded by so much steam and smoke that it seems much larger than it is."

Frank drew a deep breath.

"Well," he declared, "we have gained something. We know now what a comet looks like, and we know of what material it is composed."

"Of what material?" asked the professor quickly.

"Why of stones and earth, the same as our sphere, only these are now all on fire."

The professor shook his head.

"That is not true," he said. "You are quite wrong, Mr. Reade. The comet is not a solid body, of that I am very sure."

CHAPTER VII.

THE FALLING COMET.

FRANK was astonished at this declaration.

"Not a solid body?"

"No, sir!"

"What is it then?"

Prof. Mendon carefully folded up a small chart in his hands. Then he replied deliberately:

"A comet is simply a body of inflammable gases, collected in the atmosphere. It is nothing palpable, though it looks solid enough. Its very condensation and rapidity of motion make it seem solid. As long as these gases burn and gather force by absorbing material from space, they will continue to travel, either gaining force or losing it, until it no longer finds material substance to feed upon."

"Which then ends its existence?"

"Exactly!"

"But what would be the result if the comet should strike the earth?"

The professor shook his head.

"That is not an easy question to answer," he declared. "The imagination can picture that better."

"It is a common belief, founded upon the theory that a comet is solid matter, that it would knock the earth out of its orbit and so bring the world to an end."

But the professor laughed.

"How absurd!" he declared. "There could be nothing logical in such a hypothesis. Certainly it would be safe to assume that one side of the earth would receive a good scorching. The impact of the comet with the earth would probably result in the dissipation of the gases and the destruction of the comet itself."

"While the earth would suffer from the explosion of the gases."

"Exactly."

"But would not that be sufficient to destroy much of the life and vegetation of the earth?"

"Undoubtedly. There are indeed good reasons for the belief that the earth has already suffered from such visitations in past ages. Much that has obscurely been regarded as volcanic action, I think, can be justly attributed to some such catastrophe."

So intent had the inventor and the scientist been upon the discussion of the absorbing subject that neither had noted a sudden startling change which had taken place in the comet.

It was now at the limit of its orbit, and really as near the earth as it would probably come, or at least, as the professor had calculated that it would.

But suddenly, as Mendon placed his eye to the reflector again, he gave a sharp cry.

"Look!" he cried. "Did you ever see the equal of that?"

Frank looked into the mirror.

What he saw startled him.

"On my word," he cried, "the comet is breaking in two!"

"It is dividing!" cried the professor, excitedly.

"Is that a common thing?"

"By no means; yet it has happened. Some eternal force has divided it. See! the main body is still going on its orbit. The detached comet—Mercury on us, it is coming straight for the earth!"

"And straight toward us!" cried Frank, with sudden alarm.

This was a startling fact.

The main comet was speeding nway to the southward past the earth's orbit. But the little offshoot, which looked scarcely larger than a billiard ball had evidently taken a shoot toward the earth.

It was really a monster aerolite, and similar to many which have fallen in various parts of the earth.

Many scientists positively affirm that all aerolites are offshoots of comets. How true this may be we cannot say.

But here was certainly an instance. On came the aerolite at terrific speed.

Of course it had fully two hundred and fifty thousand miles to travel, and it would be a full day before it would reach the earth.

Something might also divert its course, and carry it away upon a new tack.

All these things were to be considered. But it was safe to assume that it would strike the earth in the vicinity of the South Pole.

The effect of these logical deductions upon the voyagers can well be imagined.

They were not exactly impressed with fear, but with the most intense of interest and excitement.

Their curiosity was fully aroused as to the result of the fall of the huge meteor and its effect upon the earth.

The affair was discussed in all its phases.

It seemed as if the oncoming comet momentarily grew larger and nearer, and would be upon them much sooner than Professor Mendon reckoned.

The voyagers even fancied they could hear the hissing roar of its approach.

Jack Mendon ventured a theory which caused all a thrill.

"You don't suppose there is any danger of our being caught in the train of the comet?" he cried. "Suppose we were involved in the commotion, would not the air-ship stand a chance of being badly damaged?"

"Begorra, thin I'd not risk it," cried Barney in alarm. "Shure it's best to be on the safe side."

"I am dat," declared Pomp, with chattering teeth. "Don' want puffin' to do wif comets at all."

But Prof. Mendon laughed.

"Jack is trying a practical joke," he declared. "Have no fears at all. If the comet should shoot past us at full speed and quite near, unless it struck us, it would do us no more harm than any ordinary aerolite."

"That stands to reason," agreed Frank.

But Barney and Pomp were incredulous. However, the professor said:

"I hardly think we can gain more by remaining here. Suppose we return to the earth and await the fall of this comet? I think it is our best plan."

"Just as you say," agreed Frank.

"I think it would be better."

"Very well!"

Frank turned to Barney and gave him orders to lower the air ship. The Celt went into the pilot-house and turned off the current on the rotascopes.

At once the gauge by the pilot-house window showed that the air ship was beginning to sink.

Down she went very rapidly. Yet all the while the huge aerolite grew larger above.

It seemed directly over the air-ship which appeared to be directly in its path.

Frank expressed an opinion to this effect, but Professor Mendon said:

"That is an illusion. When you sight the earth you will find that we are not in its course at all."

Of course it was impossible to sight the earth.

Being forty or fifty miles in the air, there were too many obstructions intervening. It was very plainly out of the question.

But the gauge showed that they were rapidly descending. Frank reckoned that in something less than an hour they should reach the earth.

This would be descending at railroad speed, and was as fast as it would be safe to do so, considering the friction of the atmosphere and the strain on the rotascopes.

By that time the comet would be fully twenty thousand miles nearer the earth.

Yet this would be hardly an appreciable distance. However, at the rate of twenty thousand miles an hour, the monster aerolite was making very rapid time.

Down sank the air-ship.

Now it was recorded that they were but twenty miles from the mundane sphere.

Twenty miles!

Only think of it, gentle reader! Measure the distance from your own town to some point which you know to be twenty miles distant.

Then extend this upward toward the zenith, and have a faint idea of what it means to be twenty miles up in the air.

Words can hardly express it.

Eight minutes later they were fifteen miles from the earth. The air was frightfully cold.

The voyagers were obliged to resort to every means to keep from freezing. Then the gauge marked ten miles.

Then came five, four, three, and at last one mile; then the gauge marked three thousand feet.

At two thousand feet they saw the fire of the volcanoes below.

They were able to remove their helmets and chemical generators and go out on deck.

The air was quite mild and temperate. The ghastly pallor which had been peculiar to all while so far up in the air was now absent.

All drew a deep breath of relief.

Even Frank Reade, Jr., who had so much confidence in his air-ship was glad to see the earth so near.

There was no danger of falling from space now.

But there was another peril which all appreciated.

The comet would strike the earth in this vicinity. There was the chance of being in its way or some of its flying particles.

But how to escape it was a question without taking chances. For as soon as it would become certain that one was in its path the time left to get out of its way would be limited.

The main comet was now far on its way along the other side of its orbit and still traveling off toward the horizon.

It would gradually grow smaller, though would probably be visible for three months yet.

But the fragment or off-shoot was now looming up perilously near the earth.

The air ship found a haven in one of the warm valleys and as near the face of a cliff as possible.

The hours passed.

All the aerial voyagers could do now was to watch the vivid descent of the comet.

Nearer it drew now with increased velocity.

A light not of earth and most supernatural was spread over the whole Antarctic region.

The voyagers watched all breathlessly.

Then Professor Mendon gasped:

"Heaven defend us! I believe it will strike in this very valley, and it should fill it with fire!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE LAKE DISAPPEARS.

It was a thrilling declaration. The result of such a contingency to the voyagers could readily be understood.

But their fears proved unfounded.

The comet did not strike in that valley. But it did strike full in the center of a lake not ten miles distant.

The result was terrific.

The earth shook, flames and great clouds of steam leaped up into the air to a great height.

It was as if a combination of volcano and earthquake were at work in the vicinity.

The voyagers clung to each other with strange sensations.

It seemed as if the world was coming to an end, so strange and unnatural were the manifestations. The scene and the experience was never forgotten by our voyagers.

The lake was on the other side of the volcanic range and was a number of miles in area.

The adventurers had obtained a good view of it when the air-ship descended. It was a considerable body of water.

But the comet had fallen, and the fears of our voyagers were at an end.

The earth had not been knocked from its axis, nor had it suffered any serious injury.

The original comet was speeding off to the distant horizon, and every moment growing less distinct.

Now that the danger was over the aerial voyagers recovered their spirits. All were anxious to see what the work of the comet had been.

"I can say that I am glad it is over!" declared Prof. Mendon.

"So am I!" said Frank.

"And we are lucky to have been so narrowly missed," said Jack, "though the miss was ten miles, it was nevertheless a close one!"

All agreed to this.

"Golly!" cried Pomp, "dis chile was jes' s'pectin' to see de Angel Gabriel ebbery moment."

"Begorra, I niver heard the loikes av sich worruk!" averred Barney. "I belave av ould Nick himsilf had turned up jist thin I wouldn't have moved out av me thracks."

All laughed heartily.

Then attention was turned to the air-ship. The Flash was practically unhurt.

The frost had of course long since melted from her windows. So far as could be seen she had suffered no ill from her long journey heavenward.

The curiosity of all was now excited as to the effect of the comet upon the lake into which it had fallen.

One effect was visible. This was an immense cloud of steam which kept rising skyward.

Beyond this nothing could be seen. Professor Mendon advanced a hypothesis.

"It is my opinion," he said, "that the lake is converted into steam by the fires of the aerolite. I don't believe you will find much trace of the lake after the steam subsides."

"Do you believe that it has completely absorbed the lake?" asked Frank.

"Yes!"

This seemed like a strong statement, but they remembered that the aerolite was a big one.

The curiosity of all was aroused now. They awaited with impatience a favorable moment to pay a visit to the scene.

But as Prof. Mendon declared, it was of little use to go thither while the mighty clouds of steam were ascending.

So no effort was made to do so. All were hungry, and Pomp proceeded to spread himself upon a good meal.

After all had partaken of this, Prof. Mendon entertained the party awhile with humorous stories. He was supplied with a fund of them.

"I don't see why we should not celebrate," he declared. "Our South Pole trip has proved a great success!"

"If we only get home all right," was Jack's proviso.

"I know no reason why we should not."

Ah! though they little realized it there were many obstacles in the way of their departure for home at once. What these were we shall soon see.

Barney and Pomp were, as usual, ready to contribute their quota to the fund of general amusement.

Barney brought out his Irish fiddle and danced an Irish jig, and played Irish airs the while.

Pomp, not to be outdone, came out with his banjo.

He was an adept at strumming this, and also sang cleverly some comical dinky songs.

So several hours were passed by the company. And then Frank decided that they had better turn in for a night's sleep.

The cloud of steam yet hung over the distant lake. It was certain that the aerolite could not be inspected until this should clear away.

As it might be hours, perhaps days, before this transpired, it was decided to follow Frank's advice and indulge in a night's sleep.

This was done. Soon the entire party were in the embrace of Morpheus. Not until they had sufficiently satiated the desire for slumber did they awake.

Then it was seen that the steam cloud had greatly abated.

Frank declared:

"I believe we can go over there now with safety. All aboard!"

He went into the pilot house and turned the rotascope switch. The air-ship sprang upward.

Ten miles was easily covered by the Flash. A descent was made upon an eminence which overlooked the lake.

The scene spread to the view of the voyagers was a curious one.

As the professor had predicted, the lake was no longer there. In its place was a curious mass of charred rocks and sand. It was the bed of the lake which had been completely evaporated.

Of the comet—what was to be found?

Nothing!

At least nothing tangible. The evidence of its work alone. The blackened bed of the lake and the mighty clouds of steam.

This verified the professor's theory to a dot that the comet was not a solid body.

Being but a mass of inflammable gases in a condensed and procreative form, nothing could be left of it, after its impact with the waters of the lake.

All this was explained by Prof. Mendon, to the deep interest of his hearers.

"Mercy on us!" exclaimed Jack. "What a powerful amount of fire there must have been in that comet to turn this whole lake into steam!"

"Indeed, yes!" replied the professor. "No doubt the water in part made fuel for the fires!"

"Humph!" said Frank, "I am afraid we shall be unable to carry home any pieces of the comet."

"The comet, therefore, is a snare and a delusion," laughed the professor, "an exceedingly impalpable thing!"

"This much we have certainly learned by coming to the South Pole!" declared Jack.

It was no use to attempt to walk upon the bed of the absorbed lake. The earth was so heated that the consequences would have been serious.

For a time the party watched the scene. Then they returned to the air-ship.

It seemed as if the great expedition had reached its end.

There seemed nothing more to do but to get aboard and sail back to the Storm King and thence home.

The chase for the great comet was ended.

The comet was far on the return course of its orbit. It had probably paid the earth a nearer visit than any other comet.

It might be ages before such a wonderful thing would occur again.

It was little wonder therefore that the two scientists, father and son, were highly pleased. They had witnessed that which no other scientists had ever witnessed in all time.

They were content to return home and report to the scientific society. They would be sure of a medal of honor and distinction.

But Professor Mendon was not blind to one fact. He gripped Frank Reade, Jr.'s hand, and said:

"But for you, this wonderful phenomenon would be lost to the world. My son and I would have sacrificed our lives for the one glimpse of the comet at such close quarters. We owe you much."

"It is nothing!" replied Frank. "In serving you, I am doing the interests of science a great service. I am well repaid."

It was decided to spend no more time at the South Pole, but at once return home.

No time was devoted to further exploration of the Antarctic world.

How far it might extend, or whether it was inhabited or not, no longer interested them. All had the fever to be homeward bound.

Life in those awful solitudes was becoming oppressive.

To be so long beyond the beneficent rays of the sun was a positive injury to health. The voyagers were beginning to experience some of the discomforts of the Arctic explorers, who have nigh been driven mad by extended season of darkness.

So it was concluded that they had tarried long enough in the region of snow and ice.

All went aboard.

A last view was taken of the volcanoes, of the absorbed lake and the Antarctic valley.

Then Frank sent the air-ship up. It rose like a bird. It was headed due north.

The purpose now was to find the Storm King. Then, when the ice pack broke up, the ship could sail for home. The air ship, of course, could go at any time.

The temperate valleys were left behind. Once more fur suits were brought into requisition.

The cold was something most frightful to face. They seldom ventured out on deck.

But a few hours later the temperature rose a peg. Then inky blackness shut down, as a terrific blizzard began to blow.

CHAPTER IX.

THE BLIZZARD.

In the Antarctic blizzard the air-ship was completely lost. Of course it was impossible to see in any direction.

The snow blew in the most blinding of blasts. Nothing could be seen beyond the windows.

Even the powerful search-light failed to penetrate but a few feet into the air ahead.

It was by no means an encouraging outlook. To say that Frank Reade, Jr., was dismayed would be a mild statement.

To ascend above the storm was hardly feasible, as it doubtless extended to an enormous altitude.

To face it seemed the only way. Of course the compass was of no use in these latitudes so Frank hardly knew which way to go.

But he kept what he believed to be a northerly course and trusted to fate. This led to misfortune.

There was a sudden terrific shock. Everybody on board was knocked down. It seemed for a moment as if the air-ship was coming to pieces.

Then Barney, who was at the wheel, was able to penetrate the gloom far enough to see that the prow of the air-ship had collided with the peak of some mighty iceberg.

But Frank had sprung below.

In that moment he had fancied hearing something about the machinery click and break. But though he searched for it, he found nothing then.

The storm had now increased with awful fury; the blackness was deeper, and the whirl of snow more dense.

No progress was even attempted. Tons of snow were on the deck. It clogged the rotascope valves.

This speedily began to tell, for it weighed the air-ship down fearfully.

Now for the first time Frank grew apprehensive.

"I never saw so much snow before in my career," he declared; "and how wet and heavy it is! I fear we shall have to do something at once to get out of it, or we shall be buried!"

"Bejabers, Mither Frank," cried Barney, "there's only wan way!"

"And that—"

"Mebbe we kin go above it."

"Correct!" cried Frank, "try it. Let the air-ship go up."

But even as he spoke, Barney gave an appalling cry. In a moment Frank was by his side.

"Mercy on us, Mither Frank!" cried the Celt. "Shure, the rotascopes won't worruk fast enough."

"Won't work fast enough!" exclaimed Frank, "it is the clogging snow. Ah?"

Even as he spoke he heard a rending crash in the engine-room. The air-ship began to settle.

"Begorra, we're going down," cried Barney, in dismay.

Frank knew this well.

He knew that there had been a break in the machinery. In face of the present situation the outlook was serious.

If the air-ship should fall and be unable to rise it would be literally buried in the snow.

This did not mean that it could never be resurrected, but the situation would be an exceedingly awkward and unpleasant one. It would at least mean delay.

In that moment it did not once occur to Frank that possibly the break was a serious one, and might indeed prevent the Flash from flying again.

The other voyagers rushed into the pilot house with dismay.

The air-ship settled down slowly and softly between the peaks of a huge berg, and all the while the snow sifted down over her.

Harder and faster blew the snow.

It seemed to come in drifting clouds.

In a few moments, as it seemed, it was over the thwarts of the ship.

It was not uncomfortable in the cabin. But the voyagers were all so much plunged into dismay and apprehension that they were not in a mood to appreciate this.

One and all only thought of some way of extricating the air ship.

Was her machinery broken beyond repair?

Frank Reade was already at work upon it.

When he came up into the cabin again there was an anxious expression on his face.

"How is it, Mr. Reade?" asked the professor; "is the break beyond repair?"

"I hope not," replied Frank; "if I had the ship at home I should say not, but I have not the right tools to work with here."

And still the snow grew deeper outside. It was now on a level with the pilot-house window.

At this rate before many hours the air-ship would be completely buried.

The electric lights made all light enough in the cabin. But nothing could be seen outside.

Words can hardly describe the situation or express the sensation of the snow-bound adventurers.

Hours passed and still the blinding storm kept on.

Professor Mendon occupied the most of his time in studying the phenomenon.

But the others were content to occupy themselves in various other ways in the cabin.

For twenty hours the fearful storm raged. Then it was not known whether it had ceased or not, for the windows were entirely blocked.

The appalling fact was forced upon the voyagers that they were buried in the snow.

Perhaps forever! It might be impossible to ever extricate the air ship from its imprisonment.

In that case fearful would be the fate of the party. But as yet none would believe this.

Frank Reade, Jr., would not accept the fact but that there was some way out of the predicament. And so time went on.

At length, when fully two days had thus passed, Frank said:

"I am not going to stay here any longer. I mean to find out where we are, and whether the storm has ceased or not!"

"Good," cried the professor; "let us by all means!"

"How shall we go to work to do it?" asked Jack.

"Begorra, the only way I can see is to dig our way out," cried Barney.

"If it is necessary we will do that," declared Frank.

"How deeply are we buried do you think?" asked Mendon.

"We cannot be entirely buried," reasoned Frank, "or we would lack for air. As yet we have not been much troubled in that respect."

"That is true!" agreed the professor. "And a point well taken. Will you go out by the deck door, Mr. Reade?"

"No, by the upper hatch," said Frank.

"There must be a weight of snow on that. Can we raise it?"

"If we cannot, then we shall know that we are hopelessly buried."

"I believe you are right."

Frank led the way to the upper hatch. He applied his strength to the trap. It yielded a trifle.

His single strength was not adequate. The others saw this and at once volunteered aid.

With four of them pressing up against the trap it began slowly to rise. Steadily it went up.

Then Barney began to dig the snow away with a shovel. Suddenly the sky was seen overhead.

"Good!" cried Frank. "Keep on! We are coming out of it!"

This was quite apparent.

In a few moments Barney had cleared away enough of the snow so that all could emerge.

The scene which they beheld was a novel and curious one.

The full effect of the blizzard was now seen.

The storm had passed and the starlit sky was above. Upon all sides was the stretch of Antarctic country covered with a deep mantle of white.

It was seen that the air-ship was imbedded in a huge drift, and that she was completely clogged with snow.

But her rotascopes were unharmed and no serious injury was done her.

Yet the situation was grave enough.

It meant that unless the snow was cleared away very speedily, the air-ship might have to remain in her present predicament an indefinite length of time.

Or at least until the Antarctic summer should come again, which would not be for many weary months. This, however, Frank Reade, Jr., had no idea of submitting to.

It was his intention to be out and en route to America as quickly as possible.

There seemed but one way to accomplish this, and that was to dig the air-ship out of her bed of snow.

This would mean hard labor, but the voyagers were not at all averse to this, it being a part of the programme. Frank's views were warmly seconded even by the Mendons.

"I used to be pretty good at digging," declared the scientist; "and here is Jack, who is able-bodied."

So shovels were brought up and the work began.

Fortunately the snow had warmed the atmosphere materially, and it was not at all unpleasant working on the upper deck.

In a comparatively short space of time Barney and Pomp had cleared and thawed out the rotascope.

Then the snow was scraped from the upper deck.

After working ten full hours a rest was indulged in.

For recreation Frank suggested a snowshoe trip. This was warmly agreed to.

Barney and Pomp were the most enthusiastic of all.

As there was no possibility of the air-ship getting away, or of there being any human foes in the vicinity to meddle with it, it was not deemed necessary to leave a guard on board.

Warmly wrapped in furs the party donned their snow-shoes. All were provided with rifles.

"We may find some game stalled in the snow!" declared Frank; "and if so, we may stand a chance to secure it!"

Thus equipped the party set out.

It was an enjoyable experience.

On the snow-shoes they walked with ease over snows which they knew to be full twenty feet deep.

Without the snow-shoes they would be buried irrevocably in the feathery white cloud. It was a thrilling thought.

CHAPTER X.

UNWELCOME VISITORS.

THE Antarctic country here was broken with a diversity of hills and valleys.

There were mighty glaciers, deep crevasses, and abysses into which one might fall with no chance of ever getting out.

So it was found necessary to proceed with caution, despite the fact that they wore snow-shoes.

There was something wonderfully exhilarating in the sport.

The party went on for an hour climbing huge drifts and descending into great ravines.

It was enjoyment of the keenest sort.

The Antarctic air did not seem to have its usual chill to-day and this made the occasion all the more enjoyable.

Thus far but little evidence of game had been seen.

"Bejabers, I'm afther thinkin' they are snowed under!" cried Barney with his accustomed Irish wit. "Maybe they'll come up wid the shamrock in the spring."

"Huh! I done flink if dey am under dis snow dey will jes' stay dere," declared Pomp.

"Begorra, phwere else wud they be?" propounded Barney.

It was Prof. Mendon who attempted to solve this problem.

"That looks very reasonable," he said, "but it is my opinion that instinct causes them to either hibernate or flee before the storm to a part of the country not so overwhelmed."

"No doubt the professor is right," declared Frank.

But at that moment a distant moving white form was seen upon the side of an eminence.

The adventurers gazed upon it with amazement.

"By Jupiter!" exclaimed Jack, "what is that?"

Frank drew back the hammer of his rifle.

"A white bear!" he declared.

"A bear!" exclaimed the young scientist. "I should think so heavy a creature would sink instantly!"

"Not much!" replied his father, the professor, "the white bear is endowed by nature with the faculty for walking upon the lightest surface of snow."

"How does he do it?"

"Well, if you will examine his feet, especially his hind quarters, you will find that they have a surface not unlike our snow shoes. Walking upon snow gives the bear a squatly attitude, but he does it just the same."

"Wonderful!" cried Jack. "We live to learn!"

"Indeed we do!" agreed Frank, "but shall we give chase to his bearship?"

"By all means. Let us not return without a bit of game."

"Very well."

With this the hunters set out in pursuit of their quarry.

But it was not much of a chase. The bear did not seem at all inclined to run away.

It is a well-known fact that the white bear is one of the grittiest of animals.

While it is not strictly aggressive and seldom molests man it will nevertheless stand its ground with great courage and fury.

And it is no despicable foe.

Woe to the man who comes in reach of its prodigious paws. A blow would fell an ox.

As this specimen now found himself surrounded by his foes he did not come the sneak act by any means. He turned about on his haunches squarely and waited for an attack.

Frank drew aim and fired.

The bullet had no more effect than to make his bearship growl, and then he made a lunge forward.

Indeed, as he came tearing down the slope it was no easy work for the hunters on their snow shoes to get out of the way.

Pomp barely escaped the animal's claws.

All now began to pour shots into the bear. Of course there could be but one result.

One of the bullets was bound to find a vital spot.

In a few moments the bear fell over in its death struggle.

He was a monster of the species and the hunters congregated over him with interest.

Barney and Pomp proceeded to remove his skin. While Frank and the scientists began to follow what looked like fox tracks.

In a short while the crack of their rifles was heard over a distant ridge.

They presently returned bringing a couple of beautiful white foxes which were stalled in the snow.

This was game enough for one expedition, so it was decided to return home.

Back to the air-ship the hunters now made their way. They were all unwitting the surprise in store for them.

Suddenly Jack Mendon, who was in the lead, exclaimed:

"Do you see all those bear tracks? On my word they are leading to the air-ship."

"So they are," agreed Frank, with interest.

"Do you suppose we have unwelcome visitors?" asked the professor.

All looked amazed.

"On my word that would not be pleasant!" exclaimed Frank.

"I should say not."

"They may do the air-ship a great deal of damage."

"Certainly."

Anxiously all pressed forward to surmount a ridge near by and get a view of the ship.

As they did so all gave a cry of fear and dismay.

Upon the deck of the Flash were three huge bears. A fourth was seen about descending into the cabin.

"Jemima!" gasped Jack Mendon, "they have taken possession!"

"Begorra, wait till we get widin range av the bastes!" cried Barney, shipping cartridges into his rifle.

Forward the hunters now pressed eagerly.

It was deemed best to get within range and then separate, keeping well at a distance.

Of course there was no way to get rid of the unwelcome visitors but to fire upon them. This might attract their attention and by drawing them away from the air-ship give the hunters a chance to get aboard.

Frank opened fire.

He was in rare luck.

His first shot stretched one of the bears out. It happened to strike him in a vital part.

Then a fusillade began.

The bears were seemingly astonished at the attack. But as soon as they saw their assailants with angry growls they came to the charge.

This was just what the hunters wanted.

Frank Reade, Jr., managed to get behind them and started for the deck of the air-ship.

Jack Mendon dropped one of the bears. The remaining two were badly riddled with shots.

Leaving his companions to finish them, Frank pressed on to the air-ship.

He was quickly on the deck. He saw that some of the railing had been demolished, but little damage was done beyond this.

But at the foot of the gangway he saw that the bears had already paid the cabin a visit.

Things were fearfully cluttered up. Much was torn and destroyed, and several pieces of furniture were clawed to pieces.

"Serves us right for leaving the cabin alone!" muttered the young inventor.

He pushed on through the first cabin.

Just as he was about to go forward he heard a curious sound. The galley door was open.

Frank looked thither.

The sight which met his gaze was a most astounding one. There right in the middle of the galley floor was a huge white bear.

Its snout was covered with jam, and its paws had turned the flour barrel inside out.

The galley was in a state of wreck and confusion. For a moment Frank was dumfounded.

Then he acted.

It was wholly upon impulse.

He raised his rifle and fired point blank at the bear. The bullet struck the brute's forehead.

Of course it glanced off. The pain was maddening. It made a shuffling leap forward.

Frank tried to get out of the way, but it was too late.

One of the huge paws struck him to his knees. Again he fired, but again the bullet had no effect.

This time the bear was upon him.

In that moment Frank Reade, Jr., believed himself lost. The great jaws yawned over him, the gaunt arms held him.

But at that moment rescue came.

Crack!

A rifle directly behind Frank spoke sharply. The bullet struck the bear full in the mouth.

"Don't yez fear, Mither Frank. Be aisy!" cried Barney.

The Celt had arrived just in the nick of time.

In another moment Frank Reade, Jr., would have received his death warrant. The huge brute reeled and fell in a heap.

Frank staggered back for a moment overcome, but he recovered himself just as the others entered.

They took in the situation at a glance. Barney was a hero at that moment. All hastened to congratulate Frank on his narrow escape.

"Saints defend us!" exclaimed the professor, "it was a close call for you, Mr. Reade! What would become of us if harm was to come to you?"

Frank smiled and thanked his friends warmly for their expressions of good will.

Then it was set about to see just what damage had been done by the bear. It was found to be nothing very serious after all.

A little labor repaired it all. The carcass of the bear was dragged out upon the snow. Then Barney and Pomp removed the pelts from all.

And so ended the hunt.

Very fortunately no one was injured, and all were in the best of spirits. But the exciting events of the period were not over yet by any means.

CHAPTER XI.

MISHAP TO THE FLASH.

The matter now which claimed the attention of all was the removal of the snow from the decks of the air-ship.

Once more they began work, and had made slow progress when the inventive genius of Frank Reade, Jr., came to the rescue.

"Enough!" he cried, suddenly flinging down his shovel. "This is too hard work for me; I've had enough of it!"

The others looked at him in amazement.

Of course they stopped work.

"What is the matter, Mr. Reade?" asked the professor.

"I think there is a better plan for doing this job."

Of course all were interested.

"Your inventive genius comes to the front, Mr. Reed," cried the professor. "What may it be?"

"Wait and I will show you."

Frank climbed down into the cabin. He went into the dynamo room and began to coil together a number of wires.

In a few moments he had made a number of net-like sections. These he took out and placed at various distances upon the snow.

To each he connected a wire from the dynamo.

"What are you going to do, Mr. Reade?" asked the professor finally, unable to longer restrain his curiosity.

"I am going to try and remove this snow by means of electric heat," replied the young inventor.

"Electric heat?"

"Yes!"

In a moment all saw the point. How feasible the plan was, of course only events could prove.

But it looked reasonable.

It was certain that the wires could be heated terrifically by the dynamo. Of course this must have some effect upon the snow.

Frank literally covered the snow with the nettings. Then a ditch was dug through the drift for the water and slush to be carried off.

Then Frank went into the cabin and turned on the full force of the dynamo.

The result was quickly apparent.

The wires sank into the snow with a terrific hiss. Great clouds of steam began to arise.

The snow began to settle as if beneath the sun of an April day. It was soon on a level with the lower deck before any water was seen.

Then the heated wires under the frigid mass made business lively. In a very short space of time water was coursing through the ditch.

Of course it froze rapidly but not in the vicinity of the heated wires. These were literally disintegrating the great mass of white. Faster and faster it settled.

Now it was far below the bulwarks. Before two hours had passed the great snowdrift was reduced.

The air-ship sat on a level keel upon the ice.

The snow which had not been melted was piled up in heaps about. Then Frank shut off the current.

The success of the contrivance was a victory for Frank Reade, Jr., and brought a cheer from all.

"Enough!" cried Professor Mendon. "Defeat is not in the category for Frank Reade, Jr. He would overcome any obstacle!"

Frank modestly acknowledged the homage paid him, and said:

"But we must take advantage of our opportunity now to get out of this vicinity. If we do not, I fear we shall get into trouble."

"Which is right," cried Jack Mendon; "I am ready to go! Let us push on to find the Storm King!"

"But first to repair the air-ship," declared Frank.

The young inventor went below again to search for the break in the electrical machinery.

This time he found it and was but a little while in repairing it. Then all was ready.

Once more the rotascopes buzzed.

As soon as they had cleared themselves well of the snow and ice, the air-ship sprang up into the air.

Northward again Frank set her course.

She sailed on over the snow-bound region apparently as steady as ever.

At least it seemed so to the voyagers, all save Frank Reade, Jr. The young inventor was not satisfied.

His keen sense had revealed to him a peculiar motion, and a certain unsteadiness which were alarming.

The air-ship had been strongly built.

But in spite of all this, nothing created by man can be eternal. Frank knew this well enough.

The Flash had traveled a good ways and encountered many serious and rough mishaps.

It could not be expected that she should last forever. But would she be able to take them out of this desolate lost land?

This was the question.

Frank feared the worst.

He dared not think of the enormity and horror of such a fate as being left in that region of ice.

It would be akin to a slow, lingering death.

The chances of rescue were few. The vessels which penetrated to those seas were very few. The chance of being rescued by one was slight.

Thus the situation stood.

At length, unable to bear the strain longer, Frank called Barney aside and confided his fears to him.

"Barney," he said, "I am afraid the Flash is never going to be able to get us back home."

Barney was dumfounded.

"Yez don't say!" he gasped.

"It is my fear. Have you not noticed her peculiar actions?"

"Shure, yes, sor; but I niver thought but that we'd be afther getting back, sor."

"I fear not."

Barney scratched his head.

He was a plucky rascal, was this little Irishman. Finally he ventured to say:

"Well, sor, if she breaks down wid us, can't we foix her up agin?"

"No," replied Frank. "Her breaking down will be a wearing out. The machinery would all have to be replaced. That we cannot do."

The Celt was thoughtful. But he was not to be defeated.

His eyes flashed.

"I have it, sor!"

"Well?"

"We kin foind our way back to the Storm King. Shure, whin Spring cums we'll just sail home in her!"

"That is very good, Barney," said Frank, shaking his head, but—"Phwat, sor?"

"The Storm King is worse off than we are."

"Yez don't mane to say—"

"She is nipped in the ice, and I predict that she will never float again."

Barney sank down into a chair. He had no more to say. The outlook was certainly bad.

"Do yez want to say anything to the others?" he asked finally.

"I think not," replied Frank. "It is enough for you and I to know it."

"Share it is, sor."

So the matter was kept secret. The air-ship kept on her way northward though.

Frank proceeded slowly, for he feared to tax the machinery to its utmost for fear of a break-down.

But he knew that the end was near and could not be long deferred. One day the pack ice was sighted. The sun was now visible just under the horizon.

This was indication that they were near the open sea, and consequently in higher latitudes.

They must soon reach the locality where the Storm King was ice-bound. So a sharp lookout was kept for the ship.

It was Pomp who first sighted the Storm King.

The vessel had changed her position greatly since first they saw her.

She was much more on her side, and the ice was pressing about her in great masses.

"On my word," exclaimed Prof. Mendon, "I fear that the Storm King will be nipped!"

"She is already!" said Frank.

The professor looked keenly at the young inventor. Then he drew him to one side, saying:

"I have noted for some while that there was something on your mind. Will not you tell me?"

"Really——" began Frank.

"That is all right," said the scientist. "You can trust me. Are our chances good for getting out of this Antarctic country?"

Frank was silent a moment. Then he fearlessly replied:

"I fear not."

The scientist seemed deeply affected for a moment, and then said:

"It is not for myself I care. I am an old man. But my boy—I had hopes of a great career for Jack!"

Frank placed a hand on the old man's arm.

"Do not let me unduly alarm you," he said. "All my fears may be naught. The Storm King may float all right yet."

"But the air-ship——"

"I shall not venture to essay the trip home with her."

Neither spoke on the subject again. But they had a good understanding.

The air-ship now drew rapidly nearer the Storm King. But just at that moment a catastrophe occurred.

The Flash suddenly and without warning began to sink. Cries of alarm escaped the voyagers. Jack Mendon rushed to Frank and cried:

"Mr. Reade, what is the matter?"

The young inventor replied:

"It is no use to disguise the fact longer. The air-ship has reached the limit of its career."

Pomp and Jack Mendon were the only ones who did not know this. They were, however, soon resigned, as were the others.

"We came here expecting to lose our lives," said Professor Mendon, "but we are sorry that you should sacrifice yours for ours!"

"We have taken our own chances," said Frank; "it is no fault of yours. We do not find fault."

The air-ship settled down easily upon an ice floe. The men from the Storm King came rushing over.

Explanations were quickly indulged in. Captain Briggs was dumfounded when he learned the air-ship had probably sailed her last cruise.

"Then we are lost!" he cried in dismay. "We were depending upon you to save us!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE ICE BREAKS UP—END.

"WHAT do you mean?" cried Frank. "Will not your ship float?"

"Do not tell the crew," whispered Captain Briggs, "but the ice has crushed her keel!"

It was an appalling moment.

Then Prof. Mendon turned to Frank.

"Is there no way in which your air-ship can be repaired, Mr. Reade?"

Frank shook his head.

"No possible way," he replied.

Then all proceeded to leave the air-ship where she rested on the ice floe and walk over to the ice-bound ship.

In all its phases the situation was a most appalling one.

No one seemed to be able to advance a plan for getting out of the scrape. A gloom hung over all.

It required but a glance for Frank to see that the Storm King was past all aid.

"She will never float again," he muttered. "This is the hardest kind of luck!"

The matter as requested by Captain Briggs was kept secret from the crew.

They were ignorant and prejudiced fellows, and there was no telling what insane thing they might do if they knew the truth.

A show was made at clearing the ice from the Storm King's sides, and preparing for the breaking up of the ice pack.

This was to deceive the crew.

Whenever practical, the aerial voyagers and the captain were wont to discuss the situation.

Many plans were laid. All at best were but dernier resort.

It was suggested by Captain Briggs that the whaling boats of the ship be dragged out upon the ice and fitted out for a last resort.

The chances were small, however, of ever being able to make any northern land in these.

The southern seas were of the roughest description. It required a strong ship to weather them at all times.

But yet hope was not abandoned. Jack Mendon advanced a plan.

This was to build a huge raft and launch it as soon as a clear sea could be had.

But it was yet too early to take action of this kind. Moreover, it would excite the fears of the crew and be sure to make trouble.

The days passed into weeks.

There were plenty of supplies for all, for the air ship was well stocked as well as the ship.

The long Antarctic winter was slowly wearing away, but it seemed almost interminable.

However, the sun finally began to show above the horizon, and with its coming there was a change.

It seemed as if the whole face of Nature was undergoing disruption. Flocks of sea fowls came down. Open places appeared in the sea of ice.

The atmosphere began to moderate very perceptibly. After a time cracking and booming noises came to the ears of the voyagers from the ice fields.

It was now time to act.

The Storm King had begun to list heavily and settle in the ice. There was a gurgling sound under her as if of flowing waters.

Then Captain Briggs called the crew together.

He told them the situation plainly and honestly.

"There is no hope for the ship!" he declared. "She must go to the bottom."

The effect upon the crew was not at first very pleasant. They seemed inclined to mutinous spirit.

But a little arguing by Frank Reade, Jr., and the captain had a good effect upon them.

"You must know," said Frank, "that this is no fault of ours. Ships will all meet with mishaps."

"But there is no help for us by being brought away down here in this God forsaken part of the world," declared one of the crew surlily.

Frank saw that it was useless to try to reason with them further, so the subject was dropped.

But it was arranged that all of the aerial travelers should go well armed to guard against an outbreak. And Captain Briggs prepared for the deserting of the ship.

And here was a source of trouble. The crew were determined to pin their faith to the ship and would not leave it.

Argument was of no avail.

At length Captain Briggs cried, angrily:

"Well, stick to your ship and go to your doom. If you will be fools suffer the consequences."

Then preparations were made for equipping the boats and the building of a raft.

Trouble now began.

The crew objected to the removal of the boats from the ship. Big Hod Olsen, the boatswain, growled:

"If ye take our boats what's to become of us if the ship founders?"

The crew were obdurate and armed themselves. Only Frank Reade, Jr.'s cool nerve saved the day.

"They cannot object to our building a raft," he said. "By the time we get that done the ship will be in such a position that I think they will come to their senses."

So work was begun on the raft.

It was made large and strong with high bulwarks. On board were placed goodly stores.

Upon this raft they could drift for weeks. If they chanced to get into a northbound current all might be well.

They would stand a good chance of meeting some sealing vessel or eventually reaching the mainland of Australia.

Every hour now the ice field was disintegrating. Only a mile north lay the open sea.

Piece by piece the ice field broke away and drifted off. The line was drawing nearer.

And now Captain Briggs took Hod Olson into the hold of the Storm King and showed him several feet of water.

"She will surely go down!" he declared. "All that supports her is the ice."

This convinced the crew, though it did not by any means settle their fears. They were moody and surly.

"I think we had better not stay in their company," said the captain to the others. "Let us give them the choice of the boats or the raft."

This was done.

The crew decided quickly upon the boats. These were equipped and provisioned.

The last of the ice pack was now in motion. The heavy sea caused it to rock violently.

At this juncture it occurred to Captain Briggs to take his bearings. He was given a start of surprise.

"On my word," he cried. "We are ten degrees further north than we were. What can it mean?"

All were surprised as well.

"Then the ice pack must be drifting northward," declared Frank. This solved the problem.

It was also a gratifying realization. They were in a north-bound current and must some time, barring accident, reach northern seas.

The spirits of all arose.

Even the crew brightened up. The future looked more cheerful.

Professor Mendon was confident.

"I can see in all this the hand of fate," he declared. "I tell you we are going to live to get back to civilization, and I shall be able to render science a mighty service."

The Storm King had settled almost to her gunwales. Early one morning her end came.

A report like a cannon rushed across the ice field. Tons of ice piled up mountain high. The ship felt the shock.

It was her death knell.

With one mighty lunge she went down. Only a hole in the ice and a few air bubbles remained.

The air-ship, being much lighter, would float indefinitely. The time had come for action.

The raft and the boats were launched.

Sails were set and the wind drove them slowly northward.

Frank took a last look at the Flash.

The northward current proved a strong one.

The raft and boats were rapidly carried into higher latitudes. Thus for days they kept on.

Fortune seemed to favor them. The seas were rough, but no storm came to disturb them for over a week.

Then a terrific norther set in. It was now that the superiority of the raft was shown.

One of the whaleboats was stove, and the crew barely succeeded in reaching the raft.

The other became separated from the raft, and four months later, with three of her occupants still alive, she was picked up off the Australian coast.

For days the norther drove the raft before it.

At times it seemed as if the crew must give themselves up to a certain and terrible fate.

They were obliged to lash themselves to the timbers, and were constantly swept by the powerful seas.

After intense suffering the storm finally abated.

They were now in warmer seas.

Day by day the weather moderated. Captain Briggs one day took his bearings.

"We are almost on a parallel with New Zealand," he declared. "I see no reason why we should not sight a sail on one of these fine days."

But the long looked for sail did not seem to materialize. However, the castaways seemed to thrive quite comfortably aboard the raft.

They had plenty of provisions, and the only fear was a lack of water. However, this was sparingly used. And thus time went on.

It would require more than words to depict adequately the situation of the drifting castaways.

The brush of the artist might do better justice. It was certainly not an enviable experience.

But there must come an end to all things.

The raft could not drift on forever. Fortunately the happening was in favor of our castaways.

One morning, just as the sun's rays were shooting across the sea, Pomp gave a great cry.

"Golly," he shouted, "dere am a coast line!"

It required but a single glance for all to see that this was true. Land was in sight.

The utmost of excitement ensued.

The raft was by no means an easy thing to steer. But an effort was made to guide it toward the coast. It required nearly a whole day for the cumbersome structure to drift in near to the coast.

Then Barney and Pomp leaped over and swam ashore with a line. The raft was drawn up high and dry on the beach. The cast-away gave divine thanks for their rescue.

The coast upon which they had landed was really a part of New Zealand.

The raft had drifted westerly as well as northerly and this explained all. It was a happy denouement of one of the most arduous and thrilling expeditions ever recorded.

In due time after some thrilling adventures the party safely reached Auckland.

Here the sailors found a chance to ship for Melbourne on a merchant brig. But Captain Briggs was decided to return to America with the others.

A steamer bound for San Francisco was found and they secured passage.

Three days later they were homeward bound on the high seas.

In due time San Francisco was reached. Then the news of their return spread over the country.

A great sensation was created.

People flocked about the bulletin boards and eagerly read the newspaper accounts of the thrilling adventures of the party.

As far as Chicago the returned explorers journeyed together. There they separated, not without some emotion. Professor Mendon and Jack fairly embraced Frank.

"We shall never forget you as our greatest benefactor!" they cried. Frank modestly disclaimed such an honor. Then they parted.

The professor and Jack went on to New York. There in the Scientific Institute the account of their famous chase of the Hopkins comet may be found.

Frank Reade, Jr., Barney and Pomp went back to Rendestown.

The expedition had not been a very profitable one for the young inventor. He had lost his air-ship. But for this he did not repine.

"I shall build another and a better one!" he declared.

So let us wait with patience for the next invention which will, no doubt, be his latest and best.

Barney turned a dozen flip-flaps in very joy at getting home, and Pomp stood on his head with excess of pleasure.

"Yo' kin talk about de Sou' Pole all yo' please," declared the darky, "dere amn't no place like Home Sweet Home. Ain' dat so, lish?"

"Begorra, yez are roight," affirmed Barney, for once disposed to agree with his colleague. And right here let us stop.

[THE END.]

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